

The Attack of the Avenging Virgins
(as told by one of the Valiant Vanquished)

Elizabeth Ann Scarborough

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Southern Campaign,

Dear Mum,

I hope this finds you in good health and spirits. Me? I am too hot, otherwise fine. This country is not what you'd call healthy, being full of little insects that bite and suck your blood and make you swell and itch. Also full of swampland and jungle, with large toothy reptiles and aspids. Which would not be so bad, except that most of the aspids are officers. (Heh heh. Little joke, Mum. See? I have not lost my wacky sense of humor.)

I thought I should send this off before we leave Sooltri, which as you know is the capital city of Ecotri, our immediate neighbor to the south (see crude map enclosed).

I enclose for you this very nice pair of gilt embroidered lacy knickers I found lying around here. They looked to be about your size. The former occupant wasn't wearing them at the time, being otherwise engaged with several of the fellows from my unit. But don't worry, Mum, it's not like they're nice girls around here. Foreigners, you know. Funny looking, filthy habits, just heathens, really. Still, the knickers were rather fetching and I thought you might fancy them.

Captain Burden says that taking the capital was only the beginning. To truly conquer the barbarians, we have to wipe out their outlandish religion at its roots-the sacred temple of the goddess, whose name starts with an A, it seems to me. Amy? Annie? Agatha? No, none of those seem right. It was longer than that. The temple is supposedly guarded by hundreds or maybe even thousands of beautiful virgins, cruelly kept by these misguided souls from fulfilling their true nature as mothers, wives, sweethearts, or dinar-a-dance girls by the head virgin, known as the Virago, the high priestess of their outlandish goddess, whatsername-that-starts-with-an-A. They also guard the true objective of our mission, the fabled Sacred Assets, said to be even more wondrous and valuable than the considerable booty we've gathered thus far.

Anyway, we must cut our way through many miles of jungle to get to the temple, which is hidden in the mountains.

If you wonder how I've become such an expert on this mysterious country, I'll tell you. S

Swinborne briefed us on it earlier today.

It took Sgt. Swinborne a couple of days to get this information from the locals-but once he took the palace and he was able to use the facilities at the royal dungeon on the royal family. It was amazing how cooperative and eager to please everyone was. Like little children, in a way. Normally they don't seem to value life the same way we do, perhaps it's the heat? But people are sentimental about the nobility, if you can call them that. The queen, who is the sectoolar sekyouler? Non-religious, anyway, ruler, because she obviously got married and had children. Which our Sarge found helpful, anyway, she was particularly anxious to please once the sergeant began chatting up the little crown princess.

Sarge said her former majesty couldn't talk fast enough, actually. Says she told him the temple is actually inside the mountains, in this great maze of caves-the mountains here being made of some unsuitable porous rock. She said we'd never find it because it was miles and miles away and the jungle was full of man-eating animals and the aforementioned asps and large toothy reptiles and such. He pointed out to her former majesty very reasonably, he said that there surely must be a nice path back there, since it is the seat of their religion and they must go out that way for ceremonies and such and she said, no, that the temple virgins periodically come into the city to bless everyone and that otherwise they seclude themselves and do sacred stuff, like making sacrifices and polishing collection bowls and guarding the Sacred Assets and such. This generally keeps them busy enough to keep them from being seen by men. When we troops talked it over among ourselves after Sarge told us this, we figured they had to be kept away from the lads because they were very beautiful and unlikely to remain qualified for their jobs as temple virgins if they got out much.

Well, we're just mopping up on the raping, killing, looting and pillaging now. We are rather undermanned to hold the city, such as it is. A shame we had to do the looting before we made the trek to the temple. Now we have to carry it all with us, as there is no one here to guard it. No place really, once we finished using the cannon on all those buildings. They were rather flimsy things, with spires and curlicues and onion domes and such, and fell apart immediately. Hard to imagine it ever amounting to anything, now, though it looked ever so grand and full of itself when we first arrived.

