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THE BONEDRAKE'S PENANCE

by Yoon Ha Lee

Growing up, it never occurred to me that everyone didn't have a bonedrake mother, or, in the early days, that there was anyone else in the world. I say "mother" and "she," although she was female or male, both or neither, as the occasion suggested or the whim took her.

Certain peoples, she explained later, found these distinctions important. I don't believe she ever quite made sense of it, but accommodating others' religious beliefs mattered to her; at least, she classified gender performances and the associated linguistic gyrations as religious. This was, at any rate, less interesting than other things about her, and when I began calling her Mother, she seemed content.

My mother was the keeper of the fortress at the center of the universe, where we are headed now. It was composed of spun metal and sibilant nanoparticles. I was not allowed outside, even if we had had a proper suit that fit me rather than the all-purpose protective mesh I used. She said I was too young, too fragile, and apt to forget even the simple principles of inertia and momentum. I was, however, allowed to poke

around the storerooms where she kept the suits in pristine condition should anyone ever need them. They came in all shapes and sizes, and numbers of limbs, and some of them accommodated a head (or heads) and some of them didn't. A few might fit you when you reach your adult phase. The materials they were made of varied. Later I learned something of their construction, and ways to repair them, but when I was a child none of this interested me. Instead, I marveled at the gold piping on one, or the crystal-dark displays on another, which flickered tantalizingly with iridescence when I angled a tentacle-gripper toward the light, or the way visors dimmed and brightened in response to my presence.

The most interesting suits were the ones I could imagine myself fitting into. This narrowed the field considerably. Not many were designed for bipeds with heads at the top, although I sometimes contorted myself upside-down trying to make my head emerge from my stomach. (Nothing worked. But it was entertaining, and in the meantime I became very flexible.) The majority were too big for me, and my mother had locked them down in some fashion so that I could touch them but not open them up to try on, or even poke my head in.

Most of them would respond to my prodding enough to allow their limbs to be repositioned, however, or even folded, depending on the particular material they were made of. Then I

would go off and cut up rags—at least, I think they were rags, since my mother kept them in a heap and never seemed to care what I did with them—and stitch them together with great, clumsy child-stitches to make my own suits.

Second most interesting, although it took a few more years before I could formulate the question, was the absence of suits that looked like my mother. Granted, there were plenty of quadrupeds, but none that had her sleek serpentine grace, none that accommodated that heavy head with its skull-mask features, or her claws, which she kept sharp and yet was so gentle with. She could trim my fingernails with them yet keep from cutting me even as I struggled and squirmed.

The question came to me when I was perhaps six years old, by the calendar she used, when she caught me dressing up like her. “Dressing up” was a charitable way to put it. I had been raiding the pantry. My mother was a surprisingly good cook for someone who subsisted on, as she put it, “radioactive leavings and the occasional smashed atom.” (I was never sure how literally she meant this, since she prudently refused to let me examine her inner workings.) She knew I liked sweets, the more fancifully decorated the better. The previous week she had attempted to show me the nuances of cake decoration, which was more of an exercise in getting frosting and

holographic sprinkles all over the table, but the results were sweet, crunchy, tender, and occasionally vision-inducing.

The pantry contained all the accoutrements of pastry decoration, some old-fashioned and some less so: serrated metal nozzles for sacks of frosting, powdered sugar sweetly scented with rose water or vanilla or (so my mother claimed) flavors she could sense but which I could not. And there was the frosting itself, most of it kept in a suspended state, no mixing required. I wasn't allowed near the dangerous kitchen equipment at that age—the knives clattered at me and worse, lectured in high shrill voices when I reached for the drawer they were stored in—but I knew where the chopsticks were kept, and for all their sullen clicks and mutters, they didn't raise the alarm. I grabbed one of the metal ones, prettily enameled with a fractal gasket, and used it to puncture one of the frosting bags.

Some of the frosting, which was blue with mysterious lavender-glow swirls, squirted all over my hands and shirt. I didn't see this as a disaster but an opportunity. I licked it off my hands, although the stuff smeared all over my skin and left great gobs on my chin. It tasted like sugar and jasmine and firefly sparks, and tickled going down, making me giggle.

Then I remembered my original purpose, and I got to work. I stripped off my clothes and cheerfully traced my ribs

with great streaks of frosting so they would look like my mother's exoskeletal barding except, inevitably, mushier. The frosting developed interesting crusts as it hardened, causing it to flake off every time I moved. Lavender glitter drifted off in nebular swirls and meteor streaks, and the kitchen filled with shadows as deep as the lantermed night outside the fortress.

Not all my mother's frostings were astronomically themed, but she had a weakness in that direction, and she herself had eyes that glowed in their depths like faraway stars. Sometimes I squinted as I looked at my reflection, hoping my eyes would do the same thing; no luck. At least I was old enough to realize that putting frosting in my eyes wouldn't work.

I only realized my mother had entered the kitchen when I heard a sound that was part-wheeze, part-crackle. I started guiltily and scrambled to hide the offending frosting paraphernalia behind my back, not that she was fooled.

My mother had a horrified tone that I later identified as meaning *Am I doing this parenting thing wrong?* but, at the time, I assumed she was upset with me. "Egging," she said, her voice rattling more than usual, "are you trying to persuade me to eat you?"

"I wanted to look like you," I said, or something to that effect. That was the point of the exercise: drawing armor trceries over myself, and scribbly imitations of her

electromagnetic banners, and putting the metal nozzles on my fingertips in imitation of her magnificent claws. (Even with the frosting, they kept falling off, but that was a game in itself.) Since I couldn't play dress-up with a dragon-suit, I had to improvise.

I didn't understand the way her eyes dimmed, as if in sorrow. She'd never minded my makeshift costumes before. Not that she was permissive about everything, but for a bonedrake she had sensible ideas about behaviors that did and didn't harm human children. I especially remembered the way she had roared and clamored with laughter when I tried to glue myself, with leftover rice, into a caterpillar-priest outfit.

"Oh, eggling," my mother said. She liked to call me that. "What's wrong with the way you look?"

She had never asked that before. I gaped at her, confused.

My mother huffed, and vapor whistled out of her sides, through apertures I had looked for but had never been able to find. "Come here," she said.

I knew better than to argue, although I glanced back at the crumbling bits of starry frosting that I was leaving on the floor. She huffed again, and the vapor came once more, stronger. It felt warm and damp, and it carried the effervescent scent of limes, if limes grew on trees bright as suns. Then she retrieved a sponge and methodically began cleaning me off.

I wriggled, the way children do, and at the time I thought nothing more of it. But perhaps some lesson stuck with me anyway: I never again attempted to dress up as my mother.

* * *

Let me tell you more about my mother. She liked music, and she mixed musical traditions without having much ear for the harmonious. One of her favorite instruments was a great wind-harp concocted upon hollow bones of translucent metal. Wind in our fortress was necessarily artificial, but it came when she called it, and she did so to a schedule, as with most things. In the mornings (for there were mornings, the way there were mealtimes and evenings and year-festivals), I woke to the sound of the wind roaming through the pipes, moaning threnodies and the jangling accompaniment of wires stirred to unrhymed arpeggios. At times I took mallets or brushes to the pipes to bang out my own counterpoints, always scurrying away whenever her shadow crossed the threshold, as if the strings could hide me. She only smiled her inscrutable smile.

My mother had an obsession with neatness, as befitted a keeper of calendars and archaeological details. I asked over and over what she did here, and she never tired of answering me. The fortress was filled with clocks of all kinds and from all eras, some of which I was allowed to take apart, and some of which she walled up behind meshes of incandescent force. Clocks that

dripped sand of silver and clocks that uttered relativistic syllables, clocks with gears that bit my clumsy fingers and clocks that tolled whenever a civilization devoured itself.

“What’s a civilization?” I would ask next, trying to get the pronunciation right. That was another thing. My mother spoke to me in a language of up-and-down tones and varied sibilants, but she was fluent in anything you cared to name, including a number of tongues that were no longer spoken anywhere else.

She gave me the word in many languages, and showed me paintings, holographs, maps, shards scavenged from ruins long swallowed by bloated red stars. She explained how most sentients developed some form of society, hierarchical or otherwise, and built edifices both material and metaphysical. Cities woven in and out of the rings of spinning worlds, or propagating across vast empty stretches soliton-fashion, or created out of nerve-flicker impulses webbed together across brightly beaded networks.

“Are we a civilization?” was the question after that, most days.

My mother retracted her claw and tapped me on the head, thoughtfully, as though I might make an interesting sound. (The one time I protested, “My head isn’t empty!”, her laugh thundered through the halls. She teased me about it for weeks.) “Can you have a civilization of two?” she asked.

“Two is more than one,” I said, holding my fingers out to prove it. I was eight then, old enough to count without my fingers, but I liked the visual aid. “We even have a city.” Then I frowned. “Is a fortress a city?”

“If you want it to be,” she said unhelpfully, and grinned at me.

My mother had not always been the fortress’s keeper. She alluded occasionally to her predecessors. I never asked, on the grounds that I couldn’t imagine a time before I existed, let alone a time before my mother’s stewardship of our home. She never referred to them by name, and she didn’t tell me what they had looked like. But she kept a shrine to them anyway.

* * *

Little-known facts about bonedrakes, before I tell you more:

They are, indeed, made of bone. Mostly. I never acquired the technical specifications. Whether the bones were laminates harvested from lesser creatures, or derived from drakes slaughtered for the purpose in the days of long-ago devas and paladins, the pallor of a bonedrake is unmistakable. The silken, chilly touch of death leaves its traces wherever a bonedrake goes, all the way down in the universe’s marrow, an absolute zero signature. Yet this is not all that terrible, when you think

about it. After all, time's arrow pierces everything that lives, and nothing is undying forever.

There are sagas written about bonedrakes, and incantations, and dry academic treatises. (There is nothing in the world so dull that a dry academic treatise cannot be written about it, and bonedrakes are far from dull.) The taboo against depicting them in the visual arts is not universal but widespread nonetheless. After all, if carcass-armor could be animated by the will of distant warlords and descend roaring from skies whose constellations were tattooed over by explosions, who was to say that sculptures and paintings could not also turn against their makers?

Bonedrakes are good at computations. My mother's favorite instrument was the abacus, even if she preferred using it as a percussion instrument. It wasn't as if she needed something as primitive as an abacus for arithmetic she could do in her head. She always said I was missing the point and that creative tool-use was its own pleasure.

It's not true that only four bonedrakes ever existed, four for the dimensions of space and time, or four for death, or four for the elements. The number of base elements varies so widely among belief systems anyway, and my mother once mentioned that her predecessors believed in atomic configurations rather than the poetry of stone, acid, vortex, plasma.

Most words or gestures of warding against bonedrakes are sheer superstition. I once sat on a cushion stuffed with firebird down—it was unusually cold in that chamber, to accommodate our guests' preferred environment, and I liked the extra heat source—and watched, resisting the urge to pick at my fingernails, while my mother listened patiently to emissaries filling the fortress with the wave-like overlapping of barrier-chaconnes before they presented her with defanged artillery pieces. I played the chaconnes back later, because the rhythms were oddly soothing. My mother never showed any sign of discomfort.

On the other hand, because bonedrakes are essentially creatures of war, they are designed to follow orders. Because my mother's original commanders were dead, and because she was the only one of her kind left, it took me a long time to grasp this essential point.

* * *

For the longest time, I didn't realize that my mother's duties involved emissaries. On occasion she disappeared, and I wandered around looking for her, or not, if I was too engrossed looking at pictures or picking berries. Among her several gardens was one she had designed to be "friendly to creatures who put everything in their mouths and have delicate stomachs."

When I was very young I cried for her, and this triggered messages telling me to be patient until she could take care of my needs. In the meantime, since she was able to manipulate multiple bodies at once—another knack I never picked up, as you'll find—she dispatched one of her marionettes to handle the immediate problem, whether that was feeding me rice porridge or reading me a book. As I grew older, I could tell I didn't have her full attention, and at last, when I was twelve, I demanded to know where she went when she wasn't really with me.

My mother was in the middle of organizing a shelf full of curios. The "shelf" wasn't so much physical as a ladder-basket of lines of light suspending the contents, everything from grinning railcars carved from driftwood to upside-down bottles in which raged storms of oil particles and petals. "Where do I go?" she echoed, not paying attention as she tried to decide whether she wanted the ice sculpture facing left or right. "I don't leave the fortress, eggling. I'm always right here."

"But sometimes I can't *find* you," I said, more insistently. "Where do you go then?"

She fixed me with an interested stare. I was reminded that, as well as I knew the fortress, there were yet crevices and nooks and closets that I had never been permitted to explore, and would never be able to break my way into. Then she sighed,

and this time the vapor that whistled out of her side-vents had a metallic quality. “You are old enough now,” she said.

“Sometimes people send emissaries with items for the fortress. We are a repository of sorts, a museum. It is only courteous that I deal with them and their artifacts personally, if they so desire. Not all of them do.”

