

Sagas of the Iron Hearts: Fragments

Second Edition

Robert Madsen

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Printed in the United States of America

First Printing, 2016

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Foreword

For the second edition of my seminal work, I've been asked to write something in the way of a foreword that would hopefully address any sort of confusion presented within the text as well as the general themes and larger context of the universe in which these stories are presented. And while the better part of me balks at the idea of having to explain virtually anything to the reader, nevertheless I acknowledge the text can be utterly alien to those befuddled with my particular take on the genre—Science Fiction—or the format and style I prefer to employ. As such, I will delineate here something of a manual that, should I have proved successful, will alleviate such woes.

To begin, the five short stories which follow all occur in the same universe, at varying times, in an extension of our own reality anywhere from hundreds to thousands of years in the future; they occur for the most part randomly across the timeline to the backdrop of mankind having successfully settled hundreds of star systems within our galaxy, a pittance considering the billions of stars in our galaxy. Throughout these endeavors there have been tumults, rebellions, and a brutally contested total war against a civilization of created machines. As regards the consequences, humans have self-segregated into those determined as “Terrans” or “Homeworlders” and those determined as “Colonists.” While Terrans possess few worlds, these are typically highly developed—as many as thirty billion souls to a world—but they suffer massive civilization diseases as a consequence.

Colonists prefer to expand and develop further colonies once they range past a population on a single world of about two billion, but this ultimately leaves them technologically inferior to their Terran cousins.

However, there are a set of technologies, possessed peculiarly only in the hand of powerful colonial families, that constitute cyclopean war machines, bipedal armor and exoskeletons, ranging from seven feet to as tall as a superlative one-hundred. They serve as their primary means of defense, an essential part of their armed forces with a long and storied history. All of the stories within these pages in some way revolve around these creatures, for creatures they genuinely are, imbued with a sophisticated artificial intelligence, which are uniquely unable to operate the material of their warforms without the assistance of a human pilot. These machines are sometimes referred to as “panoplies” otherwise as “Rittern” from the German word for “rider” or “knight,” and their pilots are often honorifically termed “Eisenherzen” derived from German meaning “iron hearts.”

Additionally, among the technologies that compose the panoply is a creation called “Metallfasermuskeln,” meaning quite literally “metal fiber muscles,” an absolutely essential creation that allows the panoply to be ambulatory, much in the way of human muscle, without the need for traditional hydraulics. Furthermore, most panoplies make use of a defensive system either referred to as an “Aegis Dilatant” or a “Shear

Shield,” which is a suspended bubble of non-Newtonian fluid that hardens upon the application of pressure, hindering incoming projectiles.

Now I hope that serves to alleviate any possible confusion on matters of basic details which would make it difficult to parse out the action unfolding. Further questions can be directed towards my various media listed at the bottom of the copyright page. I hope you find the stories meaningfully entertaining.

The Fall

1.

Lost amidst the infinite specks of starry sky there hurtled through the void an errant youth huddled within the still belly of a metal monolith. The dusky ovaloid capsule—engraved with the ancient production markings of an age beyond memory, scored and seared with centuries of use—was a thing monstrous, several stories in length. Its wild-eyed youth of fluttering heart, the traveler comfortably enshrouded within the armored auspices of the soaring bulwark, could strangely think only of his own inconsequence—how small he was against the titanic backdrop of stars and galaxies that would dwarf him just as easily as the events at hand—and his own part in them. Dread ruminations of catastrophic failure, that there is no undying glory, crept, slithering like a poisonous thing, unbidden through the hollows of his gray matter, as, with some disbelief, he remembered the sparkling image of the tiny speck he observed from the brazen bridge of the vanguard cruiser, that this tiny point in the umbra sky constituted itself a whole world with its own millions of souls—his destination.