Must rush now. Time to put one foot in front of the other, as it were. I'm glad I mostly got a bit of jewelry for you and Sarah and Gisela. A few loose gems to turn a profit on, maybe. I'll get 'em out of the eyes of the heathen idols. Things were thick with these jewels and not just the eyes, if you know what I mean. Lucky for me that a goddess likes her baubles. They'll be lighter to carry than what some of the other fellows have. Sarge was just dying to bring a lot of the tools he found in the dungeon. Said he wanted to speak to the temple virgins and do a bit of anthropological study on the local religion with the aim of discrediting it and converting the populace. Religious fellow, our Sarge. He brought along her former Majesty, thinking she might enjoy the pilgrimage, though she's a bit long in the tooth and rather too tattered from the initial persuasive tactics of our Sarge to be of much interest to the lads at the moment. But Captain Burden said that ours is not the first invasion force of our folk to come down and

decimate the capital city. Sid Smythers, who is a curious one, raised his hand and wanted to know if we weren't the first, how did we know there would still be virgins and Sacred Ass left. Captain said we didn't, exactly, but after the reports came home that the troops had taken the city and were on their way to the sinister temple, the invasion forces inconveniently disappeared completely and forever into the unknown. He says at least fifteen other attempts have been made and not one man has ever returned. Just so you'll understand if you don't hear from me very often for awhile.

From Deep in the Jungle

Night Watch

Dear Mum,

Hi? How are you doing? I am fine though hot and wet and have a bit of foot rot from walking on the squishy jungle floor. I wouldn't want to worry you, but I must say that there is something very strange indeed about this jungle. This afternoon Corporal Peabody was eaten by a very pretty flower and Symington lost half his right hand and the fingers to the first knuckles on the left trying to drag poor Peabody, who was making an awful ruckus, out of the blasted posy. Swinborn had to speak quite harshly to the old queen about failing to warn us of this particular danger. He said the next time something of the sort happened, he would see to it that she came out no better than the lad caught unawares by the indigenous flora, as the brood at our school would call it.

The queen apologized, weeping with sincerity and also because of her split lip, and said that the flower was not known to her but must be one of the magical traps laid by the temple guardians along the trail. As they changed from time to time, she could hardly be held responsible, could she? Sarge growled but don't worry, Mum. I know how tender hearted you are but, actually, it's unlikely he'll feed the queen to the blossom because we do rather need to guide the way. He's got a collar fixed round her neck and a bit of rope to pull her back in if she looks like she's going too far into the jungle. I must say, Mum, these people have their pride. She wears the bloody thing as if it was made of diamonds and golden chain.

LATER

Well, that was rather interesting. I was just sitting here writing to you when the queen dropped herself over and says to me, in quite the sort of cute accent these people have because they can't speak properly like we can. "So, you are mercenary, yes?"

"Oh no. No indeed," I said. "I am a patriot, fighting for-er-you know? King. Country. The right way of life and all that."

She gave a sigh every bit as great as the one you do when Sister soiled the frock you'd spend all day washing and ironing. In fact, under the old shiner she'd got back in the city and the newly split lip, now that I saw her close up, she looked not too different from Mrs. Bensho down the block. You know, dark and exotic and yet as common as anything, in a regal sort of way, of course. But not a bit hoity-toity, as you might think.

I mean, there she was, a queen, talking to me as if we were on guard duty together. I had never seen her close up or heard her speak until then. Well, you could tell she was a fine educated lady by how she knew our language, couldn't you? Even if it was a little hard to understand. I wondered if I ought to bow or something. She didn't seem to care one way or the other, so I skipped it.

"What is that you're working on?" she asked in a chatty fashion.

"Just a letter to me Mum," I told her. Well, of course she was the enemy and all that but it wasn't as if I was telling her how many reinforcements we were expecting or which men were our best marksmen.

"You have a mother?" she asked, sounding surprised.

"Of course I do! Everyone has a mother-Ma'am," I said, remembering her queenship just a little time.

"You'd never think it, the way your men treat our women," she said-well, ruefully, of course. She naturally would rue what had gone on and what had become of her. No help for that, was there?

"Oh that," I said, glad it was dark because I felt the heat rising in my face. "That's just what you know. Spoils and tactics and such. Nothing personal."

