“The one-eyed Yxili marauder was once bit by a Macis asp. The asp died of poison two days later.”

It’s just one of the many stories I’ve heard of the mysterious Martian, a soldier in their Yxili legion. The story is nonsense, as are so many of these tales! (Believe me, spiders know their venoms, and Martians aren’t poisonous but Macis asps are decidedly venomous.)

“I heard Ximilpix built the cloning pod they were born from.” (Ximilpix is the Martian’s name, or at least one of their names.) Impossible, of course. “The one-eyed Martian doesn’t do push-ups. They push the Crucible down.” Meaningless even if true, the empty boast of someone just discovering the idea of relative movement.

And yet.

A client came to me, an archon, no less! She called herself Ilishka the Younger, and wore a body that could pass for an elf or a human child. Like all archons, the body was a convenience. Or vanity. Or... well, who can say why archons bother? Not I, and I might be the foremost expert on the Crucible.

Ilishka hadn’t just heard the stories, she bubbled with them. “The one-eyed marauder fights for fifty cycles per day!” she giggled, swinging from the basket-chair outside my window. “That’s so wild! And it’s also funny, because days are much shorter than fifty cycles!”

I agreed that the story was both unbelievable and humorous. “But what is it that you want?” I asked.

“I want to meet them,” she said. “Or at least, I want to find out if they’re real.”

“I don’t think it’s likely they’ll live up to the stories, even if Ximilpix is real,” I warned her.

The archon kicked back in her chair, dangling for a moment upside down several feet above the forest floor. “I’m not naïve,” she said. “But surely, Inka, you’re at least a little bit curious to find out who could possibly inspire such fanciful legends?”

She had me there. So, we haggled out a price and I set off to find Ximilpix, the Yxili Marauder. I traveled to Hub City, not far from the edge of Nova Hellas, thinking that the closer I got to Martian “controlled” territory (Imagine! A people trying to claim and hold territory on the Crucible!) the more likely I’d find some first-hand accounts.

I had heard stories, not just about the Martian legend, but about Martians themselves. Insular, xenophobic, aggressively expansionist. Even the archons had difficulty with the Martian Elders, who see them as a threat to Martian purity. As it happens, these stories were largely exaggerated.
Hub City was awash with Martians. Some told me they were on “scouting duty,” but others were open about having deserted the Martian army and living new lives in the streets, alleys, tunnels, and sway-roads of Hub City. They all had stories about the one-eyed Yxili marauder.

In Hub City, the stories took on a bizarrely cosmopolitan flavor, evidence that the one-eyed marauder’s story was circulating in non-Martian communities, perhaps, or just proof that the marauder themself was being noticed outside of Nova Hellas.

“The one-eyed marauder read both sides of the Möbius Scroll,” chuckled a Logotarian archivist. “Once, in a battle along the Silver Frontier, Ximilpix killed eleven out of ten enemies with nine shots of their blaster!” crowed a Martian, standing straight at attention to salute their unseen hero.

“Well, what I heard,” whispered the proprietor of a Martian restaurant on Conqueror’s Sway, “is that the Yxili marauder seasons their food with reactor coolant.” The restaurateur winked at me with one of those disgusting eyelids non-spiders have. “Nothing else is spicy enough.” This segued into a long discussion of Martian cuisine and an attempt to sell me everything on the menu.

A small huddle of Martians in the corner overheard this conversation and beckoned me over. “What I heard,” whispered one, looking over his shoulder as if afraid of being overheard. “What I heard? The one-eyed Yxili marauder is so menacing that they traveled with an archon for over a hundred rotations, and when they returned…” Here my interlocutor dropped their voice to a bare breath, just enough to quiver my hearing-hairs. “…when they returned, the Elders didn’t scoop out their brain.”

A quiet gasp greeted this statement as the other Martians in the huddle leaned back, clutching hands over mouths. “It’s true!” our storyteller continued. “They only asked questions about what the marauder learned of the outside world!”

“But they always scoop out the brain,” insisted another Martian, this one smaller, paler, and twitchier than the rest. “That’s why we can’t go back!”

“That’s just a story,” insisted a third Martian, and then they were off on a heated discussion as to whether their xenophobic militaristic empire was xenophobic and militaristic enough to murder them for leaving.

I pondered the situation as I left the restaurant, trying to see how the legend of Ximilpix fit into Martians’ idea of themselves. They venerated the Yxili marauder both for being the pinnacle of what a Martian could be, but also for violating Martian norms so profoundly. Half the stories were about their idol’s legendary martial prowess, and the other half about the freedom that fear and respect bought. From the perspective of a low-caste Martian soldier, utterly at the whim of their taller, purportedly more intelligent Elder caste, I could see how the legend was so attractive.