He would drift nearly two hours, only the occasional buffeting of the maneuvering thrusters to keep him company, as he lingered still and tried to calm his respiration, suspended in his cockpit amidst the uncomfortable guard of attitude gel. It was a long time, two hours, to remain in this state of suspended animation; it was a long time to be

cogent but still; life must be murderous for snipers. By the time he arrived, by the time the defenders got wind of his insertion, it would be altogether too late. Minutes away now, his ovaloid capsule would come brilliantly alight in the fires of the decelerating atmosphere, roaring groundward with the crackling flames of the sidereal inferno. It was an impossible feat, virtually unheard of since the time of the rebellions—cast planetside from the vanguard cruiser in orbit of the most adjacent moon—to sojourn alone across so vast a distance with only the protection of maneuvering thrusters and come to a gentle collision with a precision of mere feet upon a world none the wiser, a frozen ball of violet idiosyncrasies under the care of a military junta entirely unprepared for the violence to follow.

“It's unprofessional, you know, to have your heart a-flutter in your throat just before an engagement. Thought you were better than that, Artemisius, rather more like your grandfather.”

“It wasn't for the immortal fame of my grandfather that I agreed to be sealed within a metal shipping container.”

“It's only by the glory of your grandfather that they agreed to take you, were so eager in fact—that they think so much of the men of your family, that so much is generally thought of them.”

“Give me a break. I can handle it. It's just anxiety, performance butterflies.”

“You've been spending too much time with the Melainolith players.”

“Battlefield butterflies then.”

“While that wit may serve you well at the feast-hall...”

“I’ll feel better after I’ve killed something.”

“Thinking about the downfall of your house?”

“All the men I’ve slain, men I once called “friend,” men that had long served my father with distinction virtually liquefied under my iron heel.”

“So why should slaughtering strangers be any worse?”

“The men that raised me, I watched them burn to death, trapped within the confines of their own iron shells, and it felt good. I had no doubts. But who are these? Someone else's problem I think. I had a reason before. The only reason I have now is convenience. That—and I’ve been contracted to do so, but I don’t think I’ll prove a fine mercenary, never thought duty and service would seem so antiseptic. Be nice if I could just dispense with the jitters.”

“I shouldn't laugh, but I have to say, you're thoughtful for a man so young—perhaps a little too thoughtful. Remember that all that exists, all that you can do, lingers within this moment, even as the moment travels hand in hand with the slithering sands of time. Put it out of your mind. There's work to be done.”

“If I could have, I would have.

“But be mindful and relax; you've got something that only a handful of soldiers in the history of mankind have ever had.”

“And what's that?”

“Me.”

“Wonderful.”

“The Eisenherz makes his own way. He's leagues above and beyond the altogether rabble that composes the rest of the army; he doesn't rely upon his commanders, and he learns to rely upon such comrades as only he can. You've got the thrumming heart of a titan beneath you. Villagers flee far to the hills, and cities tremble, all at the most distant echo of our earth-breaking stride. Legends are spoken in roars and whispers whence we have, at last, gone.”

“I suppose that's just what I'm worried about.”

As the silence pervaded, all he could hear was the gentle humming of the ancient fission reactor secreted into the metal not more than pair of yards distant. It was a comforting sensation, experienced as much as sound as a textural vibration, reminiscent of the back-and-forth rocking of an old steam engine fed crude coal at the sweltering and stained hands of burly engineers—ancient technology still lingering on here and there in the hinterlands of the colony worlds. It was here, in the bosom of his ferrous nostalgia, that his thoughts wandered to the matter of his mission.

The world's first line of defense, its primary guardians, were a garrison fleet that had been constructed locally—long before the floating dry-docks had been disassembled for scrap—absent of any mode of propulsion besides sub-light engines, no ship in the fleet could take advantage of the system's transit buoys which hailed for distant star systems. The guardians could not avail themselves of their liberty; they remained fixed upon their

battle stations, whether they liked it or not—a sort of penal legion by incident. Even so, while the first line did not err from their patrols, the earthward vagabond was silent on their scanners, and they would become helpless witness to the violence unavoidable below as an assailing army scattered like stars among the iron sky made landfall.