She laughed a rather unpleasant laugh. "I hardly see how it could have been more personal but never mind. How does your mother take the news you send of your exploits here against the people?"

"Dunno, really," I admitted.

"You don't?"

"Well, can't really post letters until someone is sent home and right now nobody is going home. I just keep track, like. I did send one out of the city, but there's been no time for a reply. See?"

some lovely souvenirs to Mum and Sarah and Gisela. That's my sisters, Sarah and Gisela."

"Did you?" she asked. "What are they like, Sarah and Gisela? Do they grovel at your feet?"

She had a bit of trouble pronouncing their names but the girls would've liked how their names sounded in her mouth, split lip and all. Sort of softer and furry and with longer hisses on the s's. Very foreign. Classy, I rather thought. But then, you'd expect that of a queen. Even a heathen one.

"Oh, my goodness no. They're both on the bossy side, actually. Sarah's tall and plump and blond and Gisela is short and skinny and redheaded," I said. "Sarah's good at games and is ever so fond of animals and Gisela wants to be a queen herself when she grows up. That's what Mum says. Leastways, Gisela is always managing others and only does as she likes. Say, I don't suppose you'd care to tell me a few things about the queening business I might pass on to you, would you?"

She sighed. "I'm not a particularly shining example at the moment, I fear. But I'll tell you what. If you will allow me to attend to my personal needs in private, just there, beyond that bush, so I need not be humiliated further in front of your-comrades-I will write to your sisters myself."

"You write in our language?" I asked.

"Why not? I'm speaking to you in it, am I not?"

"Oh, I beg your pardon, Ma'am, that you are. I-uh-I think I should probably take charge of the end of your rope, just so Sarge doesn't have my skin off. I won't look, I promise, but it's as much as my job is worth if you escape."

"I wouldn't dream of it," she said, and smiled at me. Somehow I didn't get the impression she liked me at all, though. She took the end of the rope, like she was going to help me, and held it up so the end dangled by my nose. She swung it back and forth, all the time smiling.

I didn't think anything of it, at the time, except that she was an odd one. Don't recall her spewing forth foreign enchantments or any of that sort of thing. Just swung the rope, back and forth, back and forth, while I watched it like a great ninny.

Then she strolled over to the bush, the rope trailing her like you always hear of the train conductor's court gowns doing, elegant like. She just twitched it a bit as she went round the corner and the lady, rope and all disappeared behind the bush... how curious. (ZZZZZZZ)

LATER

Dear Brother St. Elmo of the Martyred Albatross,

I am writing to you from this place to ask you for spiritual guidance and counsel. You're only one I can talk to about this because Mum would not understand if I had the bollocks to her. But it's been said around the school that you were in the Navy before you took your vows and became sainted and all, so between your being a saint and a sailor, I figured you'd know what's what.

The thing is, we're on campaign see, you probably heard about it. And there's this ex-queen prisoner our Sarge made to guide us. You can go see my letters to Mum (enclosed-be so good of you to deliver them) if you need more background. She'll be glad for your visit, I'm sure.

The thing is, while I was on guard duty, this queen comes up to me and asks if she can talk to me in private like, away from the lads, and I saw no harm to it as Mum always taught me to respect the ladies-well,

Mum and my sister Sarahs good right hook. This queen was pretty friendly, for an enemy. And from how long it took her, I figure it must have been a long time since she went.

But while I was waiting there, eyes and ears open, as I thought, still thinking myself as a sentry as ever hoped to skewer an officer for not identifying himself as friend or foe, peculiar things began to happen.

First thing I heard, over the sound of the royal waterfall over behind the bush, was this funny-sounding bird flying over. I couldn't see it, of course. The trees in this jungle are thick with the warts on Brother St. Maisie the Maladjusted's nose and even though you feel the sun hot on anything, you never see daylight and it drips steaming raindrops all day long and all night as well.

Back to the bird, it was making a cry that could have curdled milk to cheese while it was still inside the cow. Very upsetting sort of thing to hear that time of the night. None of our boys woke up though and I decided it was just me, being jumpy. Pretty soon this bird got answered by another bird, and then another one. I got a bit worried. If these were songbirds, their taste in music was somewhat unusual, to say the least. I wondered how large they were. They certainly were loud enough.