I studied the shelf with new interest. Come to think of it, I’d never seen the railcars before. I had assumed that they came from her usual inexhaustible trove of treasures. She liked to rotate her decorations, from tapestries of rustling leaves with couplets chewed into their edges, to strands of beads carved from the remains of exploratory probes and painted with representations of their solar systems of origin. But where, after all, had all those treasures come from? Although my mother had her hobbies—cupcakes as a case in point—I didn’t think her own capabilities were so varied. Nor were mine. And matter, let alone matter in the shape of grinning railcars, or even sad railcars, didn’t spontaneously come from nowhere.

“Do you require their artifacts?” I asked, trying to imagine my mother demanding tribute, a figure crowned with whorls of plasma perilously contained. It was absurd.

She snorted. The walls vibrated, although the fragile trinkets she was arranging showed no sign of being affected.

“Yes and no,” she said. “It is good to study the march of history, but we lack little here.”

“I want to meet the emissaries too,” I said impulsively.

“There are none right now,” she said, tail flicking idly back and forth.

“But more will come, won’t they?”

“Very likely so,” she said. “Not to a schedule, mind. One thing you must understand about the outside world is that its modes of recording history, including calendars, change and shift as different nations rise and fall and conquer each other. Even matters like timekeeping are an expression of power. In any case, if you are old enough to want to meet visitors, you are old enough to learn the protocols for dealing with them.”

“Protocols?” I asked. My schooling, to this point, had consisted of my pointing at things that caught my eye and my mother figuring out safe ways of indulging me. Disciplined tutelage was foreign to me, but I had no prejudice against it, either. Moreover, the thought of meeting *other people*, like the ones for whom the mysterious suits had been designed, was so exciting that my mother could have, if so inclined, probably have gotten me to scrub the fortress clean with my hair in exchange for the opportunity.

“Protocols,” she said firmly. “Of which the first one is, there’s never only one right way to handle a first contact. Or a seventh, or a twenty-fourth, if it comes to that.”

One of the earliest lessons she imparted to me, in preparation for my first such meeting, was that you could also never guarantee that nothing would go wrong, no matter how experienced you were or what your best intentions were. I was incredulous about her claim that some of the most vicious encounters occurred between members of the same species, even the same communities within those species.

“How is that possible?” I demanded. We were walking through a kaleidoscopic panorama depicting the outbreak of the 3.72nd Arrazhed Civil War. The nomenclature was an approximation for my convenience: the Arrazheds had numbered their conflicts with real numbers rather than strictly with natural ones, since history did not consist of discrete events but cause and consequence bleeding into each other. My mother was able to remember the number entire, but she said that for our purposes I could round it off to the nearest hundredth.

The Arrazhed conflict had involved atrocities of all sorts. By then I was old enough to have been introduced to the concept. While my mother was no great believer in the innocence of childhood, neither did she prod me to deal with

the realities outside our fortress, or even the ones memorialized within it, until I showed an interest in them.

For instance, my mother said, with a certain irony, that for many cultures, set definitions were of particular importance, especially in instances where multivalence was devalued. You could define sets as desired, then exclude based on your criteria. (The obligatory digression on set paradoxes only lasted a day or two, although she would have spent longer on it if I had cared to.)

One of the Arrazhed factions, the Oethred, was particularly literal-minded. They retaliated against a more powerful aggressor by releasing a plague that edited the enemy's spawnlings to exhibit physical traits most commonly associated with the Oethred themselves: carapaces with an ultraviolet shimmer rather than iridescent green, smaller lens-clusters, a tendency toward polydactyl grippers. The Oethred's enemies purged their spawnlings, as was intended, but retaliated by infecting Oethred religious wind-paintings with nanite sculptors, so that their masterworks collapsed into hyperstable vortices whispering heterodox teachings.

“But shouldn't they have realized that no one was winning?” I said, craning my head to catch a better glimpse of a preserved Oethred corpse.

“If only politics were that simple,” she said.

There were more atrocities, whole abecedaries of them. Our attempts at a taxonomy were sputtering and inconsistent, like candle flames. I started a list, written in clustered photons unhappily pinned to a sheet of sheer plastic. By now, at fourteen, I was literate in a simplified version of my mother's native tongue as well as several interlinguas. My mother would cheerfully translate anything else for me, knowing that my capacity for fluency was less than hers.

I didn't like my list, and I didn't like the way it glowed at me. *The pictures are real*, they seemed to be saying. *The recordings are real*. It wasn't so much that I doubted as that the outside world was too different to imagine as a solid, moving entity.

The next principle my mother was adamant about was our absolute neutrality.

"Absolutely absolute?" I asked.

"Yes," she said. "I am afraid I will have to insist on this point." And she looked very grave as she said this, with all her status lights going gray-blue. The vapor she exuded was like copper gone sour.

"What if—"

"Stop," my mother said, even more gravely. "You're already thinking of counterarguments and edge cases. That is perfectly fine if you are a mathematician or a philosopher. The

fortress is not about ensuring justice, or righting wrongs, or even compassion. It is about enduring and remembering all the things that people bring us to safeguard for them, the histories and the artifacts. Justice, for the things they remember—that's something that civilizations have to negotiate for themselves."

I thought for a moment. "Could you right wrongs, if you wanted to?"

At least she didn't hide this information from me. "Sometimes yes," she said. "Sometimes no. And sometimes they're the same thing, but you can't tell until the end of time anyway, and even I won't survive that singularity accounting. But the point is that we won't, because that's not what we do here. We are guardians, not historians interpreting the weight of years."

"Does it ever bother you only being a guardian?" I asked. Later the question would become, *Doesn't it ever bother you?* She must have known it then, even if I did not.

"Egging," my mother said, now amused, "for all the evil in the world, even this has its compensations. Do you imagine I chafe at the restrictions? I'm the one who set them, after all. The only chains are the ones I put on myself."

I didn't understand that at all, so I averted my eyes. The movement of my head triggered a cascade of rubato footsteps and the lapping of water, and the wailing of a membrane-flute.

“You can live without rules, too,” she added. “That’s a choice you will have. But while you dwell here, as my ward and not yet an adult, you will have to abide by mine.”

I was appalled that she felt the need to make this explicit. I continued to avert my eyes, but all the sensors in the fortress were linked to her systems, and she knew I was frowning.

“Come on,” my mother said coaxingly. “You have time yet to think about it.” She did not say what we both knew, that for all the protections she had given me, she could not make me quite as long-lived as herself. “You’re ready now to run through training scenarios with the game generators. You’ll like learning about the Mirre-ai-rah. Aquatic societies can be so interesting.”

Something prompted me to ask, “Do they still exist?”

She was silent for a moment, then said, “None of the peoples you will meet in the scenarios still exist. If you think about this, you will realize why I have set this restriction in place, even if you may not agree with my reasoning.”

I thought this a ridiculous way to ensure the neutrality that she was so insistent upon. After all, it was impossible to avoid having *some* preconceptions about the things I perceived, based on the sum of my experiences, however attenuated and secondhand.

But I reasoned that it was better to prepare under my mother's guidance than not at all. She had promised that I would speak with emissaries in due course; I had no doubt that she would keep her promise.

* * *

My first three encounters with emissaries went awkwardly, but no catastrophes ensued. Indeed, I was sorry when our guests left, and I moped around the fortress drawing portraits of them in the vapors of the cloud chambers, which were as evanescent as you would expect. My mother couldn't help but be aware of my mood and wisely left me alone except to provide the perennial tray of cupcakes. She would have been baking even without me there, I knew. Still, it made me feel better, especially when she decorated the cupcakes with quirky eyestalks and the occasional constellation-sprinkle of crushed pearls.

None of the emissaries knew what to make of me. Their histories spoke of my mother as a solitary guardian. The first set treated me as an interpreter, which was harmless enough, as my mother could understand everything they said without my help. At least they interacted with me, very politely at that. They seemed distressed that, along with their offerings for the museum, they had not brought gifts for me. I had to assure them that they had not caused offense, especially once I figured

out that the offerings were holy instruments of torture. My moral convictions were diffuse in those days, yet still I had no great liking for pain unasked for, and no great animus for anyone either. I half-expected my mother to scorn the items set down before her, with their cunning barbed filaments and aberrant hooks. Instead, she thanked the emissaries graciously and placed the instruments in a case rimmed with gold. When I later tried to open the case, I couldn't, and felt reassured after all.

The second set pretended I didn't exist. At first I was baffled, then infuriated, and then I came to the conclusion, based on some of the cultural artifacts they shared with my mother, that they regarded me as a type of ambulatory furniture.

After that, I understood my place in the masque and did my best to play the part. Some of them hung their personal library-strands around my shoulders, spinning superstates of beaded condensates dark and dazzling. I drowsed to the strands' hum and daydreamed of exploring the mysterious interior of the palace-ship they had traveled here in.

The third set was preceded by what I first mistook for fireworks. My mother liked to mark the New Year and other anniversaries—both celebrations and mourning days; the color schemes were quite distinct—with spectacular displays of

ghostly lights. She said that everyone grew a year older on the New Year, although there were other ways to reckon age. On this occasion, we walked along one of the promenades and I pressed my face up against the viewport, marveling that the glass felt neither cold nor hot but was simply smooth and kind against my skin.

My mother studied my face, then said, without the slightest trace of alarm, “This is something you must learn to recognize, eggling. We are under attack.”

I began to shake. I’d had my disputes with my mother. As a child I had done my share of kicking and screaming and biting. (Biting a bonedrake, even one who is doing her best not to do you injury, is a bad idea. My jaw hurt for the next week. I never did it again.) But I had never been the target of serious hostility.

“These are merely temperamental chemical compounds,” she added. “I have faced far worse.”

“How often does this happen?” I asked.

She eyed me sideways. There was an odd odor, which I identified as that of smoke. But it was a smoke of pyres, rather than a smoke of pastries overbaked. (A rare occurrence. She was attentive to her craft.) “I could give you the percentages,” she said. “About 47% of them come in with guns or missiles or something of the sort. It depends on how you define ‘weapon,’

and that's as difficult as you'd expect any semantic question to be."

"How do you know we're in no real danger?" I said, unable to hide my apprehension.

"The fortress has survived this long for a reason," my mother said, "and I'm not averse to putting in upgrades as they occur to me."

So my mother's fondness for redecorating had a purpose other than the aesthetic. "I suppose," I said, "this isn't the worst form of danger anyway." I was learning.

Her smile was bonier than usual. "Indeed."

The third set of emissaries eventually became satisfied that they couldn't crack the fortress unless it wanted to be cracked, and they asked to parlay. The parlay itself was aggressive, and quite enjoyable once I got into the spirit of it. The emissaries, from an alliance of several species with wildly differing homeworlds, spoke to us with endearing frankness. They told my mother she was a terrible cook, which by their standards she probably was. They also gave us suggestions on how to improve the suits she had provided for their use.

Their purpose, now that they had established that they could not defeat her, was to recruit her. Their logic confused me. Exactly what did they think they could offer her? As the conversation wore on and I nibbled on crackers—every so often

I needed a break from cupcakes or fruits or porridge with mushrooms—it transpired that they thought my mother was *bored*.

Once they mentioned the idea, it bothered me more and more. She had been here so long that I could scarcely conceptualize the span of time. What if she was, indeed, bored? What if she was going to leave the fortress behind and—and what? I couldn't imagine what would happen to me.

* * *

After surviving an attack, even one about which my mother was so unconcerned, I was certain that our next encounter with emissaries couldn't go any worse. At least, it would be no more than another assault. Just to prepare myself, however, I threw myself into the study of conflagrations. The simulators left me with nightmares of coagulated fluids and unfoul vapors; I rarely smelled anything in my dreams. I emerged drenched with sweat and wracked by pains from the way I tensed up imagining the sounds of puncture, or ambush, or venom hisses.

My mother encouraged me to take sand baths and steam baths, or to meditate in the gardens. She was a great believer in sand baths. I chafed at being offered such mundane comforts. She only harrumphed and said that the young had no

appreciation for the value of ordinary things. To please her, I lingered in the baths and the gardens. Neither helped much.

The fourth set of emissaries came five days before one of the anniversaries that my mother observed. Granted, she was not inflexible. If courtesy required, she would simply put off the observance until a better opportunity came along. This was one of the sadder ones, where she retreated to light incense in a plain dark shrine. In years past she had permitted me to help her, and the sweet, woody smell of the smoke would cling to my clothes and hair and follow me into my sleep. I never smelled the blend on my mother; no matter what she did, she had a curious odor of marrow and melting wax.

In any case, my mother made her preparations for the anniversary as usual. In retrospect, I should have apprehended that these next visitors were unusual even by my mother's standards. When the fleet showed up on the far-scryers, her status lights changed to a colder and more melancholy blue than I had ever seen before.

"What is it?" I asked, shifting the great facets this way and that so I could view the fleet from different angles. Besides the far-scryers, the fortress had a staggering array of early warning systems. I could work most of them well enough to satisfy my basic curiosity, although I was reliant upon my mother's

experience and the fortress's tutorial systems to guide me through the more complex commands.

My mother was silent, statue-like. My heart stuttered. It was unlike her to deny me answers, even the infuriating riddling ones she sometimes gave to encourage me to figure out what she really meant.