The time was now. The maneuvering thrusters shouted panic in unison, and the growing comet of an ovaloid countenance grew incandescent bright, fiery bronze juxtaposed brilliantly with the betraying-cold blue of the maneuvering thrusters and the saffron heat of entry.

One couldn't have been prepared for the violence of the fall, as the ovaloid capsule threatened to shake apart from its very yokes to temporarily bathe the onyx sky in the waning warmth of a second star, announced with its disintegration. Turbulence of a sort rarely experienced but in the fleeting moments of a passenger liner's very final descent, the whip hand of the molten god of war, the blustering blast of the thunder gods lips, the chthonic tremors of the seaward earth-shaker himself—these all threatened at once to smash the old iron townhouse to drifting detritus, but the old and venerable capsule that had witnessed a hundred battles and suffered the passing of generations stood firm, determined to finish what was her final mission with as much grace as her first. It was a battle; it was a contest, but she concluded her deceleration, slowed to just kiss the surface of the terra with a gentleness and

elegance uncharacteristic of her meteoric voyage; seared, she was appointed with the colors of autumn glowing with the searing heating heat of entry, from her tired exhaust expiring her final fumes.

A series of explosive bolts cast away the high-rise panels of her solar skin and revealed her rust-stained inner lattice work, but, gods above, there was something else secreted within. She must have been four stories in height, a die-cast goliath of swimming brass materializing from the milky-black of groaning Hypnos; in shape only human, she was armed to subdue armies. She emerged slowly, like the very avatar of all nightmares, from the pregnant shadows of the capsule with the elegant concision of an unchallenged gymnast descending from the balance beam without any memory of having mounted. With a mixture of awe and wonder, she surveyed the violet horizon and all gathered below, glittering wastes of sometimes fractured and otherwise unblemished crystal that stretched forth in all directions across violated and bedraggled badlands slowly becoming sands. A thought crossed her pilot, running in an instant from ear-to-ear, who was unnerved—in spite all the training, the many briefings—with a terrible realization felt viscerally, the shock of observing up close a new world for the very first time, that he was—indeed—very far from home. Apprised of his surroundings, he moved rapidly to his first objective.

2.

Albay Ghazanfar Chubuksu, long-time commanding officer of the 511th Smyrna Mountaineers, had been awoken particularly rudely—that is, to say, at all—from this evening's slumber by a pale-faced lieutenant, reporting on behalf of the night officer who had insisted, apparently, that the matter, whatever god-forsaken matter, was too important to be left to the night watch. Shaking the exhaustion from his eyes, he bore himself, half-dressed, to the command bunker—instant coffee in hand encapsulated within a venerable ceramic mug. What an infernal nuisance. He had never planned to join this backwater's planetary defense force. There was even a time, one out of distant memory, like a fairy tale, but remembered only gravely in the glint of long-chafed eyes, a time in which he had once even had visions of greatness, complete with gilded rooms, beautiful women, and even the occasional deed of military brilliance. But all it takes is an innocent mistake, the right word at the wrong time, an unbidden sideways glance at another man's woman, even the occasional error in tactical judgment—it only takes one—and all that potential is lost, cast away to seaward breeze as so much chaff. Even a casual observer could have grasped the matter immediately; the ships in orbit possessed only stellar drives; they couldn't leave the system, and neither could he. This planet was as much as a prison as a garrison, the deployment a

punishment—for all involved—an ideal place to dump the undesired and even sometimes the incompetent, the excess from the private military. There were many such places, some far more dangerous. At least this deployment was relatively quiet; the locals had been long subdued in some ancient war beyond remembering, and all potential resistance was little more than vagabond rascals who managed to eke out an existence in the wastes of this world called “Star Rudneik.” “Rudneik,” as it was more commonly known, was an unmitigated hell of a world that should never have been settled; the planet's rotation and revolution was of such a quality that the one burning, hellfire hemisphere always faced towards the sun, and its opposing hemisphere, a frigid wasteland, always faced away. Nine tenths of the planet's surface was essentially uninhabitable, only dotted with the occasional military installation, such as this shivering hole. Only a single band, running where the hemispheres connect, remained of appropriate temperature so as to support significant habitation, where it remained dawn and dusk at all hours of the day.