Then the queen, or at least somebody who looked just like her, comes back around the bend. Her smile was much nicer than when she left, I supposed because of the relief and all.

I changed my mind when she was followed by another woman, and another and another, nearly naked except for frocks of some linked metal overlaying matching metal unmentioned. They were tittering and squealing like schoolgirls but they were very large and mature schoolgirls indeed.

They made the queen and me look like dwarves, but they didn't stoop, the way some tall girls do.

The queen spoke to a lady much taller than the others, who wore her hair pulled back and had magnifying glasses surrounded by studded bronze over each eye. She looked much like Sarah's hockey mistress. I heard her say "Virago" but couldn't make out the rest.

The Virago nodded to one who wore her curly pale hair in a tail down her back. Made her look a bit like an oversized duckling. The two of them looked at me and jabbered.

"Wha-what are they on about?" I asked the Queen.

She stooped down and whispered, "I told the Virago to give you to Melisel to take first. And to be gentle because you write to your mother and didn't peek. Perhaps, if you are able, you will thank me for my mercy later."

I wish I could say, sir, that the rest of it was all a blur but actually I remember it quite well. The girl Melisel stretched like a cat getting ready for a meal, then did a couple of handspins causing her metal frock to rise well above her shapely thighs, and did cartwheels so that I became aware that my first impression of her attire was erroneous-of course, metal knickerbockers would chafe something terrible so she had dispensed with them-or any other land. Well, I thought to myself, and as it turned out I was quite right, as I often am, (Mum says it's second sight but just good sense is what I think) whatever else may be said about nubile maidens, a girl who would do such tricks in such lack of attire was capable of anything. And though everything was attractively covered with soft and rounded skin, she was, as I said, a very large girl. Also very athletic. Also very very strong, as I was soon to discover.

I supposed she was doing this to convince me that resistance was futile, which I had already decided, as she displayed her mighty, albeit extremely attractive, thews and sinews and such.

Meanwhile, all the other women also were taking full advantage of the element of surprise. Though I can't say I was able to pay a great deal of attention to much of anything else, I did notice that, judging from the flash of smoothly muscled limbs gleaming in the moonlight, the other girls were cavorting about in the same acrobatic way and with the same lack of decorum. It occurred to me that either these ladies were professional trollops, if you don't mind my using such a blunt word, or that they were very naïve and would shortly be taught a lesson by our lads, who had been awakened by the girlish giggling and squealing and perfumery and the thumping and bumping of feet and hands, backsides and bellies hitting the ground in the course of various tricks.

I suppose we should have each reached for our weapons but the truth was, the only weapon any of us apparently felt the need for were the ones fully alerted by the antics of our attackers. It was only crossing my mind that another sort of dagger might also be useful in this case w

I saw that the ladies seemed to be into their grand finale, where they landed, each astraddle of our lads. One, in fact, Melisel of the pale gold horsetail, was astride me. My weapon-the metal one-was out of reach before the thought had quite finished forming.

Melisel's pale hair hung over me like a ghost, her bared teeth and eyes twinkled in the shadow of it, as did the tiny brass things that protected a very insignificant portion of her voluminous upper anatomy. Not that she was fat at all. Not a bit of it. Well, some bits.

I hardly know how to tell you this, Brother. She-uh-had her way with me. Wicked way, course. Ravished me, that is. Up to a point, beyond which I was not able to go. I thought it might be from inexperience. I thought the other fellows were no doubt making a more thorough job of it, but as for myself I fear that I let the-er-side-down.

Even worse, the queen looked on the whole time, her expression not changing no matter what happened.

"Who are you?" I cried, in something somewhat like, but not quite the same as, agony.

The queen obligingly repeated my question in her own heathen tongue and the girl laughed merrily and licked my face impertinently... All while holding her dagger at my throat.

"She's one of the temple virgins, of course," the queen pointed out. "All of these women are."