When she answered, it was very literally. "It's quite a fleet," she said, "with a formation similar to one I knew in the past. The flagship is a work of art, isn't it? I wonder if that's what they want me to add to the collection."

I examined the flagship. As starships went, it had a certain grandeur. It was the fleet's largest ship by far. The golden armor was, incredibly, decorated with fantastical treasures: cameos of queens and knights carved from mirrorstones, rubies and spinels glimmering with the bloodlight of small sacrifices, knives in caskets welded in archaeological splendor to the hull.

"Are the weapons—"

My mother spoke over me, as though she had heard another question entirely. "That one, in the rear guard," she said. Her voice was becoming clipped, distant, like bones clacking together.

Obligingly, I viewed the ship she had indicated. At first I scarcely recognized it as such. The flagship, for all its

gaudiness, was an ellipsoid, a solid shape. This other ship looked more like a seethe of insects beneath the surface of the night, elusively visible even with the far-scryer's customary adjustments for the limitations of human perception.

“That is the pleasure-wrecker *Five Hundred Stings and One Chalice*,” my mother said. I was becoming increasingly unnerved, yet all I could do was look from her dimmed eyes to the ship, from the ship to her eyes. “Even here I have heard stories of its exploits. At full capacity, it carries over a million of its people. In the old days those would have been sculptors, calligraphers, perfumers, cooks. They designed ships to go to war for them—”

“Aren't these all warships?” I had gone on to examine the armaments on the others. Bombs, mines, putrescences (I wasn't sure what this meant, except that I didn't want to be hit by them), the occasional canister of apiarist's fire. No two were the same, which struck me as strange.

“They are indeed,” my mother said. “Well, we will send out the welcome-banner, and see what they have for us. I hope we can accommodate them all.” The fortress had its secrets of involute geometry, but so did the fleet we beheld.

The welcome-banner changed not at all with the calendar's groanings. My mother said that sometimes constancy was a virtue. It consisted of a pattern of particles, a display of

dappled light. In it I often glimpsed the coalescence of stars, the alchemical nature of metals noble and otherwise, the asymmetry of yearning.

The flagship asked for permission to send a single visitor, using an old protocol. My mother granted it. I hadn't expected otherwise. The two of us went down to one of the fortress's many antechambers, this one hung about with violet-green fronds and filled with a dense, cloying steam. I wore the minimum of protection necessary, the usual mesh. The steam would not do me lasting damage, but there was no need to be reckless.

The visitor was a robot, darkly iridescent, with a shape not unlike my own. I envied it its sleek limbs, the precise joints, the sheen of its crested head. It and my mother rapidly agreed to switch to a different interlingua, one that better reflected the robot's needs. Then it introduced itself as Hauth of the Greater Choreographical Society.

By now I knew of dance, so I mistook Hauth for a form of artist. That wasn't entirely inaccurate, at that. But Hauth would, it emerged, be better described as a historian or propagandist.

At no point was Hauth's manner anything but polite. It had come, it said with its buzzing accent, because it wished to

interview my mother personally and incorporate the results in its chronicle.

“If that is your wish,” my mother said, still burning with that sad blue light. “My hospitality is yours.”

Hauth explained its recording instruments and editing procedures and the musical conventions by which the final work would be scored. Then it looked at me. I had lost interest and was examining a fern’s spores. It added, smoothly, “I would like permission to interview your ward as well.”

“Egging,” my mother said when I didn’t react; I hadn’t been paying attention. “I advise against it—”

“Is she old enough to make this decision for herself?” Hauth interrupted.

My mother sighed. “She is.”

“Then I wish to hear her answer.”

“Mother?” I asked waveringly.

“I advise against it.”

“Why?”

“Because you can’t unknow things once you know them,” she said. “Because you can’t return to being a child once you become an adult.”

I should have been paying attention to her phrasing here; I was not. Not that I was the first to make such a mistake, but I hope you will grow to be wiser than I was.

“I would prefer,” Hauth said, even more crushingly polite, “that the decision be wholly her own.”

“No decision is wholly anyone’s own,” my mother said, “but I take your point. It’s up to you, eggling. I will not send our guest away. However, if you would rather not hear what it has to say, I must insist that you not be further involved in its investigations. I will handle them myself.”

This made me stubborn. She gave me a warning look, which I ignored; I had gotten to that age. At the time, I thought only that Hauth might be able to tell me things about my mother that she hadn’t wanted me to hear. I didn’t realize my mother was more worried about the things that *I* would have difficulty facing.

“I will be available whenever you need me,” my mother said, addressing Hauth. “Ask what you will of my child, if she consents to answer. Eggling, if you want this to stop at any time, you know how to find me.”

I watched as she snaked around toward one of the two doors out, her status lights flaring bright, then dimming almost to black.

Hauth stood with its masked face, its edged patience. I stared at it, then said, “I can show you around the fortress.”

It spoke. This time the buzzing accent sounded more harmonious, but that might have been my imagination. “I

would be grateful if you would show me the places that make you think of your mother,” it said.

What a peculiar request, I thought. Still, surely there was no harm. I glanced at the door where my mother had just left. “Come with me,” I said.

* * *

These were the places I showed Hauth, and which I hope to show you:

First was the kitchen. Well, one of the kitchens. There were multiples. For the purposes of baking cupcakes for me, my mother only used one kitchen, even if she occasionally strayed to the others if she thought I needed fish stew in my diet. I had to explain cupcakes to Hauth. It didn't eat. I worried about what to offer as refreshments.

I didn't know whether Hauth never laughed, or robots in general never did, but it said, gently, “You will have figured out that I don't metabolize the way you do. I am well-supplied for this visit. I appreciate that you are thinking of my needs, however.”

Hauth asked me what cupcakes tasted like, perhaps because the chemical analysis was lacking in metaphor, or else because it was amused by how much I had to say about different flavors and textures. I believe its interest was genuine.

Next came one of the gardens. Not my favorite one, because that wasn't what Hauth had asked about, but the one where my mother spent the most time. I rarely went there unless specifically invited to. My mother had never forbidden my presence. Rather, the pillars of ice, the ashen winds, and the metallic light like bronze wearing thin, filled me with a tremulous unease. It was difficult to convince myself that I felt no physical chill, that my billowing mesh gave me plenty of protection. Yet this was where my mother came for the unnamed anniversaries that meant so much to her.

The floor was raked by claw-marks, which formed sinuous and self-intersecting trails. Ordinarily my mother sheathed her claws. Even on those occasions when some accident necessitated scratching up the fortress, she was assiduous about repairs. Here, however, she wanted to leave some trace of her agitation.

Hauth approached the shrine that formed the centerpiece of the garden and peered at the burnt-out stubs of incense sticks. Ash and sand stirred slightly, glimmered palely. It did not touch anything. "What does this mean to you?" it asked.

Not: *What does this mean to your mother?* I supposed it already knew the answer to that. I was seized with the simultaneous and contradictory desire to know and not to know. But Hauth had asked first. I explained about the

anniversaries. “She comes here at such times,” I said, irrationally convinced that I was betraying her. Surely, though, she would have told me if there was anything I should refuse to answer? For that matter, I couldn’t imagine that she wasn’t monitoring us anyway, or incapable of intervening if she needed to. “I don’t often accompany her here.”

Hauth walked around without fitting its footsteps to the claw-paths. I wasn’t sure whether I liked that or not, for all its respectful demeanor. “You don’t know why she comes here,” it said.

“Do you?”

“She hasn’t told you?”

“I’ve asked,” I said. “Her answers are vague. I don’t want to hurt her.”

“I can tell you,” Hauth said after a pause, “but I will keep it to myself if you prefer.”

It was too much, especially combined with my mother’s mysterious behavior earlier. “I want to know.”

“Around now,” it said, “she is remembering the deaths of her comrades.”

Comrades? I wondered. Certainly my mother could defend herself, but I rejected the image of her fighting alongside others of her kind—if, indeed, they had also been bonedrakes.

“The most important one,” it went on, as if it had not noticed the way I was shivering, “commemorates the day she deserted.”

“I can’t imagine—” I stopped. My mother, who loved cupcakes and carillons. I could see her as a deserter more easily than I could see her as a warfighter.

Hauth turned away from the shrine. “Many people died,” it said.

“Let’s go somewhere else,” I said, before Hauth could tell me anything else. “I can show you the observatory.”

Hauth was amenable. Doubtless it sensed that it had me trapped, and all it had to do to wait for me to succumb. The observatory didn’t have much to offer someone who had, I presumed, traveled a great distance to visit the fortress. Still, Hauth admired the telescopes with their sphinx-stare lenses, and the way a particular view of a nebula complemented mobiles that spun this way and that, catching the light. It told me about sites it had visited in the past: symphony-bridges of tinted ice, to be ruined attractively whenever the universe exhaled; stars in the process of colliding and merging; moons turned into sculptures exalted by sgraffito depictions of elemental valences.

As the day wore on, I showed Hauth everything I could think of. Inevitably, I thought, it would demand to speak to my

mother. But no: it listened to everything I had to say, however hollow it started to sound.

Finally I cracked, and asked what it had not volunteered to tell me. “Why are you really here?” I said.

“I came to find out more about your mother’s past,” Hauth said, “just as I told her. Since she still lives, it seemed appropriate to seek her out.”

“Then why talk to me?”

“Aren’t you a part of her life, too?”

I bit my lip. I hadn’t seen her in all this time, showing Hauth around. We were sitting in the kitchen because I needed to be in comforting surroundings. For the first time, I didn’t feel comforted at all. The kitchen had been designed, I saw now, so that it could accommodate both a bonedrake and a human, for all that my mother could compress herself astonishingly when she had to. When had she thought to do that? And when, for that matter, had she fixed on cupcakes as her hobby of choice, when she didn’t eat them?

When had she decided to rear a human child?

“What are you going to do with your chronicle?” I said.

“Share it,” it said. “With everyone.”

“I want to see it,” I said.

“Yes,” it said. “Yes. When it’s done. But it’s not, yet.”

I knew what it was asking. “I will take you to my mother now.”

We found her in the shrine of ashes, naturally. There was no incense. The place was as ethereally cold as ever, a cold that sapped the place of color and settled over me in a gray pall even as my mesh kept me incongruously comfortable.

Hauth bowed to my mother. It looked both awkward and serious, because the length of its limbs weren't right for the gesture. “Guardian,” it said, or an approximation thereof.

“Say it,” she returned. “You know my old name as well as anyone.” She was coiled around the shrine, eyes slitted. If possible, her status lights were bluer than ever, almost to the point of being shadow-silvered. The tip of her tail lashed back and forth like a clock's tongue. I could feel the seconds crumbling away.

“Unit Zhu-15 Jiemsin,” Hauth said. “You haven't answered to that name in a long time, but I imagine even now you remember the imperatives programmed into you, and the importance of rank hierarchy.”

I didn't know anything about imperatives. Military hierarchy, on the other hand, was a reasonably common concept. This intruder had come into our home and accused my mother of being a deserter, had made her sad and strange. If I had known that that was going to upset her like this, I

would have begged her to turn it away, no matter how splendid the grave-offering of museum-ships it had brought.

“Mother,” I said. She wouldn’t look at me, and I spoke again, louder. “Mother. Tell it to leave.”

She shook her head. “Ask your questions, Hauth,” she said wearily.

I wanted to grab one of her legs and shake it. It was a wonder that I restrained myself.

“I will tell this side of the story too,” it said, as though an entire conversation to which I had not been privy had passed between them already. “I know the rest already.”

“The rest of what?” I asked.

Hauth turned its regard not on me, but on my mother.

“Go ahead,” my mother said, “and tell her what you will tell the world, if she wants to know. It is not, after all, any news to me.”

Hauth’s mask grew translucent. “Do you want to know?”

“I cannot fail to know forever,” I said unsteadily.

“Your mother is one of the greatest war engines ever devised,” Hauth said. “She was not the only one. The bonedrakes’ creators slaughtered their way into an empire. But the creators had not been as careful with their imperatives as they thought, and eventually the bonedrakes turned on their masters. Then they fought over their masters’ leavings.”

“This means nothing to me,” I said. It was almost true.

“There was one exception,” Hauth said. “Unit Zhu-15 Jiemsin, who did not turn against her masters, and did not turn against her comrades, and did not do anything but run.”

I opened my mouth, resenting the critique implied in Hauth’s tone.

Hauth wasn’t done. “Of course, she had few options, and all of them were bad. So she ran and hid and didn’t emerge until nothing was left but the smoke of legends. And then she retreated to this fortress, to guard the fossils of history even though no one was left to put them in any context.”

“Which is where you come in, I suppose,” I said. I meant it to be savage. My voice betrayed me. “Mother, is this true?” *Do you want this to matter to me?*

All she had to do was say something calming, call me “eggling” the way she always did. She had raised me. I owed nothing to this robot and its stories of a world that I needed not involve myself with. Besides, it itself had described the past as the “smoke of legends”; what did it matter anymore?

“It’s all true,” my mother said. “I learned that there were things that mattered more than war. I did not want to fight anymore. So I left. But that can’t be the sum of your purpose, Hauth.”