The Albay cursed himself, and cursed the world with him, feeling his advancing age as he paced the sterile halls toward the command bunker. If not for the material wealth of the planet, he would never have been here; the planet would never have even been settled. It was an unpleasant sort of reality to live under. The military relied upon such materials as were here derived, and though his labor ensured such provision—he was in a way an

essential cog in the supply chain—this deployment was nevertheless a dead end. So his labor served the largesse of others. And so painfully, day in and day out he surveyed the hoar-frost wasteland of rock and toxic sand, awaiting a battle that could never come, guarding a vital link in the planet's defensive network.

He found the master of the night watch staring out from the command bunker across the ice-rink landscape perforated with the innumerable impacts and detritus of countless meaningless meteorites. He seemed to have his eyes fixed eerily upon an absence in the horizon illuminated in lavender under the waning moon, abutting violet spires of sheer rock rising in like broad spear-shafts.

“Do you have any idea how late it is?” the Albay began, his eyes already red with murderous intent.

And though the master of the night watch should have been terrified—the Albay had a preference for leaving the evidence of his discipline evident, crippled digits, shattered mandibles, just to say the least—he was animated with altogether different horror and stammered out his explanation. “Sir,” he saluted, “observation satellites detected what they thought at first was a meteorite breaking up in our sector, but upon closer observation, the object appears to have actually made landfall.”

“And you considered this adequate reason to rouse me from—”

“Sir, fleet command observed an object—huge, by their accounts—rising from the site of the

impact. They say we need to identify it. Neutralize it, if necessary. They say it might be an armored suit, used out in the colonies.”

Red in face, the Albay showed admirable restraint as his thoughts drifted to visions of the most sumptuous and delicate tortures, and he moved to admonish simply the night officer, asking matter-of-factly and without malice “How many men serve in the 511th, Kaptan?”

“We're regiment strength—over a thousand all told, plus vehicles and support staff.”

“And what's the maximum potential threat we're dealing with?”

“Well, just a single armored vehicle I suppose.”

“So?”

“Well, it's just that we've never had anything resembling a genuine threat since—well since longer than I can remember; you can't possibly blame me for—”

“Just find it, you idiot! Do you think a regiment can't handle one armored vehicle, obsolete tech in the employ of colonist savages? Wasting my bloody time!”

“Well problem is, Sir,” the kaptan replied nervously, “we've already lost contact with several listening stations and a guardhouse, one hundred men in total.” He wiped the perspiration from his forehead and attempted to hide his myriad desperation amidst the several consoles before his shivering fingers. “I uhh... deployed several surveillance drones. That should get us a picture of what we're dealing with. It's probably nothing;

perhaps some idiot tech cut the mains, but I wanted to be careful.”

The Albay had been planetside too long to care. It was clear that the planet's defenses were more than adequate to scare off any pirates. And as far as the “panoply” went, the general term used to refer to the bipedal armed suits, otherwise referred to as “Rittern,” used in colonist militaries, well—the things were ancient—some of them quite literally, the remainder at least in design. Terran militaries, by contrast, didn't bother with them. And besides, the colonists had never shown any interest in Terran affairs, ever since the rebellion; they mostly kept to themselves. More than likely, it was just life-pods from some civilian freighter; it wouldn't be the first time they had a shipping accident.

“Sir,” the kaptan added, “I've got a signal out by the south-west transformers; should have an image shortly, but I'm patching you in to the radio feed.”