"Hardly," I pointed out. "If this is any example of their military tactics, they can hardly be virgins."

"Oh, you mean this? This doesn't count," the queen said with a dismissive wave of her hand. That hurt.

"Does so!" I protested with some difficulty, the dagger pressing into my adam's apple.

The queen smirked and shook her head. "Does not. The Holy Virgins are now performing the Coup of Conquest, which is completely different from the deflowering you seem to think you're close to affecting. It is very much an opposite sort of thing."

I was too distracted to ask why that was, unfortunately, for I was desperately trying to bring matters with Melisel to a more satisfactory conclusion. I hope you won't repeat it to any of my other brothers or mates of mine that instead I simply ended up exhausted, deflated, defeated and desperately craving a smoke and a nap.

Oddly enough, that was exactly the point at which I became once more alert to reality-which, of course, I hadn't realized I wasn't before.

But all at once the girl's weight no longer pressed me to the ground, the moldy air hit my open eyes, and I sat up, fully clothed. My steel weapon was in the hands of Melisel, who seemed to be real enough, but the queen was standing far off, over by where Sarge had kid bedroll. He was making an awful groaning sound and holding his goolies. In and among my fellows stood these big buxom girls, looking very stern indeed.

And despite my former observations on the ladies' fashions, they wore full metal jackets knickers with their chain mail frocks-a powerful suit of armor indeed. They were obviously well able for us and resistance at this point didn't seem a very good idea. Especially since girl held one or more of our weapons in a businesslike manner.

Melisel jerked me to my feet and we joined a procession of my fellows, each of whom now in the grip of one of the temple "virgins," who were disappearing into the woods. As we passed a pair of the girls, they clamped leg irons and chains upon our wrists that bound us together in a way that wasn't a bit jolly.

We trudged on into the night until, at dawn, the girls removed a bit of shrubbery from the mountainside and revealed a very narrow opening in a mountain face that otherwise looked absolutely solid. We entered into a kind of open air grotto. It was an amazing site, a temple carved from the stone the mountains all around it. Caves forming windows and doors all the way up. Would have made a lovely market, and was, despite being made out of free stuff already on hand, quite as impressive as any of our churches. They must be tax exempt here. Long flights of steps led halfway up one of the mountains to the main entrance. This was great fun in our chains, as you may imagine.

The ladies abandoned us in a long barracks-like chamber, without food or water. I have no idea what's to become of us but in case we're to be put to death I was just wondering if fornicating with a heathen priestess was a sin if one doesn't fully, shall we say, achieve the goal? I do hope you will send up a prayer for yours truly in the event this reaches you.

Yr. Former student

Dear Mum and Our Ambassador,

I am training a pigeon in my spare time, which I don't have much of, to carry my message to you. Unfortunately, the bird is a bit thick when it comes to maps and street numbers and such but I trust sooner or later he'll get the hang of it. Or perhaps some other bird will be flying toward the embassy.

I had hoped I might manage to make contact myself, since the queen and her large lady

friends immediately packed us all back to the city. This time, however, we traveled by way of quite a good road Her Majesty had not remembered to tell us about before.

Under the gentle (hardly) direction of our recent enemies, we've all been given jobs at hand labor rebuilding the city, mending broken idols and replacing the jeweled bits, building shelters and so forth while we are left to sleep in the mud and fed the same thing for weeks or months at a time.

Very much like boot camp, actually.

Our chow comes from a soup line run by Local Temple 303, where the girls are not especially virgins and are a bit smaller than the mountain lasses. The food is cold but it tastes well enough except that it makes your belly ache all night until you spew it all up in the morning. The bad conditions haven't done much for anyone's temper. In fact, the men are behaving in rather strange ways. I saw Captain Burden hurl his soup at the wall and declare that he simply had to have pickled cod and clotted cream that day or he wouldn't be able to carry on. At that Sarge (poor soul) started weeping and said that it was simply too much to expect him to carry on as he had been when the officers who were paid ever so much more behaved like spoiled children.