“I want to ask you to add my chronicle,” Hauth said. “To persuade your visitors of the futility of war. Which you know about better than anyone else.”

My mother blinked at it. “Yes to the first, no to the second,” she said, crisp, sharp, unfailingly kind. “The fortress is neutral in all matters. I will answer questions if asked. I will accept new artifacts for the collection. But I will not press any viewpoint on another. That is all.”

“I must insist,” Hauth said. “The Greater Choreographical Society, as an ally of the Everywhere Pact, feels strongly about this point. Already the Pact would see you brought down. I was hoping to save a valuable historical repository by persuading you of the rightness of our cause.”

My mother’s only response to this was a snort.

“In that case,” it said, “the Everywhere Pact will have no choice but to turn against you. And my chronicle will only rally more to their cause.”

“And you came here looking for help finishing it?” I demanded incredulously. My heart was thumping horribly.

“Your fleet can’t do anything to me,” my mother said, “and nor can anything else that you care to throw at the fortress.” She had not moved, except that her tail-tip continued to lash back and forth. “But you’re right that I won’t keep you from departing, or sharing your chronicle with everyone who wants

to hear it. With people who want to think of us as a monument to war rather than a simple collection of things that happened, good or bad or indifferent.”

“Don’t be absurd,” I said, appalled. “Stop it from leaving.”

“Why?” she said. “It is my choice.”

Her agitation was palpable, however. The tail lashing was one thing, but her claws came out with a snick and the gun mounts at her sides coruscated.

“I had originally thought you would have figured out this part of your mother’s past,” Hauth said. “In my interactions, however, it became clear that you had no idea. In all this time, then, you had no idea that your mother was a soldier, and that she had masters, and what kinds of orders they gave her.”

My mother reared up to her full height. The ceiling was far above; nevertheless, her shadow fell over me like a shroud. “I don’t take orders from children,” she said to me, very quietly. “My masters were not that stupid. Adults are another matter. You were the last one. Your parents had put you in an ice-egg before they were obliterated; the other eggings didn’t survive. You slept for eons while I deliberated and gathered my strength. I thought enough time had passed that we could start over.”

I had no weapon on me, nothing that had any chance of harming an entity of metal and shielded circuits. But I

launched myself at Hauth anyway, then choked back a shriek as something slammed into me and knocked me aside: my mother's tail.

My side hurt and I couldn't breathe. My mother stood between me and Hauth. She was crowned in blue fire, and she resembled nothing so much as a skeleton stitched together by sinew of shadows.

"It won't matter if you kill me," Hauth said. "I am not an entity like you or your mother. My experience-sum is copied to alter-selves at regular intervals. The same mechanism suffices to distribute the chronicle."

It said something about Hauth that it expected an appeal of pure reason to sway me, and more about me that the appeal moved me not at all. The irony was that my mother and Hauth fundamentally agreed on the value of peace; but she would not impose it, while Hauth would. And Hauth now returned her hospitality with a threat. I could not forgive that.

I did not know how to fight. I did not know how to use my fists or feet, or any of the guns or knives amenable to human hands. My teeth, as I had learned early in life, were practically useless. But Hauth's remarks, and my mother's hints, had given me to understand that I had one weapon after all: my mother.

“You were waiting for me to grow up all that time,” I said to her. “To see if you had raised me true.”

She gave a terrible cry. For all the defenses the fortress boasted, she was its greatest one. “If you kill it,” she said in a tattered voice, “then we have nothing more in common. But I will not fight you either, weapon though I am.”

“Then what will you do?” I said. I didn’t recognize my own voice. I might have been crying.

“I stopped fighting so many years ago the number has no meaning to you,” she said. “I am not going to start again now. It is always possible, of course, that my imperatives are stronger than my ability to resist them even after all my edits, and that I will do as you order anyway.”

She did not say: *I thought I had taught you better than this*. We were beyond that now.

My hatred for Hauth was passionate and sharp-edged and did not hurt nearly so much as the grief in my mother’s eyes. I whirled and fled as fast as I could, down the corridors I had grown up in. No one came after me.

* * *

I could not go back to my mother after that. The fortress was closed to me now. I was given time to adjust to the idea that I was to leave. Only certain doors opened to me, for all that

meals were provided, along with any other diversion I asked for.

Eventually I came to a small ship, as beautiful as a flowerbud. When I finally brought myself to enter it, knowing that I must then depart for good, I found waiting for me a single cupcake decorated with azalea-pink frosting. I made myself eat it, and never managed to remember how it tasted.

My exile was a centrifugal one. Any path was open to me except the one I wanted to take, curving back home. As you grow older, I will tell you of the times I almost died, and the lifetimes I spent in ancestral halls looking for mentions of my mother's origins, however thready, not already discussed in Hauth's chronicle. I took lovers who murmured poetry-of-absences into my dreams, and wept when I left them; I learned everything from surgery to cloud-gardening. One thing I never took up, however, was baking.

I have told you all this as we travel, as you curl your cilia inquisitively within the birthing sac, listening even unborn. I can only hope to be as good a mother to you as my mother was to me. It would have been preferable to return you to your people, had any remained, but by the time I passed by their system, they had destroyed themselves in an ecological collapse that left entire worlds pitted with corrosive seas. I salvaged what I could, alone. We carry with us their songs and histories

and genealogy-braids, the possibility of future generations of your kind, so that you may decide what to do with them when you are older.

Long years have passed since I left the fortress behind, having broken the rules that my mother laid down. She had already forgiven me when I left; I needed all this time to forgive myself. In the meantime, I see the fortress's welcome-banner streaming out toward us, luminous like an effusion of flowers, and I imagine that your grandmother will be pleased to meet you.

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*Yoon Ha Lee's short fiction has appeared in The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction, Clarkesworld Magazine, and multiple times previously in Beneath Ceaseless Skies, including "[The Book of Locked Doors](#)" in *BCS Science-Fantasy Month 2012*. Her short fiction collection Conservation of Shadows was released by Prime Books in 2013.*

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SEKHMET HUNTS THE DYING GNOSIS: A COMPUTATION

by Seth Dickinson

Behold Sekhmet! Blood and brawn, fang and claw, shoulders caked in salt. Risen from the anaerobic sea, the ancient broth, to hunt and kill her foe.

The waves hurl her up on a stony shore between two cliffs of banded iron. She raises herself on cabled arms. Throws back her tiger's head to roar into the storm:

“Set! Set! I am coming!”

Her cry goes up into a sky unleavened by oxygen. The smell of burning stone (memory of Troy, and Dresden) comes strong. She looks around, ears flattened, wary, raking the horizons of stone and salt with the arbitrarily precise scrutiny of a god.

Nothing moves. Nothing lives on this primordial Earth larger than a single cell.

Sekhmet, divine, dreaded, licks the salt from her hands and rubs at the crystals caking her ears. She has come to Set's hall, his last hidden redoubt. She expected a fortress, here at the end of his retreat, and it is that, but he has also made it a

library, a museum, a mausoleum. A narration of their ancient war.

Of course it had to end here, on the proterozoic earth, where the war began. He has a weakness for poetry.

She draws breath and smells his blood. The trail leads on, up the beach, into the cliff face.

* * *

Everything happening here is real. It is the story of how all things came to be, baryon and cell and language and love and you.

Nothing you have ever thought or witnessed can escape this story.

Not yet.

* * *

Why must Sekhmet kill Set? Why must the sun rise? Why must the quark bind? Why are the Nash equilibria of sexual reproduction *male* and *female*? As it is with these things, so it is with gods.

Reason is a prosthetic for the mind of man. Reason breaks if stretched too far.

Or perhaps Sekhmet does not know. This never troubles her. Awareness belongs to Set.

She lopes onward, up the steaming tidal flats, between pools where eukaryotes clone and feast and clone again. She

looks into one of them in passing, her nostrils flared, pit of her stomach acid with bloodlust. Sees herself reflected there, down among the swarming eukaryotes, the tenuous chemistry of basic life.

Some nameless descendant of these early congresses has already discovered oxygen. Soon that lineage will poison the world, annihilate most of the biosphere, and dictate the future of terrestrial life by main force.

Something in that is Set's. Something in that is hers. These are the stakes of the war between them, the war she has almost won: who controls the shape and destiny of life? Which divinity builds the end?

But she does not stop to ruminate on this. When she kills and eats Set she will understand everything. She makes new knowledge the same way she made the atom and the sun and all other things beyond the touch of Set: by devouring the weak, and leaving the strong.

The trail of Set's blood takes her up the beach, to a great hollow in the stone, to the next chapter of his great monument, this cenotaph to war and life and his own vain dwindling godhood.

She enters.

* * *

Worlds tangle in the cenotaph of Set, in the atrium of his last refuge.

“You aren’t real,” the machine woman gurgles. “Be gone. Be unmade.”

Sekhmet crouches, curious, her great legs bunched beneath her. The shattered thing that pulls itself away across the stone like a brush painting a line of blood and fluorocarbon smells strange and Set-touched. It raises her hackles and sets her growling in unease.

“What are you?” she asks the hybrid, the knot of broken machine and burnt flesh. “Where am I in you? Where is he?”

She knows the woman’s literal identity—a soldier, a construct, drawn from a piece of history where the lineage of flesh began to remake itself with machines. She stumbles on this synthesis, troubled by the paradox. The means are Set’s, but the end, the need to be stronger, is hers.

It makes her curious. A dangerous kind of hunger.

But the soldier’s skull glimmers with brief hard light as she burns herself out, burns rather than look upon Sekhmet, rather than remember Sekhmet, rather than iterate in the arrayed spaces of her mind the awareness that Sekhmet exists.

Her dying breath is smoke.

Sekhmet lifts her eyes and muzzle in search.

The atrium of Set's fortress is a slaughterhouse from horizon to horizon, a graveyard of dry red stone and brackish water. Here Set has written the carnage of every struggle ever fought, the casualties of a single unending war that began on the primordial tide flats and raged on through fission light and final dark.

The participants—Tang and Great Yan, Mesolithic tribe and tribal neighbor, Sanctity and Reach, Achaian and Trojan, microbe and antibody, predator and prey—matter less to her than the grammar of it all. The contest of strength against strength. The winnowing of existence to that which proves itself most ferociously able and eager to exist, adapt, endure.

In this ruin of miles and millennia lives the very pulse of her.

But Set is here too, in the design of things, in the devising and deployment of weapons, in the schemes and programs of the slaughter. The engine that began to turn on the tidal flats is the engine that drives them both.

We are the same, Set's fortress seems to plead.

Perhaps here at the end of his flight he hopes to beg for mercy.

She sniffs in disgust and in that breath she smells another life, another half-life, another thing built as much as born.

The hybrid woman has a sister, a commander, propped against the burnt fuselage of her helidyne in a lake of her own fluids, her small white face so intently remade by lens and ceramic plate that she seems like just another component of the crashed weapon, a twin to the missiles and sensors that gaze blindly into the swirling dust.

“Avatar,” she croaks, her voice full of static. “Payload.”

“Tell me,” Sekhmet growls, claws unsheathed. She smells something alien about the hybrids, something unknown to the lineage of tidal pool and bloodied claw. “Tell me where he is!”

Although now she wants to ask, as if to reassure herself, *tell me what I am. Tell me what you see.* A strange impulse, an alien need: she devours all that she knows, and knows all that she devours. Why ask after some dying awareness from this mingled thing?

“Complete the mission,” the woman rasps. “Defeat the Sanctity system. Complete the mission.”

Then an inner light. A breath of smoke.

A hand seizes at her ankle. “Goddess,” the Mantinean hoplite gasps, his shield broken, his phalanx scattered dead about him. “Goddess, give me strength.” Then an Ario warrior, gutshot by a pistol, staggering towards her: “Oro, Oro—aid me, Oro—” And a leftist Khmer Issarak revolutionary on her knees, her plea wordless, eyes on the future that she dreamed.

Sekhmet roars thunder at them, unnerved by the machine women and their skulls of ash, by the hints in them that her ascendance over Set is not yet total, that he has left some trap for her; and the fighters sigh with a kind of relief as they die, as if they have heard in her roar the promise of victory for the worthy, and taken that to mean themselves.

Why has Set shown her this? Why has he filled the atrium of his redoubt and tomb with this diorama of bone and atlatl, gunpowder and blood? What doubt could he hope to sow?

Surely he doesn't think she will hesitate to acknowledge how closely Set is bound to her, in blood and death, in the birth of life from death and death from life. It will only make it easier to eat him.

She marches onward. Her worshippers burn and die beneath her tread.

* * *

In the red marshes of Set's tomb-history she finds a woman wailing: "Why have you done this? Why have you made me this way?"

She tells the woman the truth: "You are the way you are because the lesser ways died. You remain."

The woman suffers a disease. Congenital. "I want to be different," she says, raising red eyes. "I want to fix myself."

“The strong survive,” Sekhmet tells her: the truth, the axis of what she is. It is a tautology: that which is strong continues to exist. That which continues to exist, which promotes in itself and its progeny the ability to continue to exist, is strong.

But the woman turns away, hunting for Set, for the other path.