The usual hiss of indistinguishable radio chatter blazed dull throughout the command bunker, as the clatter of fingers pounding upon stiff keyboards came suddenly to a halt; all ears turned in anticipation to the radio signal.

Explosions sung audibly over the cacophony of frantic, pleading voices, calling for reinforcements to this sector and air support in another, voices that one by one were finally silenced to the chorus of mocking, cackling flame sucked in through the receiver.

All eyes turned expectantly upon the Albay, who could not form the intent to speak—to demand a report from the soldiers in the field—choking greedily upon his rehydrated coffee, which was incidentally not even derived from real coffee-beans.

“Sir, a surveillance drone seems to have picked up an image of the object, which apparently has moved past the transformers and on to the Southern Barracks.”

A broad screen occupying the space above the West-facing portal flickered to life in the black and greens of night-vision. There was no audio, and the command bunker recommitted itself to terrified silence. Several fires flickered in the foreground of a great aperture where the northern wall of the southern barracks used to be, a huge figure, barely discernible, moving with deliberate intent among its smoldering contents.

“Can we get in closer?” the Albay demanded with childlike curiosity tempered with awe.

“I’ll try, but we may lose the feed.”

“You only sent a single drone?”

“Already on it, but we’ve lost several already; I think it’s using a point-defense system to bring down fliers.”

As the drone moved in, trying to get a better angle, the creature emerged abruptly from the crumbling aperture, obviously slick with the speedily frozen products of the fire-management system and what may have been human ichor, there being no liquid water available this far into the wastes. Planetary command had not lied about the

size of the creature. It was gigantic, at least sixty feet in height, probably forty feet from shoulder to shoulder as well. It was indeed humanoid, and obviously heavily armored, but one detail stood out from the rest. A pair of terrible red eyes showed forth brilliantly from a roaring leonine maw bathed in the eyes' crimson light, menacing outwards from between the shoulders, surveying the amply produced carnage without apparent emotional affect. The screen lit up rudely with a shower of small arms fire rising in protest from the earth, gathering infantry brave enough to play "David" before the graven image of the sanguine-palled devourer before them. Battling bravely, their pounding hearts were nevertheless silenced forevermore, as a launcher from beneath its shoulder lit up, and an innumerable torrent of tiny blasts murderously elucidated the foreground, bathing erupted environmental suits—armored head to toe against the elements and rifle-fire alike—in a semi-violet concoction of anti-freeze and running gore.

"Looks like some manner of MIRV, Sir, but nothing I'm familiar with."

The Albay felt sick, not that he cared for his subordinates, but the pain was visceral, inborn, helplessly human. Though the command staff heard it not, the unmistakable baleful cry of a creature of shadow, a haunter of burial places, a horror from a time before the rise of reason tickled his skin and ran riot up and down his spine, until the Albay thought he was finally going to collapse.

He found himself affixed in his chair, the frozen breath of father death tickling the nape of his neck.

“G-g-get me the fleet. I want everything they've got on it—now!”

But before that message could be relayed, a sudden blast that over-saturated the camera bathed the hollow command cabin in niveous white. He couldn't help but hope, even as he felt a fool, as Pandora's paltry bounty tugged painfully at his heavy heart. But it was all for naught; as the flash and smoke cleared, the creature revealed itself unharmed, resounding with a deafening brassy ululation indecipherable as it turned to punish its attacker. A co-axial machine gun network affixed between the sadly howling lips an old man's venerable countenance consumed within a lion's jaws liquefied the anti-tank crew and slashed their armaments to ribbons, a crude soup crystallizing rapidly in the unspeakable frost.

“Looks like a shaped charge—an anti-tank missile.”

“It should have at least put a dent in the damn thing!”