“Ho, tiny bug!” I was startled from my musings by a booming voice, and I scooted myself around on the wall for a better view. A pair of Brobnar giants strode toward me, one sporting a beard shot through with sparking copper wire, the other with a tattoo of a serpent coiling across her face.

Sparkbeard leaned forward to jab one enormous finger at me. “I hear you’re the one going around asking questions about the puny little Martian.”

“You got the story all wrong!” added Snakeface. “Those stories? Those are stories about Brobdingnar, the First Giant.”

“Brobdingnar brushes his teeth with iron filings, battery acid, and Vanhallan mead,” said Sparkbeard. “Brobdingnar doesn’t sleep. He waits.”

“There’s two types of people: the living, and those who have crossed Brobdingnar.”

“Get the story right,” insisted Snakeface, “or I’ll squish you… like a bug!”
“I only have the stories I’ve been told,” I stammered. I do not mind admitting that I was scared. Both giants looked to have had more than a little Vanhallan mead themselves, and drunken giants are even more dangerous than the regular kind. “And I’ve been told all those stories about the one-eyed Yxili marauder.”

“But those were Brobnar stories first!” roared Sparkbeard. “I’ll tear off your legs if you tell everyone that some Martian is stronger than Brobnar!”

“Are these two bothering you?” rasped a voice from the mouth of the alley.

All three of us turned to look, and there they were: Ximilpix, the one-eyed Yxili marauder. They stood silhouetted by the street lamps at first, but as they stepped closer into the flickering light of the glowsigns lining the alleyway, I could see them clearly. Dome-shaped head, two arms and two legs, gray-green skin, every inch the Martian. Their skin was a little weathered and battered from their adventures, and one of their eyes was white, the skin around it scarred. They wore a Martian soldier’s uniform and had a blaster at their side.

“Oh spew,” muttered Sparkbeard.

“Get out of here, dome head!” growled Snakeface. “This doesn’t concern you.”

“I think it does.” Ximilpix’s voice was like a rasp drawn along wood. It was a voice that smelled like cured leather and cedar, a voice that had been to the far corners of the Crucible and returned. It was quiet power. I could hear it. Sparkbeard could hear it. Apparently only Snakeface couldn’t.

“Agram,” hissed Sparkbeard, “let’s get out of here.”

Snakeface—Agram—shook his hand from her shoulder. “I’m not afraid of some tiny little spider and some Martian twerp.” She reached to her hip and lifted a heavy hunk of metal, part axe, part prybar, part blowtorch—as much a mechanic’s tool as a weapon. I thought it likely she used it as both, as needed.

“Mistake,” Ximilpix said, and drew their blaster so fast their hands were a blur. There was a loud Zorch! noise, and then Agram’s axe-torch was lying on the ground, hissing, smoking, and bent all out of shape. She clutched her injured hand to her chest.

“What about you, friend?” growled the Martian.

Sparkbeard held his hands up in the air. “Hey, we were just talking. Just having a friendly disagreement.”

“That’s what I thought. But I think it’s time for you to run along now.”

The giant nodded, grabbed hold of his friend, and dragged her pell-mell down the alley and
out of sight. The Martian turned to me and nodded their head. “Sorry for the trouble,” they said. “I’ll be on my way.”

I finally collected my mandibles enough to chase after the Martian as they climbed back up toward the sway. “Wait!” I called, before they vanished from sight. The Martian paused, turning to fix me with their one good eye. “I have to ask,” I said. “The stories. Are they true?”

“The stories?” Ximilpix sniffed. “I can stretch diamonds back into coal? The Crucible revolves under my feet when I walk? Those stories?”

“That you’re a great warrior, that you left the Martian empire and returned, that you know no fear.” Ximilpix paused, looking down at me. My pedipalps quivered as I fumbled out a pen and paper to record whatever wisdom the legendary one-eyed Yxili marauder would have to share. “Is any of it true?”

“Does it matter?” they asked. Then they walked away.

I thought about that question the whole way home. When I was finally behind my desk, I penned my report: every story I’d heard about Ximilpix, and my final assessment.

“Every one of those stories is true,” I wrote. “Even the impossible ones. Especially the impossible ones. They have to be true, because Mars—the whole Crucible—needs them, needs Ximilpix to exist, to be out there, a living legend.”

I left my encounter with Ximilpix out of my initial account. It’s only now, years later, that I feel compelled to share the truth of the matter. In so many ways, the one-eyed Yxili marauder is more than any of the stories could have shown. They were more than I expected.

I hope they’re still out there.

Ximilpix didn’t live up to their legend. Ximilpix’s legend lived up to them.