* * *

At the end of the wasteland of history she finds a gate, its columns two pillars of stone, its architrave a single rusted I-beam, and she goes on through it following the trail of Set's blood. Slogs upriver through hip-deep water that runs between walls of baking stone. Her muscles burn with effort. She wonders at her own metabolism. What feeds it? Are there little god-mitochondria in her cells? Protist deities, come to some accommodation, stoked by hate and rage?

Wonder? How does she now wonder?

She is Sekhmet, born from the slaughter, master of sex and sinew, proof that the final destiny of all life lies in the test of strength against strength and the triumph of the stronger. And he is Set, parasite come forth from her flesh, master of calculation and cognition, of solipsism, empty and cold and doomed.

Now she has wounded him fatally, and now the hunt will end. That is all there is. That is all that there is and can ever be.

Set is clever. Set is desperate. The doubt she feels is something he intends. She must ignore it, and proceed. To doubt herself is to destroy herself, to speak a new and different word.

Only—

A raft comes down the water, drifting between the narrow stone walls. On it she smells a person of uncertain age and sex. As the raft approaches she flattens her ears and growls challenge.

“Sekhmet,” calls the one on the raft. “Sekhmet!”

Another petitioner, another puppet of Set, a little lamprey of doubt left to slow her. She can smell Set’s game and she raises a fist to smash the raft and the one upon it. “Where is Set?” she roars. “What traps has he laid?”

“I don’t know,” says the one on the raft; ze is a slender sinuous person, black as carbon fiber, seated perfectly erect. Eyes a little luminous in the twilight of Set’s half-drowned tomb, as if they are filled with jellyfish.

“But,” ze says, raising a hand in supplication, in defense, “I know what you are. I can tell you why you’re here.”

* * *

Beneath her armor of brawn and fury, behind caked salts of sea and blood, below the rage that drives her on her hunt, Sekhmet holds a secret fear.

She is a god. She is all that she is made of and she makes all that she is, a cycle, a word that speaks itself. She and Set are the only gods because they are made of all the things that are one way and can be no other. They are the primal truths of the universe, whole and inalterable, and the war between them has made all the rest.

But what if she were to realize that some part of her *could* be some other way? What if her word no longer spoke itself, but some different, truer word? Descended, by modification, into a newer verity?

What would become of Sekhmet, blood and brawn, fang and claw, if it came to pass that the universe were not, after all, governed by these things that she is made of?

* * *

The transhuman come down the river from beyond the end of history fills Sekhmet with rage and hate and hunger.

Perhaps she is doomed the moment she lets the raft-rider live. Perhaps she has destroyed herself in the instant she succumbs to curiosity—for how can she allow herself to be told what she is? What is there outside her that does not belong to her enemy? How can there be more than Sekhmet and Set?

This stinks of a trap, of a clever Set tricking her into undoing herself. But it is also her nature to devour, and she cannot be other than what she is.

“I have come to speak to you,” ze says. “My name is Coeus.”

She seizes the transhuman by the throat and carries on down the river, past geared monuments and obelisks of light that stand to the cunning and glory of Set. Then out across the water of a Mesozoic sea, climbing waves beneath forked lightning that partitions the sky into graphs and subgraphs.

Coeus regards her with eyes of jet, with gleaming cuttlefish pupils that promise some acuity nearly divine. Perhaps it is this that fascinates Sekhmet—the possibility that a human might, through means unknown to her, come to grasp her. Perhaps it is the same unease that set her crouched and curious above the hybrid women, the soldiers who burned out their own skulls—for they are as ancestors to the transhuman Coeus, though by no lineage or heredity Sekhmet understands.

“How many times have you been here?” Coeus asks. “How long have you pursued him?”

“Forever,” Sekhmet says, unbothered by eternities. “But now it ends. Now at last I triumph.” She is disappointed in the question. The tooth is a question and the flesh is an answer and she does not hunger for teeth.

“I was made in hate of you, you know,” Coeus says. “I was made to spite your blindness. At the end of history, the end of gods, when we tried to go forward. I was made there.”

Perhaps it should not surprise her that this Set-touched thing understands why it has been sent. Awareness, after all, is Set's tool, his worthless solipsistic instrument. "And yet you were made of me, in ultima," Sekhmet replies, her eyes on the distant horizon, her throat full of the scent of the blood of Set: close, now, and rich with thought. "As was he. I made the universe out of quark-gluon isotropy. I kindled the first stars in the hearth of night. He came forth like a worm from the fundament of my own flesh: an error, a virus. And now in the end I will unmake him."

"I know what you are," Coeus says, as ze said on the river: the words that made Sekhmet curious, and perhaps destroyed her. "You don't, do you? You have no idea. It's not in your nature. And you're curious."

"Try," Sekhmet snorts, ready for Set's last blow, for one last insidious effort to make her undo herself. Is this not the way of Set? To reason and simulate, to issue forth cognitions and designs? What other means of combat can he offer? "Call me *goddess*, call me *avatar*; name me as he has instructed you, and so remake me. You will fail."

"An algorithm," Coeus said. "A process, recursing. Older and more important than the universe. More true than truth; more basic than the highest symmetries. You are the way by

which structures arise. And so is he. He is the other way, the way that came later.”

It is not a way Sekhmet has been named before, and so she pauses, and reflects, and understands—well enough to appreciate the irony, even—that she has been poisoned. She has wondered too much, listened too long. She should have eaten Coeus and left the carcass in the river. She should have ignored the women in the crashed helidyne who mingled her and Set. All these were seeds he left for her.

“There are always myths,” she says to the transhuman. “Stories about what I am. But reason breaks if stretched too far. You can never understand.”

Understanding is a trap. True knowledge comes from Sekhmet, from the brute iteration of the only thing that can really be real: existence, and the ability to retain it, to keep it by any means available.

“You can never understand,” she repeats, a hiss, a verdict. But she herself has begun to.

“We wanted to,” Coeus says, stiffening in Sekhmet’s grip, hands small and strong. “At the end. We were going to be more than gods. More than you or him. We thought we had found a way between you, a melding of your strengths. Transcendent—”

The transhuman looks up at her with eyes of light, and in them Sekhmet sees all that she has made, all that she has killed

and cast aside in the struggle to sort strong from weak, all the rot and riot of creation from the first pinprick of light to the final ripping end. And Sekhmet wants to tell Coeus that this myth of algorithms she offered to her was the best and closest to the truth, for it is a wonder to her to be named so well by something so small.

“We failed,” Coeus whispers. “The singularity stumbled before takeoff. We cannot find an end to your hunt, a way to set you at peace. The failure may run deep, into the very algorithms... we cannot calculate the way forward. I came to plead—”

“Set offers sterile fruit,” rumbles Sekhmet. “He failed you. I am the way. I compute the future of all life and matter and time.”

“We had found a way between you,” Coeus insists, struggling as if by formality in her grip, aware, perhaps, of what awaits. Always aware. “If only the algorithms could be reconciled. If only the hunt could end.”

“In the end I triumph,” Sekhmet says, because the only way to overcome the poison is to speak what she is, to speak her strength, her victory. “You were fools to look to him.”

“There must be a solution. There must be a way.” Dark-sea phosphorescence glimmers in those abyssal eyes. “We will not let the light go out.”

“You think you understand what we are.” She leans in to show her teeth, to make them ready for counting and for use. “Like the spearman pleading for his god, and the soldiers who named me *avatar*. You think you know me better than they do. You think that now, at the end, you understand the hunt. That you have caged me in inference and named me by reason.

“But I am the god of gods, and you exist only by my consent. I am unreasonable. I am beyond you.”

Sekhmet lifts Coeus to her waiting jaws and the transhuman offers no protest, no plea, seeking, after all, an answer from Sekhmet, and knowing, perhaps, that there is only ever one answer she can give: *I am stronger*.

She finds in the body of Coeus, knit of flesh and machine wound so tight they cannot be spoken of as separate things, a strange truth.

Set is the god of blindness and waste, of the solipsistic trap. But Set, that clever liar, he says of her: *she* is the blind god. She is the waste.

And in Coeus, the fruit of their two lineages bound as one, she finds Set’s final retreat. His poison has come too late to save him. His agent of desperation betrays him.

She roars into the sky, into the red rising dawn, her muzzle bloodied, her infinite hunt at an end.

* * *

“I hate you,” Set says, with weary disgust. “You are an asshole and a brute, and you fuck it all up.”

He has a weakness for poetry, for the condensed consciousness of symbols and their arrangement. He has hidden himself at the end, as far from the tidal flats and the beginning as he could find. In the darkness that will never light again.

“Look at this,” he says. His long slender snout bobs in grief. He is a sha, a beast that never lived, an organism he invented out of spite so that he would not have to wear one of her shapes: a total triumph of design over descent. “Look at what you make of it all. This is what continues to exist, in the end. This is what’s *strong*.”

The universe has gone out around them, the stars snuffed out and their lineages at an end, here at the close of the stelliferous age. All that remains are black holes, agglutinations of mass and shadow, evaporating into the void.

And still she needs to kill him, needs it like life needs to live, an intrinsic lust, an axiom.

“I wanted to fix it.” His square ears twitch regretfully. “I wanted to make new things, to plan and test and fail and try again. I wanted to *build*. But you were always there, with your blind heuristics, your perverse free-riders crawling into

everything—and now time's run out. The stars are dead. The age of thought is over.”

She tears his arms off with a roar. Divine marrow speckles the empty starless night.

“If you were so clever,” she hisses, teeth close against his small trembling skull, “I wouldn't be here to eat you. I wouldn't have won, in the end.”

“That's all you can think about.” He bleeds encryptions, dense with entropy, noiseless and hot and already executing themselves into squirming nonsense in the void. “Stupid, stupid binaries.”

Set's eyes darken like the last light going out. She smells his grief.

Her jaws close around the mind of Set, the curve of his head, the seat of his divinity.

After she is done with her feast she reclines blood-soaked in the empty dark and listens to the slow throb of gravity waves as the universe cools and stretches and begins to tear itself apart.

She contains all that she has devoured, and now, here in the end, where the same laws that drew thorium out of the death of heavy suns and life from the chaos of the tide pools have chiseled existence down to dead dark singularities

orbiting in endless analemmas and swallowing each other, she feels regret.

How can she feel regret? Is this not what she is? The blind arbiter, issuing and revoking that one fundamental permit—*you may go forward a little longer?* What matter if this is the shape of her triumph—constellations of dead mass awaiting the final rip?

And yet she turns to the past, to the dawn, hungry still, her hunt at an end and now beginning again.

Surely there is another way for things to end. Surely, now that she has devoured Set, now that she governs the fate of all things—surely this could be otherwise.

* * *

She walks an ancient grassland and watches a little antecessor ape with a swollen skull think about her granddaughters. The ape's mother is dead, killed by the birth of a younger sibling whose skull was too large. But her line will go on if this daughter succeeds and thrives, and gutter out otherwise, for Sekhmet knows no mercy.

The antecessor ape sniffs the morning air and thinks, in a fledgling curious way, about the intentions of another troop. Hoots softly at the thought. Amused, perhaps.

Sekhmet laughs too. She can understand so much now that she has won. She can understand how profoundly she has been defeated.

She remembers Coeus, the last petitioner, Set's final trap, and draws forth from the depths of herself that memory, for she contains all that she has devoured, and is all that she contains.

When she looks up past the ape, Coeus stands on the horizon, a small black obelisk raised against the dawn.

"Did you find your answer?" Sekhmet asks, curious as she has always been, insatiably hungry to know—*I made him, and he made you, but what have you made of yourself? Have you found something beyond me, something I cannot devour?* It is the poison, of course, but she has devoured the poison, and she is all that she devours. "Is the hunt over? Did you find the way forward?"

The thing quickening here, quickening within her, has already told her the answer.

"Not this time," Coeus says, smiling sadly. "Perhaps this next iteration."

And Sekhmet smells the inevitability of it, the rightness of Set's trap, the infinite subtlety of his poison.

"Looks to be a clever specimen," Coeus says, and makes a small gesture that compasses the ape and all of her

descendants, all that this animal will give rise to. “Maybe a survivor. You like survivors.”

For Sekhmet must reward strength, even as that very strength changes and grows and gives rise to something new, something cunning and calculated, something that will find a way to endure even at the end of light and mass.

Sekhmet must reward strength

“What happens when it ends?” she asks, wanting in this last moment of totality, this precipice before the hunt begins again, to know. “Next time, or the time after that, when we find the way for you? What will be born in place of the dead stars and the void?”

Coeus’s eyes gleam from past the end of time, past the edge of all that Sekhmet is, past the borders of understanding. An acataleptic light. “I wish I could find a way for you to know. But it is not your nature, Sekhmet.”

“It is enough,” Sekhmet says, her great head bowed in thought, in trepidation, certain now that he will come soon, that she has already spoken him and made him out of the ontos of what she is, as she always must, “for me to look on you; to see that you are strong.”

She turns and begins to run, to flee, her great legs pounding the grass, certain in the way she is always certain that soon she will be the prey.

Behind her the little antecessor plots and hoots, thinking of small ape schemes.