“That flash wasn't explosion alone. It's using an old-fashioned shield system, a hardening dilatant suspended by a field in a bubble about the frame. Upon the application of pressure, it not only hardens, it illuminates. You don't see these that often anymore. Shaped charge would be unlikely to penetrate—better off with a long tungsten rod. ”

The walker went on the move, with a dancer's measured stride, galloping now northwards, in the

direction of the command bunker, as the surveillance drone, as yet unnoticed, pursued close behind.

“Again, get me the fleet!” Pointing to another subordinate he demanded, “Where the hell's the armor? There's supposed to be a tank detail between us and the southern defenses!”

“They're reporting in, and moving to intercept the object. They should make contact within thirty seconds.”

3.

“Hostile transmissions indicate the presence of a company of armored vehicles holding position on the road to the command center, to be reinforced very shortly.”

“Reinforced with what, exactly?”

“Likely a mix of conventional infantry and support vehicles.”

“Anything else?”

“Make it quick; there’s a company of crawlers on the North road, likely to arrive within fifteen minutes—ten, possibly.”

The moon-illuminated salt flats, held in eternal reverence, hissed with the death rattle of countless young men, whispering their last, “I want to go home,” huddled amongst the multitudes of towering rock that unmarked would serve as their gravestone. The peculiar thump of iron heels resounded over the whispering din of slowly departing dead souls and smoldering flames. The primary objective was still some distance away, whither he briskly recommenced.

Within the belly of this metal beast, which had been dyed in tessellated crystalline patterns of purple to match the rocky salt flats, lay young Artemisius in the fair repose of rest, as his consciousness drifted further and further away from his bones, now only a dim memory, and into the being, into the body, into the awareness of the creature that contained him, itself alive with the alien sapience of a created mind—together two just

as much one and increasingly one. The body of the machine, a strange thing to consider, was experienced much as one would one's own. Through its optical sights, aural apparatus, pressure sensors, and even limited capacity of olfaction, a fair resemblance of physical awareness had been manifested. He manipulated each humanoid limb as naturally as he would his own, producing even his own unique gait not possessed merely by the machine.

There remained still much to do. The defenders had been bloodied, but their numbers remained vast. Speed, therefore, was the utmost necessity; the defenders had to be broken before they could reorganize themselves, draw their numbers together, dig in.

The advanced elements of the armored company—tracked vehicles, as it appeared—rattled quickly into view, attempting to obscure themselves, their profile, amidst an outcropping of sheer rock, according to their training. They didn't waste a moment. Streams of plasma clementine sung out in tightly measured and strictly controlled volleys intended upon the presupposed weak points of their opponent from their many barrels; long projectiles of hardened tungsten, proof against armored plating, and warheads of seething magma hurtled inexorably towards this brazen tower's unblemished sheen, enough to blind the eyes, enough to saturate every photo-reactive cell of every camera, a brilliant contest of midnight streamers surmounting the glory of day. So it seemed, but before the gently

whispering wind could carry this rosy-fingered extravagance to the four directions, the buck of several asses struck hard on unrelenting steel, and a dozen tanks, carrying four poor souls a piece, were nothing now but molten metal, shredded shortly with the secondary explosions of unexpended ammunition.

4.

“Kaptan, where the hell's the fleet?”

“They're not responding, Sir. Looks like outward radio communications are being jammed. Could be the object—?”

“Oh for god's sake.”

“Sir?”

“Get me everything you can. Shift all defenders to the southern road, as fast as possible.”

At that moment, a tank drifted, uplifted on monopole suspensors, into the left field of the camera, just large enough to make out. Its cannon went alight, hurling an armor-piercing warhead towards the object's armored viscera, propelled forth on a column of flame. Whirling jets of smoke consumed the whole scope of the camera, and hope once again tugged at the unrelenting thumping of the Albay's moribund heart, but as the enkindling obstructions cleared, the walker was once again visibly unharmed, not even an apparent scratch. A blinding ray of light blotted out the camera's feed, rocketing forth a set of projectiles from a monstrous cannon clasped tightly in the walker's two hands, held in the manner of a rifle. Four more tanks, their ammunition racks ignited, practically soared on seraph wings skyward, embroiled in an aura of seething hellfire, and clattered with a sickening crunch again upon the soil, blackened and twisted and virtually unidentifiable, trickles of escaping atmosphere hissing serpent-like into the near vacuum.