The rest of us have had the cravings and the vomiting too, though that finally mostly went away after the initial endless weeks of work. They switched our diet to some sort of gruel that was even less tasty. This wasn't as tasty as the soup and this for some reason bloats a fellow something fierce. My ankles are so swollen some days I can barely walk and my feet look like oars. And my-er-crotch hurts, around the tender bits.

While we are working, a lot of people line up to throw things at us and jeer.

Through it all the temple virgins pretend not to notice. I tried winking bravely at Melise when I saw her but she just stared straight ahead and pretended not to notice. Fickle wench.

Some of the women just smirk at us, though they talk nicely enough with the temple virgins. My belly is as big as a hay bale and I've gas something awful and feel as if I'm going to have to get rid of it somehow or die, quite frankly.

A couple of days ago, just when it seemed our conditions were improving, as we were given a sort of sweet with our gruel, some of the men began screaming and falling down, grabbing themselves and crying and grunting. I found out first hand last night that it was because they were in a lot of pain-I know I certainly was. I thought I'd split wide open with the agony of it all. The pains were an hour apart to begin with, then every fifteen minutes or so every ten and so forth until at last it was just one long unbearable century or so of anguish while the thing that seemed to fill me from gullet to goolies, a thing with sharp hooves and needles like a porcupine, was being pried out by some invisible force using a battering ram and a fireplace poker.

It finally ended but I am still very tender and well and truly knackered.

Fortunately, this morning for the first time, though the work is not done, we have been ordered to stand in a line and face our accusers. We have been here, and I know as the Virago makes a point of telling us how long we've been in captivity every day, as it has some meaning we don't understand, some three months shy of a year, but it's been like forever. Please send troops or money or whatever they ask and get us out of here.

Sacred Secret Temple-The Creche

Dear Mum,

Hello. It's me again. Your son. At least, I started out that way.

Wish you were here, and I mean that more than you may realize.

You see, the vengeance of the virgins upon us was a terrible and subtle one indeed. When we stood at attention beside our work stations, the Virago, with the Queen at her side to translate, read out a list of our crimes.

"Now," the Virago said sternly, looking over her magnifying glasses at us, her chain mail frock jingling like a jailer's keys in the high wind that swept sodden debris up and swirled and smacked it against the various onlookers as well as us accused. On the other side of the Virago stood Melisel, her curly horse tail fanned out and spread like a cobra's hood around her head. "You the war criminals will be faced by your victims and your punishment will be meted out as is appropriate."

A troop of city women, some of them young, some older, some barely more than children and all somewhat familiar, trooped forward. Each carried a bundle, some carried more than one.

The Virago's magnified eyes were the blue of glaciers as they met the gaze of each man.

The Queen translated. "What is it with you guys? Your country never seems to learn! We're just sitting down here minding our own business, worshipping Our Goddess, sculpting beautiful images of Her, eating, drinking, trading, our citizens falling passionately in love with each other and carrying on blissful consensual sexual relations in order to have happy, healthy children who will carry on our chosen lifestyle while respecting that of others, when here you come again. Once was not enough for you. You come over and over, never letting us alone, taking no for an answer. In the olden days, our foremothers would simply impale any of you who sacked our city, making the punishment fit the crime against our women under the

protection of our Great Goddess, the Divinity whose name is Diversity, Affirmaterra." (The it. Not Amy after all, but Affirmaterra. I'd heard them jabbering it, of course, but until the q translated, I didn't know.) As soon as the name was uttered, all the women stamped the gro and raised their fists in salute while shouting, "Yes!" or so near as to make no difference in their own tongue. "However, we have since gained enlightenment. Impaling was messy, no smelly, and generally icky. It was also a waste of resources-trees died to make the stakes th impaled your countrymen. So over the years, we have come to rely on our Sacred Assets instead (at this the women did a stomp-stomp, slap right mailed hip with right metal gauntlet hand, left with left, and each fist is socked into the air so that the whole salute has six count it-stomp stomp, slap slap, sock sock, sort of thing), the life-giving force of our Womanhood which we conserve and dedicate to Affirmaterra, the Divinity of Diversity (the goddess's salute, described above) to neutralize and nullify you, to punish you."