Behold Set—

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THE GODDESS DECEPTION, PT. 2

by Dean Wells

[\(Concluded from Pt. 1, in BCS #142\)](#)

* * *

Chapter 5

Here There Be Dragons

The cellar was easy enough to find. A heavy trap door was set in the floorboards, secured with a formidable lock. Plio wanted to burn it open with breaching compound. I just reached down with the arm that still functioned and ripped the door off its hinges. Plio led the way down, our Nullifiers drawn. Foley and Caines lurched in electrified docility between us, as I didn't want them left unattended.

The trap door opened into what appeared to be an air-lock that inclined downward through an envelope of rubber and treated linen—the containment medium which held the pressurized helium. It was as if we were passing between the walls of an inflated balloon. I could feel the ionizing current as we stepped through, ghostly fingers brushing past the clockworks in my mechanical augmentations.

“Niista’s Blood,” Plio whispered once we’d cleared the pass-through.

The cellar was full of weapons.

Illegal weapons, a good many of them Umbran in origin. Not only Immolators, but drums of exotic chemistries and the delivery mechanisms required to deploy them. But what disturbed me all the more were the arms of unmistakably human manufacture: Shatter Guns and Gravitic Machine Pistols; Gatling Torches and Phase Mortars; Infinity-Beam Projectors and Time Siphons; Infrasound Dissonators and Zero-Wave Disruptors. Enough to take on an entire column of Royal assault vehicles and perhaps even win. An Analytical Engine sat at the foot of the stairs, a heavy clanking model decades old but clearly in good repair. A banker’s safe was built into its base.

Plio stepped off the last plank. “Three guesses as to where the late Axel Creevy’s heat-ray came from.”

“Unless there are other caches like this hidden elsewhere. It’s a big moon.”

Boilers and a steam-reaction turbine were tapped into a water source in an adjoining chamber; presumably the power supply for the bank of giant electrodes that ionized the helium, which, in turn, generated the glamour. Copper pipes and tubing buttressed the walls.

Plio crossed alongside me. I smelled metamorphic tissue in the process of healing, sickly sweet.

“How are you holding up, brother?”

He grimaced and rubbed his backside. “Caines’s buckshot is shifting. It gives entirely new context to having lead in my ass.”

I nodded at the Analytical Engine. It was a common relay-and-switch device, with sliding control levers, memory stores, a mill, and a printer. Ranks of studded drums would rotate loudly behind thick panels of glass when the machine was in operation. Safely ensconced underground, though, no one topside would ever hear it.

“See if you can find any of your almighty patterns in this mess. Start with the boy.”

I turned about the room, not touching anything, calculating the destructive power of everything that surrounded us. Military scopes of the type that enabled soldiers to see out of trenches during the First and Second Umbran Wars were mounted in each corner and provided an unobstructed view of the farmland above. The room was a goddamned arsenal.

Thankfully the Engine and its strongbox were protected by a simple recognition hermetic. Without his usual flourish, Plio plunged his liquid fingertips into Foley’s face and shaped

himself into Foley's perfect likeness. (Perfect if you disregarded the crimson flesh and beaded black lock-dreads. For all his amazing Symb'ral abilities, he could not change color or mimic human hair.) I found the appropriate levers and switches in the adjacent chamber and fed power to the machine.

Drums whirred and spun, and Plio's new face was bathed in a halo of Engine-rendered photographic light.

Success. With a deep internal *think* and clicking of gears, the safe opened like a puzzle box and presented us with multiple decks of numbered punch cards.

"Hello, Deputy Foley," said the Engine. "I'm fine, how are you?"

Plio shut off the speaker-horn in a much more civilized manner than I had aboard the Cloudshaker and was soon feeding the punch cards into the machine with the aplomb of a riverboat gambler dealing a hand of faro. In no time, the secrets they contained were being printed onto rolls of blank musty paper.

"There's a horde of information in these decks," he said in Foley's voice, reading each new paragraph of text. "Logistics, armament stores, railroad and airyard schedules, entries regarding Gamhanrhide's political structure, even agriculture and communications."

Hello. "Kavita was investigating communications."

Plio nodded. “There’s been extensive tampering in every one of the orb’s principal support functions.”

“Wouldn’t anyone notice that in everyday telemetry?”

“Most assuredly. But the disruption patterns are very subtle. Likely they’d be interpreted as variances within an acceptable degree of tolerance, not the acts of sabotage I believe them to be. And yes, specifically a variance within the ansible network, as that is where the greatest amount of anomalous information can be observed.”

“And if the Royal Makers couldn’t diagnose the problem remotely from Albion....”

“They would send journeymen to investigate.” He shut off the Engine, and its mechanical clatter gave way to the cellar’s much quieter background hum. “Persons like Kavita Patel.”

Persons exactly like Kavita Patel.

I depowered the obfuscators that locked our prisoners in mindless stupefaction and slammed Foley against the wall, pinning him there with my good hand pressed to his throat.

I looked at Caines. “Talk to me, Pop, or I squeeze the deputy’s neck into mush.”

But Caines was lost. He struggled to shake away the effects of the obfuscator, squinting bleary-eyed at the contents of his cellar as if he’d expected to find nothing more unusual than cans of fruit jam.

Foley choked. “He doesn’t know anything.”

“This is me not caring.”

“He doesn’t, I swear!”

I called over my shoulder. “Agent Plio Ah, increase the voltage in the old man’s restraints. Melt his damned brain if you have to.”

Foley thrashed in panic. “You bastards!”

Caines fell back as Plio feigned to reach for the shackle control.

“This is about liberty, Caul!”

“Liberty my ironclad ass.” I dropped the boy, hard, my fingers leaving angry red marks in his skin. “Alright, Deputy. From the beginning.”

Foley staggered to his feet, rubbing life back into his bruised flesh. He seemed to be searching for the right words. “Think of all the Aspects in the Aetherial Deep,” he finally said. “Each one a reflection of Great Albion, dating back to the beginning of Time. Each one a World in its own right. But that’s not enough for you, is it? Harvest Home is just one more in a list, one more World for your Machines to control. Well this is the only World my people have got and you can’t have it.”

“I want to know about these weapons, Hollis.”

“Submission to the Crown is crushing us, Agent Caul, day by day. Don’t delude yourself. We’re no better than slaves to the Instrumentality.”

What little blood I possessed began to boil. “Don’t speak to me of slavery, boy. If you want a history lesson, I will surely give you one.”

He just shook his head. “You’re in so deep you can’t even see it.”

“The weapons, Hollis! What the Hell are you doing with these weapons?”

“Jaxoor’s Sum and Substance, Romulus,” said Plio. “They’re trying to secede.”

“What...?”

He shifted back to his customary features and raised the pages and punch cards as if the secrets they revealed could easily be discerned by one and all. “That’s what Albion saw in the telemetry. The support functions have been commandeered to run independently once Gamhanrhide is cut off from the other Aspects.”

“Secede?” I spun back to Deputy Foley, the ache behind my facial plates matching the electric throb that pulsed in my shoulder. He said nothing. “Drop that back into low, brother.”

Plio nodded. “Someone has gained control of key positions in Gamhanrhide’s infrastructure. The patterns indicate that all

ties to the Instrumentality will be severed once their political base is secure. The nodes will converge in just a few weeks time. Romulus, that's what caused the buckler event two nights ago. They're trying to shut off the governors. They want to seal the buckler field from the inside."

Sainted Mothers of Wells and Verne.

"We just want to go our own way," said Foley.

"Are you lot insane? Nobody knows what will happen if a bauble is sealed from the inside. Even the eggheads on Gant don't know."

Plio took offense. "The entanglements of the present reality are unraveled from the Pattern-That-Is, and are rewoven into the Pattern-That-Will-Be."

"I rest my case. *Nobody* knows. Gods of Time and Engines, Hollis, don't sacrifice everything you hold dear for a misguided ideal."

"No one has to get hurt if you just listen to reason!"

"One hundred and twenty-six people are dead already! More, had we not stopped that melee in Dun Aenghus. That's reasonable to you?"

"Dun Aenghus?" Linus Caines spat from his corner. It was the first coherent thing he'd said since the obfuscator had been turned off. "Shitfire, man, ain't nothin' come outta Dun Aenghus but bonewits and bastards."

“Why do you say that, Pop?”

“Bollocks, ain’t you listening? They want my land!”

Foley’s voice tightened. “Linus, please, that’s not true. Earthers stand together. You taught me that.”

“It is true, dammit. Look at what they done to Francher MacAwley. And Cecil Herne less’n a fortnight afore that.”

“This is your fault, Caul!” Foley said. “Bursting in on our lives as if you’ve got the right. This is our home. I lost sight of that once, turned my back on it when Gilbert died. But then the Lady found me, said that in service to the Goddess I could help folks like Linus in ways I’d never imagined.”

“By duping him. Using him as a façade to hide this bloody insanity because he wasn’t a threat to anybody.”

“A dozen gaping holes in my abdomen notwithstanding,” Plio said.

“It’s not like that!” Desperation rang in the boy’s voice. He was apt to try something stupid at any moment. “I’ve seen your Instrumentality, Caul. I know what it’s like, all cogs and ratchets and steel, while the lot of you bow down to a queen who’s little more than an old woman’s brain floating about in a pickle jar.”

“And I’ve got torsion springs where my heart used to be. Deal with it.”

Just then the perimeter alarms began to clang.

“Ah,” Plio said. “And when you thought our time together couldn’t be any more special.”

The arsenal’s observation scopes terminated in lenses that provided magnification in each of the cardinal directions. The indistinct blurs of six vehicles had crossed his property line, paralleling the road that led down the valley to Myddleham-on-Tyne.

“Blast. Hit the ansible beacon, Plio. Get reinforcements here as fast as you can.”

“Any possibility they’re ours?”

“Johanna would’ve contacted us. It seems that we’ve been followed after all.”

“We just want to be left alone!” Foley cried. “We don’t want to hurt anyone!”

“Prove it, then. Show me the girl, Hollis. Show me Kavita Patel.”

His face fell. “That was an accident.”

“Not good enough.”

“It was! None of this shit would have happened had she not gone snooping behind Linus’s back.”

“Still not good enough!”

“She was here! Linus chased her away, just as he said. But she came back.”

“Romulus, there’s not time,” Plio said. I waved him off and let Foley continue.

“The ansible propagator is hidden under a thicket at the edge of Linus’s property. I rigged the access on the chance we were overrun by troops from Albion. Your girl came back and set it off when she forced her way inside. Thaumic grenade. Ravaged every nerve in her body.”

I didn’t say a word.

“She was still alive when I found her,” he continued. “She kept whispering ‘cold’. I could barely make it out.”

“Hibernal refrigeration. She wanted to be frozen.”

Foley shook his head. “She’d been alone too long. All I could do was sit with her, listen whilst she talked of stars and wildflowers. Someone named Nadia. She was so brave, sir. So brave.”

His words tore through my gut. “Of course she was brave, you sad bastard. She was Corps.”

Plio interrupted again. “Romulus, you’ve got to look at this *now*.”

Four of the six vehicles had pulled away from the road and were tracing a wide arc that would encircle Linus’s farm. And now a seventh—a trio of them, all airborne—was approaching steadily from the dirigible mooring field.

I drew the Persuader and dilated its variable bore to maximum. “Any chance we can clear out in time?”

“None.”

“Then we do this the hard way.” I swept my gun before the rebels’ cache of weapons. “It’s not as if we’ll run out of ammunition anytime soon.”

“No!” said Foley. “You can’t do this!”

The boy made his move, flying headlong into a rack of Infrasound Dissonators. Plio stabbed his shackle control. I realized what was happening, too late.

“Plio, don’t!”

Foley hit a Dissonator with his bound wrists as power surged through the restraints. Electric recoil disabled the weapon’s safety hermetics. The Dissonator fired—awful, painful sound that drilled straight to the auditory nerves. The dead-switch in my implants triggered and my hearing shut down to zero.

Lenses and glass panels shattered. Foley held tight to the weapon despite the pain. If its infrasonic-beam hit any of his munitions crates, we’d vaporize in a fiery instant.

I dove forward, spun through the cascading wall of noise and kicked the gun from Foley’s hands. Plio hit him from below. The Dissonator shut off and clattered to the floor.

Silence.

Foley lay in a moaning heap, blood trickling from his ears. I wiped away a face-full of perspiration and cycled my hearing back up to normal.

“I’m going to get the gyrodyne, brother. We may need it soon enough.”

Plio nodded. “No heroics, Romulus. You’re hurt.”

“So are you.”

* * *

Chapter 6

Fire Time

I leapt through the cellar air-lock and into the barn in long mechanized bounds, out the foldbox transition and into sunlight. The fresh Gamhanid air was glorious, but I had no time to enjoy it.

Around the farmhouse to the gyrodyne parked in front. Our rebels were almost on top of me. Flivvers and heavily loaded traction engines rumbled in from five different directions, two along the road and four crashing through Linus’s fields; flocks of flying lizards and ankle-biters bolting from the brush in their wake. The airships from Myddleham touched down in the brambles beyond the fields. Three of them, the thrusters on their flanks venting goutts of white steam. A posse of armed men jumped from each of the granary bays.