“Kaptan!”

“Yes, Albay?”

“Where the hell is the goddamn fleet?!”

“I'm trying, Sir; I really am.”

“Well try harder; the thing's a fucking
menace!”

5.

Behind him there lingered only in graven loneliness strong men seized stiff in the rigor of woeful silence; death had carved its name among the legion, who would forever now call this strange setting their final resting place—a lamentable sight and grisly memorial. But there was no time to introspect about strangers slaughtered in a strange land; there still remained the mission, the utmost necessity that should see the skies filled with the now-familiar crimson-white deceleration of bronzed pods and barges bearing their deadly cargo upon the planet's soon-to-be defenseless surface. But between him and the command center, there still remained a company of crawling tanks, an opponent for whom he remained untrained; there were few such things in the colonies, certainly not in the hinterlands of Molossos.

A pair of crawlers, tire-bearing tanks born aloft on insectoid appendages—light vehicles, in actuality, and lightly armed—of woeful insufficiency against a towering warrior—abutted a road surrounded on all sides by such thick and rocky cover that might well conceal an entire company of such vehicles and abundantly. All of it screamed “TRAP!” It didn't require the collected experience of untold generations of pilots stored within this brassy metal. You couldn't see them, if there they were, and conventional methods of detection would prove ineffective; unless one should abscond himself

from the rocky outcroppings, he would show no different on radar than being rock himself.

But Artemisius feigned ignorance, and strode onward his monstrous form upon the observed pair, obscuring the twinkling stars with the illumination of the gifts of his muzzles, making good his assault on what was then clearly evident. And this had been the moment, just what they'd been waiting for; crawlers of company strength emerged, ever-so-slightly, their light armaments trained rapidly upon the walker's lavender limbs, the go-ahead already given and their hurtling lead their last chance. But the voice of their timely victory was stifled with a sudden dispersal of thickest smoke, making imperceptible the fruits of their slaughter, drawing from those resolute and defending boulders those assassins quick to make confirmation. Unknown to them, in spite of the blinding smoke, the panoply had noted, with long-wave detection, each and every attacker and the defensive positions they had chosen. The hissing cackle of a carving laser—more tool than a weapon—ripped the boulders out from beneath the rubber soles of those sanguine assassins, accompanied shortly by the hollow crunch of an eight-inch gun, more a piece of artillery, more suitable for a naval engagement, more than enough to ensure a kill.

The survivors, by their training thinking more lost from indecision than poor decision, surged forward, dancing without collision or incident among the plentiful boulders, eager for one thing and one thing alone; all they esteemed would rescue

them from pitiless fate and restore the honor of their slain comrades was to succeed within the minimum killing distance of that merciless gun. Some nevertheless fell for their endeavors, twisted and gnarled, their limbs curled inwards, in the facsimile of a slain spider idly enjoying the repose of death upon a white-painted windowsill. Nevertheless, they made it, achieving the close distance, and they launched forth in rapid fashion a thousand and one deadly little uranium teeth that lit up the battlefield in the reflected glory of his shielding dilatant, thinking this they should by fury overcome. Their desperate plan, hasty as it had been, had been peerless, save for what they could not have estimated. Idling within killing reach, they mocked the mauve titan's alacrity; for he moved unexpectedly, like lightning, hurling his own Goliath mass with the perfectly balanced grace of the ballet, stomping his heavy heel through the semi-circular canopy of one pilot, driving his flattened form into the earth—a greasy puddle surrounded by twisted metal. The second, reacting only too late, was snatched easily in a pair of monstrous hands that made a mockery of its peerless construction—ripped utterly to pieces and cast away to the frozen terra, upon shattered limbs vainly seeking to rise as it leaked hydraulic fluids profusely.