We lads looked at one another in dismay. The Sacred Assets weren't golden treasure at then? Oh dear. We could have dispensed with the temple all together then, saved ourselves trouble and gone home with the booty we just finished rebuilding into the temples and idols such. Hindsight is better than foresight, I suppose, particularly in this case, if you'll pardon for being a bit crude, Mum.

"Through the use of the Assets we made you helpless. And in administering the goddess Nectar of Natality, we have transferred to you the pains and bodily indignities endured by y female victims in the aftermath of your cruel misuse of their Goddess Given bodies."

"That's what it was all about?" muttered Symington. "Well, it was worse than kidney sto just like me wife always said it was. Don't suppose they'd let me go to tell her so, do you?"

He got smote just then and only the Virago and the Queen could be heard after that.

"During the Gestation we have made use of your formerly misspent strength to repair so of the damage done to our buildings.

"But at last, the time has come to see to it that you reap the harvest of your crimes. Exten your arms in front of you, now." Since we were all chained together still most of us had litt choice but to obey and held out our arms. Whereupon each of the townswomen, with the nastiest possible expression on her face, handed each of us one or more bundles. Which promptly began howling and wetting and crapping and demanding to be burped and cuddle

After that, chain-mail skirts swinging, the Virgins force-marched us back out of the city to the mountain temple, up to our old room. The creche, as they call it.

It has no windows, only one door, and accoustics that echo each whimper, whine, and squall into a din-and that's before all the others join in.

None of us have slept for months. My guts and backside and chests have been aching me

something terrible. See, the nectar makes us able to feed the little dears from our own manly breasts but all the tots seem to have come born with teeth.

Moreover, the virgins are always on hand to scold us and tell us we are cocking up everything and how their mothers raised children and how you can't fold a nappie that way what are we thinking, letting the child cry for two seconds before we pick it up once more pet it?

Symington says it is like having a battalion of mothers-in-law. And the other day, the Virgins caught Sarge, as she said, trying to abuse one of the triplets he is charged with the care of. After she gave him a sound thrashing in front of us all (and he never stood a chance, believe me. That woman is at least ten feet tall and her arms are bigger around than most of the babies she assigned him latrine duty in perpetuity, using only a thimble and a toothbrush to clean the area, plus he must wash all of the nappies by hand forever after.

I hate to say it, but I'm glad not to have to do it myself any more and it serves him right. I'm sorry for the poor little triplets though, and said so. Melisel overheard me and I thought perhaps she might be pleased and like me again, but instead she smiled in a very roguish way and spoke to the Virago. Now I have four tots to tend. They're all very good, really, but it's a lot of work and very tedious. We lads never have time to speak of manly things among ourselves and there are no campfires, just the large fireplace at the end of the hall where we take turns sitting to nurse the kiddies, too exhausted to speak.

MUCH LATER

Dear Mum,

I hope this finds you and my sisters alive and well because the thing is, it looks as if I may be coming home. This may even reach you before I do.

A lot has happened since I last wrote, when was that, almost 20 years ago? I have tried to sketch the children for you at various stages but unfortunately, the only things I could find to draw with were bits of charcoal and the wall and the Virgins are not likely to let me bring that along (ha ha).

Oh, we've kept very busy. Although the Virgins themselves have taken care of schooling and training our little ones into the bright and attractive young people they are today, they have been schooling some of us. I have learned a great deal about Affirmaterra, the Divinity of Diversity, and have for the last five years made offerings for all of you in Her Name. I have been at the head of all my classes, thanks to special tutoring from Melisel, my dear mentor.

It's because I've done so well that I'm to be allowed to come home. I won't be alone. In

I'll have about three or four hundred young people with me, so I do hope the crops have been good. After all, the children ARE sired by the lads of our country but with their proper Ecotrian upbringing, the Virgins feel it would be a civilizing influence to return them to the land of their fathers. I am coming along as Guardian, under the protection of Melisel, who appointed Virago upon the death of the old one.

So, I'm afraid you'll need to set a few extra places at the table but don't worry. I've grown very handy with both the cooking and the washing up.

See you soon!

Yr. Returning Son