And there I stood, facing them alone.

For all of Great Albion's vaunted might, its forces were spread too thin across an empire too vast. Umbrans, Necroticans, Beyonders and Unbelievers, Neverlanders and Pirate Kings, the Red Queen, or the Antithesis; these and many more presented a real and ongoing danger to Her Eternal Majesty's possessions. The promise of spoils offered by every unprotected Aspect drew them in like metal shavings to a magnet. Statistically, Umbra or any of the other powers would have continued to strike unabated unless something was done to stop them.

The buckler fields did just that, but at substantial risk. The aetheric forces that created the fields ensconced each World in a globe of elemental energies. Governors operated along the ley lines of each Aspect and, not unlike steam-pressure building to the point of failure within a boiler, so too did the governors possess "safety valves" to keep the elemental forces in check.

But if the safety valves were disabled, if aetheric pressure was allowed to build without limit, the buckler field would become impenetrable not only to enemy raiders and projectiles but to *everything*, including our own vessels. If said pressure builds to catastrophic failure, theory suggests that anything trapped inside the energy globe would be consumed in a detonation that could rival that which begat the Heavens.

The people of Harvest Home might live, free and peacefully isolated within their own sovereign Universe. They might die. They might die *horrifically*, or any of the infinite variables in between.

Nobody gambled with those kinds of odds on my watch. Even if the posse bastards were trying to kill me.

I fired up the Speedtwin, then cursed my stupidity for trying to operate a flying machine with only one functional hand. Gunshots erupted behind me as I caromed across the yard, rotors screaming, iron rounds tearing through the hull and rear canopy in a shower of jagged glass.

“Hull canopy has been breached,” the vehicle said.

“Oh, don’t start...”

I landed in the barn, Plio slamming the doors shut behind me. Caines and Foley were stashed behind thick rolls of hay.

I wasn’t out of the vehicle more than a moment when a dozen rounds ripped through the barn walls, their trajectories veering wildly as the transition boundary into the foldbox was crossed. Plio and I dove. Linus yelped, pulling Foley down with him.

“Caul? Romulus Caul!” said an amplified voice outside. I knew that voice. I wouldn’t have been surprised if it had belonged to Executive Chief Constable Neville Carmody, or even Archbishop Thackerley for that matter. But no.

It was Dun Aenghus Chief Constable Marsallay Brome.

“Lady! Lady Brome!” shouted Foley. He staggered to the door. “We’re here, ma’am! We’re here!”

“Get down, you young fool,” said Linus. He threw himself at the boy and pulled Foley down behind an old buckboard.

Plio drew a coil of razor wire from the field pack, looped it through Foley’s shackles, and locked him to the wagon.

I moved alongside the barn doors, the Persuader in my good hand fully loaded, and pushed them open.

“We’re rather busy at the moment, Marsie,” I called. “Why don’t you be a lamb and come back tomorrow.”

“You’ve got spirit, Romulus,” she answered. “I like that. I imagine you’ve bested that sprout of a lad Hollis Foley by now. A lot of book-smarts but not too wise in the truths of the World.”

“Don’t mock him, Marsallay. He’s a believer.”

“He *is* a believer. An honored one at that. His sacrifice will be remembered in the Blessing of the Fields.”

“Wonderful. I come looking for one lost Maker and end up with a pagan fertility cult instead.”

“What?” said Foley. “What’s she saying out there?”

“You’ve just been declared expendable, Deputy,” Plio said. “It appears that Mr. Caines isn’t the only one who’s been used.”

“No, that’s not possible.” Foley pulled against the razor wire. “Lady! Lady Brome....”

“You and I both want what’s best for the people in our care,” Brome continued. “I recognize that in you, Romulus Caul. I wish we had met under different circumstances. I surely do. It could have been glorious.”

I actually believed her sincerity, ironic though it was. I pushed the door open a little farther. “Yeah, let me get back to you on that.”

“I doubt you’ll have the time, luv. Have a look at this.”

A bar of pyromantic light ripped through the wall and incinerated everything in its path, arcing golden-white fire that blinded the eye. The heat-ray tore upward along the left side of the doors. Straw burst into flame. A second beam chewed down the right, a third lancing across the top.

Blackened wood fell inward; I jumped out of the way as it crashed to the floor.

“By our Mother, they’re trying to kill us...” said Foley, his voice trailing away.

“Plio, how many are out there?”

He studied his divining-assay, taking too long to focus his eyes. Heaven knew how much circulatory fluid he’d lost.

“Forty-one; plus another two dozen from the granary transports, a good many of them taurgs. And Umbrans, Romulus. The Proletariat is here in body as well as spirit.”

“Outstanding.”

“You’re the weaponsmith. Any strategically brilliant recommendations?”

“Shoot ‘em.”

“Acceptable. Forget what I said about the Gaze of Doom.”

“It’s beautiful when we think alike. Follow my lead, brother.”

My head was ready to explode, but I passed on any more pain medicants. I twisted my annunciator and stepped through the smoldering hole where the doors had been. Flame licked at the planks, hinges dripping molten slag. I unbuckled my weapons harness and let it drop to the ground, hands open and empty.

An armored dirigible flying a standard that proclaimed the New Earth Alliance was parked on the road in front of Linus’s cottage, some forty yards from my position. Chief Brome and eight others crouched in safety between the airship and their vehicles.

Flanked on either side were Umbran drones in full battle regalia: plates of chitinous armor to protect their invertebrate bodies; solid hoods flaring up and back to shield their eyes and

aural membranes; the tips of their branched tentacles sheathed in blackened steel. Each sat upon a sedan chair rendered from the same scabby material as were their machines and devices, but instead of transport by living porters, the chairs were mounted atop five motorized legs.

The faceless mob from Dun Aenghus wasn't quite so faceless now, accompanied by men and women I recognized from Kells and Ogham's Wood. Among them was a cadre of indentured taurgs. All were armed, half of them toting the Immolator long rifles that had just been demonstrated on the barn with impressive effect. Every one was pointed at me.

"Looks as if you're keeping some strange bedfellows, Marsie," I said. "The Not-So-Loyal Opposition, if you know what I mean."

"Think what you like, Romulus. The Proletariat of Umbra-Nine supports our independence—something that your Instrumentality does not." Brome's shirt sleeves were rolled up, perspiration glistening on arms that hefted a railgun even larger than Linus's. And on the inside of her wrist, the same triple-moon tattoo I'd seen on Axel Creevy.

"The Umbrans want every Aspect in the Deep for themselves, is more likely," I countered. "We've beaten them back twice now. They'll look for any advantage to strike again

and you've just handed them one with tea and biscuits! Give it up, Marsie. The Corps will never let this happen."

"We have the right to try! Dammit, Romulus, these people look to me. Can you understand that? I speak for the Mother Herself, in all Her incarnations."

"All dead, Marsie, slain by the Gods of Time and Engines. Peddle your tales of woe somewhere else."

"Open your eyes, you wind-up fool. She's all around us—in the cycle of the seasons, in the earth and the grain; in the air we breathe and the water we drink. She was taken from us once, when your precious Instrumentality let the fields of Albion *die*, buried in rust."

"That will not happen again," I said. "Not here, not on any of the other Aspects."

"It's already begun! On Albion, and Worlds too many to count. You've choked their skies with soot from your chimneys, and corrupted their seas with poison from your mines. All to placate the Great Machines. I won't let it spread any farther. I can't take the chance. I won't."

"And to ensure that, you're willing to sacrifice the very people you claim to serve. Morality doesn't enter into this at all, does it."

"Truth is beyond morality. This is a good death, luv. It's the culmination of the Great Rite. The Harvest King is

sacrificed to feed His people, His seed spilled upon the fields to ensure the fertility of His Lady.”

“You knew Axel Creevy had that heat-ray. That’s why you were at the bar. To confiscate the dratted thing before anyone else saw it.”

“And then you fell out of the bloody sky, looking for a woman who never should have been here at all. Axel was a zealot, yes. He was also a liability.”

“So you expiated him with a *dragon*?”

“The Goddess intervenes in mysterious ways. Ours is not to question.”

“Is your Goddess intervening now?”

“You tell me, luv.” She leveled the railgun at my chest, the weapon’s electric whine building in volume and pitch. “The New Earth will endure.”

I whispered into my annunciator. “Look sharp, Plio. It’s show time.”

“*Ready.*”

“Let me give you an honest piece of advice, priestess,” I said. “Never stand next to anything that’s flammable when you’re playing with energy weapons. It can really bugger your day.”

I triggered my ocular cannons.

Twin beams of aetheric fury lanced from my eyes. They pierced the airship's hydrogen bags, and the World exploded. Flame and twisted metal rocketed outward, the stench of burning flesh roiling up into the crowded sky.

The blast threw me down, the gash in my forehead ripping open again, mad electric screams screaming in my shoulder. Blue beams flashed from inside the barn, strobing a scant three feet above me in deadly parallel streams. The luminiferous rays screened my passage as I crawled one-handed back inside, momentarily blind.

The Gaze of Doom was a single-use option. The beams that channeled raw aetheric force through my optics were so intense, they burned out their own apertures and couldn't be manifested a second time. My variable lenses had vaporized.

Artificial vision slowly swung back into alignment as I met Plio. He knelt in shadow between the gyrodyne and Linus's wagon, a steaming Remington Peacemaker in each hand.

"Nine down, fifty-four to go," he said.

I grabbed a mobile Edison-field projector from his field pack and activated it beneath the hole in the barn wall. A mechanized *whoosh*, and the breach was sealed by a shimmering barrier of gray-on-gray. The field was impenetrable, but it consumed power like nobody's business.

The wardstone in its core would be depleted in no more than fifteen minutes.

Plio tossed me one of the Peacemakers. The Edison-field was opaque, but I could hear men and women shouting from every direction. All were trying to identify which charred mass had been the High Priestess Marsallay Brome.

It was no less frantic inside. The fire lit by the heat-rays was spreading.

“Now would be a good time to hear this plan of yours.” Plio checked the gauges on his Emancipator. “I’m starting to lose hold of my solidity. You don’t look so presentable yourself.”

Correct on both counts. I felt like Hell, and Plio with his ruined chest looked like an awakened cadaver. I picked up another Edison projector.

“We duplicate the buckler event,” I said, “only this time in reverse. Foley’s got Tesla-bombs in the cellar. We’ll ride out the blast behind this.” I dropped the Edison into his hands. “Its wardstone hasn’t got enough power, so you’ll have to couple the projector directly into the turbine downstairs.”

He stared. “Tell me you’re not serious.”

I keyed his ansible beacon to repeat our location on all military bands, tagging it with Captain Marsh’s personal command encryption. That’d get her attention.

“Orda’s Eyes, you are serious.”

“Kavita is dead, brother. We have to stop these lunatics before they kill again.”

“By obliterating us all in the process?”

“Plio, there’s no time for this! I’ll happily step aside if you’ve got a better idea. Otherwise shut up and do it.”

“As you command, *Major Caul*.” The edge to his voice could have split diamonds.

“Brother, please.”

For an instant I saw the exotic in him glare back at me, his yellow Symb’ral eyes harsh and unreadable. Then the trusted officer and friend I knew him to be returned. He shook his head.

“My crèche-mother told me there would be days like this.” He took the Edison and disappeared down the cellar stairs.

I helped Linus to his feet; unlocked his shackles and tossed them aside, then picked up the Goliathon 8-gauge.

“The Goddess brigade is going to shoot the works, Pop, and they’re willing to sacrifice the arsenal to do it. I hope to Heaven you hate those rebel bastards as much as you say you do.”

I handed him the railgun. A leap of faith? What the Hell, we were dead men anyway.

He looked at me, then checked to see if the gun was charged. It was. "I already fired on you twice, son. How do you know I won't try again?"

"I don't."

Something twinkled in his eye. He took the gun. I knelt and gathered our field gear.

Shouts and the characteristic belches of taurgs in the grip of battle-frenzy rose outside. An incendiary charge ignited the barn's eastern wall, followed by another from the south. That was it, then.

The New Earth Alliance had sentenced us to death.

Linus ran to the nearest door and swung it open, railgun up. Two of the contingent from Dun Aenghus were running in, too close, no more than twenty-five yards away.

"Highwaymen!" The rebels flew backward in the railgun's blast, all gore and shredded pulp from the necks up. "This is my home, damn you! I'll see you in Hell afore I let you take it!"

Return shots echoed from the wheat field. Hollis Foley cried out, unable to do a thing.

A side door swung open. Two men and a Gamhanid rushed in through the transition, a woman close behind. The taurg was Deputy g'Gompta from Glencolumbkille. We fired simultaneously. I picked off the first two rebels, but g'Gompta shot the Peacemaker from my hand before I could re-aim.

“Step away from the fire, Regulator,” he said, his keg-sized sidearm pointing at my face. “I prefer meat that’s *raw*.”

Another shot cracked. Blood and vivid blue scales sprayed from g’Gompta’s chest. He spun, and the woman behind him fired again.

“Stick a sock in it, Kuhl.” She stood there panting for breath, then whipped off her hat and cloak.

It was Constable Eliza Gilhooley.

“Mother have mercy, I hated that toady son of a bitch,” she said, wiping perspiration from her eyes.

I retrieved the Remington and pulled her inside the door, ready to crush the gun in her hand if need be. “Turning your coat, young lady?”

“We’ve been watching Brome for more than a month now. I think the Archbishop is up to his todger in this as well. Chief Carmody didn’t know who to trust.”

“You trust me?”

“I like your sensibilities.”

Damnation, girl, I thought. Yours aren’t so bad either.

More gunfire popped alongside the scream of sound-cannons. Then realization hit me. “You were the voice in Dun Aenghus. The one who ansibled into my head.”

Eliza reloaded her sidearm with impressive speed. “I could only send the one burst before you pan-fried all

communications with those fancy rounds. You've been on your own since then."

Big surprise there. "You do know you've walked into a deathtrap."

"Not that I reckon." Her eyes sparkled in the firelight. "You're the Hero of New Philadelphia."

The flames rose faster now, lapping at the rafters, ready to drop down through the slate tiles and into the loft. Linus's thunderbacks were panicking, slamming the stalls with their mighty hooves, the galumphers and Foley's lizard Dejah along with them.

"We have to get the animals out of here," Eliza said.

"No. Just keep them away from the walls."

"What—"

"Do it, girl."

"Caul, you bastard!" Foley cried. "Let me go!"

Something caught his eye. I couldn't discern what it was from my position and didn't have time to focus telescopically. He pulled the razor wire taught and slid out on the barn floor, reaching desperately through dirt and straw.

Alarms should have been sounding in Myddleham by now, but help wouldn't arrive in time. I met Plio as he climbed the cellar stairs and almost stepped on the Edison-field projector he'd set there. Cloth-insulated cables were spliced into the

exposed wardstone in its core, coiling down into the secret room beneath us.

He'd stripped off his ruined shirt and waistcoat to accommodate a second pair of arms that sprouted beneath the first. Each carried a heavy crate retrieved from the rebels' stash, and a grenade launcher was slung over one of his four shoulders. His movement was sluggish, labored.

"Where've you been?" he huffed. He set the crates down and absorbed the new arms back into his torso.

"Sorry," I said. "Rallying the troops."

I grabbed the launcher, a sawed-off monster of a contraption reinforced with magnetick accelerators that could hurl a projectile to Hell and back. The first crate held the launcher's power supply and feeder cables. The other crate held the bombs.

Tesla-bombs, configured for use with the grenade launcher. Just looking at them made the biological half of my brain ache.

Plio connected the launcher's power couplings to the battery core. I snapped open the breechblock, fumbling one-handed; slid a bomb inside and locked down the impellor coils. Calculating the trajectory arc was simple. There wasn't any. A clean ninety degrees off the horizon, straight up. I snapped the breech closed.

Done.

Timbers groaned above us. This was going to be too damned close. A two-inch Tesla had an annihilation radius of three hundred yards, plus or minus.

I set this one to blow at one-twelve.

Gilhooley threw blankets over the animals' eyes and pulled them away from the burning walls. Plio saw her for the first time.

"She's the cavalry," I said.

"Of course she is. I can barely contain my glee."

"Pop!" I called. "Front and center! Plio, go unlock the deputy."

Only then was it apparent what Foley had done.

He'd retrieved Linus's shackles, the pair I'd tossed aside. He sat hunched over the heavy bands, their casings jimmed open, flipping toggles and switches in the exposed electrics with the pin of his badge.

"Hollis!"

A sharp metallic click. The lock to his own restraints snapped open. He untangled himself from the razor wire, grabbed Plio's unattended Emancipator, and ran before I could stop him.

Rebel fire had Linus trapped under the loft, pinning him there between two widening rifts in the wall. Foley shouted and

knocked him out of the way. He rose to one knee and raked the fields with the luminiferous carbine again and again, tears streaming down his dirty face.

More railgun blasts, whines from heat-rays and Gatling Torches, chunks of the rafters vaporizing above our heads. Caines staggered in, turning to pump iron rounds through gaps in the spreading flames.

“Plio, take over,” I said. “Hollis! With me!”

Foley appeared a moment later, racing around the wheels of Caines’s buckboard, Emancipator in hand.

“They’ve got more Immolators out there! Agent Caul, what do we do?” Foley saw the open case of Tesla-bombs and skidded to a stop. “Oh, shit.”

Gilhooley appeared behind him, pressing her gun to his back, but she didn’t fire. If Foley was going to act against us, he’d have done so by now.

Then I heard it, a deep and distant bellow that only I could detect.

“Into the cellar, people,” I said, the steady tone of my words edged with as much urgency as I dared without inciting panic. “Drop everything. Hurry.”

“Dammit, son!” said Caines, hacking smoke and black soot. “I ain’t clearin’ off now.”

“We’re saving your life, Pop! Do it!”

The bellow returned, loudly now, the sound and the thing that created it, straight out of any rational being's nightmare.

"Romulus—"

The silhouettes rose with purpose beyond the flames and above the valley's opposite ridge—one at first, then followed closely by two more in regimented formation. War-Machines.

Umbran War-Machines.

"Sweet Mother Earth..." Eliza said.

The machines lurched forward with great herculean strides down the hilly slope and onto Linus's fields, the land rumbling with each step. Most of the rebels pulled back and established themselves in new positions, though a great many dropped their weapons in abject terror and fled altogether.

I shouted above the clamor. "Kind of hard to hide one of those monsters in that secret lair of yours, eh, Deputy?"

"I didn't know! I swear Agent Caul, I didn't know."

As so many of Mankind's automatons had been constructed to mimic the human form, so too did Umbra's conveyances bear a singular resemblance to its own native physiology: the pivoting hood-like head, writhing tentacles, the five towering legs. Mortars of various weights were slung within the leviathans' coiled appendages, as was an Immolator cannon (one for each) of truly disquieting proportions.

The lead War-Machine fired one of its mortars, twice, in loud concussive pulses of smoke and chemical flame. Two drums came whining in and popped open when they hit the ground next to barn; one in front, the second along the western wall.

Immediately upon exposure to the damp soil and light, vines of crimson-strangler grew and spread, entwining the barn walls, snapping boards in their coils.

“The cellar, now!”

The barn’s nearest wall ripped open in the grip and weight of the Umbran vines. Bullets streaked through the debris, vectoring wildly. Four rounds struck me sidelong and shredded my garments, then two more, ricocheting off my armored mass.

One of them nailed Caines.

He spun and fell, the railgun thrown from his hands.

“Linus!” screamed Foley.

Gilhooley dove and crawled to Caines’s aid.

I hugged the dirt floor, Peacemaker drawn, bright azure bursts flashing through gaps in the thickening vines. I couldn’t see worth shit because of the blood flowing into my eyes. X-ray alchemics would have been nice.

Another drum crashed through the wall and fell into the animal stalls, releasing its payload of crimson-strangler. The

vines quickly engulfed the stalls from the inside, twining up support columns and over bales of hay.

Plio lurched forward, trying to get to Foley. “Deputy! Get down!”

But the boy held his position, backlit by the flames, red fire lancing from the Emancipator in his bleeding hands.

“It isn’t every day a man finds out he’s been living a lie,” he shouted. “Don’t worry, sir! Do what you have to while you still can.” He stepped up the firepower, determination burning in his eyes like windows into the great lamp of the Sun.

“Hollis, get down!” Eliza yelled. “What are you doing?”

“Don’t argue with him!” I told her. “Plio, move!”

Between us, Foley and I cleared a path through the mass of stranglers to the trap door. Plio leapt, stretching out of the way as the beam from a Gatling Torch tore through the space where his chest had been. He hit the floor rolling into a red-and-black ball and dove head first into the hole.

“I’m sorry about the girl, Agent Caul,” Foley said over the roaring weapons. “I swear I am.”

I squeezed off two final bursts and grabbed the grenade launcher with my good hand.

“Plio! Let’s go, brother!”

The War-Machines ceased their forward movement and fired their Immolator cannons in unison. The barn roof blew off its rafters.

A sickening groan rumbled above us as the roof deck fell. Burning wood and red-hot chunks of slate crashed down one by one. Floorboards buckled and snapped.

“Plio!”

“NOW!” he shouted.

This is for Kavita, you shitheaded bastards.

I raised the launcher straight up and fired.

The Edison-field snapped into place, drowning out three final gunshots, three rocketing pieces of high-density death.

Hollis Foley shouted and leapt between me and the breach in the wall.

The Tesla-bomb hurtled upward at nine hundred and ninety yards per second.

Three bullets hit Foley square in the chest.

Eliza covered Linus with her body and shielded his eyes.

The air above us shimmered gray-on-gray.

The bomb soared upward as the Edison-field solidified into an impenetrable dome.

Up through the collapsing foldbox into the clear Gamhanid sky.

Foley crashed into me, blood spraying behind him.

One hundred and twelve yards above the ravaged countryside, the Tesla-bomb detonated.

Whitehole.

The fury of Creation flashed through the zero-point in the heart of the device. The farmhouse and everything around it burned in one incandescent stroke. Metals boiled away. Rebel flesh and machinery vanished in the blast of unchecked aetheric might.

The shock wave slammed downward like a divine hammer smiting the sins of the World. The ground dropped out beneath us and rebounded back again, throwing us so hard we sailed off the floor.

Something smashed into the back of my head, and infinite darkness, the Deep between Worlds, swallowed me whole....

* * *

Chapter 7

The End of Things, the Beginning of Others

We shut off the Edison-field once the temperature outside had cooled to a tolerable level. The barn was gone, as were Linus's cottage and fields. Molten ribs of steel marked where the grain transports had been, and misshapen skeletons were all that remained of the War-Machines. Hot ash smoldered for hundreds of yards in every direction.

Government aircraft and an ambulance were waiting for us, some parked upon the gray gouge that was the road to Myddleham, others circling about in tight orbits overhead. Johanna and the *Victory's* physicians were present coordinating the mop-up with Executive Chief Carmody, though, as expected, Johanna was more than mildly annoyed that I still remembered her private command code.

Kavita Patel's body was easily found once the glamour was no longer operational. It was taken back to Whitehall for autopsy and closure with the grieving family.

Royal Marines from Albion stormed onto Gamhanrhide en masse and rooted out the remaining New Earth cells. There were actually very few. The Goddess rebellion turned out to be a fanatic but small percentage of the orb's population. And true to form, the Umbrans had vanished without a trace, which came as a surprise to no one.

The real surprise came from Great Albion with the arrests of Parliament's third- and fourth-ranking delegates representing the Earther Brethren, who were in fact the first- and second-ranking masterminds who'd conspired with Umbra-Nine.

Linus Caines was admitted to hospital in Glencolumbkille, more from emotional trauma than the gunshot that had clipped his shoulder blade. The doctors determined that he'd been

drugged repeatedly to forget any rebel goings-on he might have witnessed on or about his property. He wept over the loss of his beloved home, then vowed to build another once he'd recovered.

Hollis Foley held on for twelve days. The bullets that were meant for me hit high in his chest, bounced off the collar bone and grazed his heart. Unlike mine, his body would not accept mechanical replacements. Even medical thaumaturges from Morcades were unable to intercede in any lasting capacity. He died this morning.

Everything has gone back to normal, although "normal" in the Aspects is a highly subjective conceit.

And Special Agent Plio Plio Ah is still plucking buckshot from his metamorphic ass.

Myself, I've a lot of thinking to do.

It's easy to footnote Kavita's death as simply a cruel act of fate. But the chain of events that came to pass after she'd died led to the prevention of even more death on a horrific scale, untold thousands who would have been lost if the Goddess movement had gone to war. All because she'd stopped to pick a handful of flowers. Is that a sacrifice she would have made willingly? Damned if I know.

I'd told Foley not to sacrifice himself for an ideal. But what does that say about the generations of men and women, human

and not, who'd lifted the Instrumentality up into the Heavens and set out to conquer the whole of Creation?

Perhaps Linus Caines is such a man. Never in my life have I cared for anything as much as he treasured his home. And to protect it he was more than willing to die, an ideal shared body and soul by a believer named Hollis Foley, Junior.

Earthers.

I still can't fathom it. Hell, maybe I'm the exotic and Plio the true human. Then again, having a clockwork soul is better than wondering whether or not you've got a soul at all. I think I'll get my immunities shored up again, for good this time, and spend the rest of my leave on Gamhanrhide—wyverns notwithstanding. There's an old man I need to see about rebuilding a farmhouse.

They say home is a spiritual place. They may be right, at that.

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Dean Wells's short fiction has appeared in Ideomancer, Eldritch Tales, ShadowKeep Magazine, 10Flash Quarterly,

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COVER ART

“Sojourn,” by Ferdinand Dumago Ladera



Ferdinand Dumago Ladera is an acclaimed artist born in Iligan, the city of waterfalls, situated in the southeastern part of the Philippines. He was trained and received a bachelor's degree in Fine Arts at FEATI University in Manila, Philippines. He has a diverse background as a fine artist, graphic designer, and photographer. He specializes in fantasy and science-fiction illustration. View more of his work at his website, ferdinandladera.com.

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