What remained constituted only a pair, hardly a pair at that, their spinning cannons shining white-hot with the heat of their projectile hatred and miserable disdain for the loss of their

comrades. Brave men, undoubtedly, and deserving a better fate than fate would allow—they inevitably joined their undaunted friends, breathing their last amidst a sarcophagus cemented with the flaming gifts of the walker's myriad ordnance.

6.

The camera revealed in gory detail the remainder of the battle. Practically dancing between the shells and the explosions, the walker made short work of the terrified defenders, the fire from her weapons illuminating the image, lighting up the sky. It was hopeless. Their vehicles had been shattered. The frozen remains of their men had gasped their last amidst the venomous vapors of the nearly-absent atmosphere, their concrete fingers fixed, forever-clutched vainly upon their weapons as their profuse blood produced queer red crystals that instantly turned solid in the frost.

The realization that he had just witnessed the deaths of hundreds of his own men, the destruction of virtually all their military material, all in less than twenty minutes, sank slowly into the stricken heart of the Albay, who could not even form the intent to escape, the intent to even imagine escaping. Seized with horror, his eyes did not blink, and his hands did not shiver, as he stared intently into the dying light of the groundward surveillance drone; its broken battery shortly gave out.

“We have to get out of here! Sir? We really don't have time to tarry! He'll be upon us in a few minutes; we can still make it to an escape craft,” the kaptan gesticulated in vain, as the power to the command bunker suddenly ceased with the deafening whine of twisting, deforming metal and the crunch of crumbling concrete. The temperate air of the artificial atmosphere was quickly drawn

from all about them with the violent incursion of the exterior aether as the very vault of the command bunker was ripped away from its seams by a pair of steely hands, each larger than a man. All that they could see, under the waning light of the moon, was the outline of something that shouldn't have existed, the intense glare of a pair of unblinking crimson eyes, the sole illumination now of the freezing room. A hand launched forth from the darkness, as the kaptan, snatched away, was lifted upwards screaming, and with an indescribable splattering of flesh and bone, the room was sprayed in his rapidly frozen blood. The Albay's eyes fixed on those terrible sanguine orbs, the last thing he saw before the searing blaze of a fire-borne gel consumed all those that remained within, rendering them instantly and painlessly down into ash.

Finally alone, complete in his privacy, the walker produced from a hidden compartment a small-device, placing this upon the flame-scorched floor of what had once been the command bunker. It at once glowed to life, eager to fulfill its function. With that, the walker and her pilot were gone, rapidly making their progress away, far to the west, as they outran the blast, their optical sensors overwhelmed with a bright flash of light followed by a billowing plume of smoke that coalesced into a mushroom fit for the vault of heaven.

With a crackle, his radio sprung to life, its hoary shout still ringing in his ears. "Panoply Artemisius, this is the vanguard command; we're

reading an explosion from the Eastern Battery Network. Can you confirm mission completion?”

Without a second thought, still reeling from the realization of his own outrageous potency, uncomfortably numb, he replied emotionlessly, “This is panoply Artemisius, destruction of installation confirmed, moving on to secondary objectives.”

“Roger that, panoply Artemisius; keep us informed.”

As the cockpit went silent, Artemisius felt the unpleasant warmth of the attitude gel drain away, jettisoned away to the planet floor, even as he did not see it nor hear it, a strange relic of the interface between Eisenherz and Ritter.

The panoply addressed him reverentially, with pride apparent in her voice. *“I haven't experienced a feeling like this since...”*

“Hundreds of years?”

“The rebellions.”

“That good?”

“Your father would be proud.”

Reminiscing the Skyward Goliath

They call me “Memnon,” the first son of Aristarchus. Ancient creature that I am, I was there, in a time before living memory, in a time now unimaginable under the reestablishment of the colonial empire under a blue banner. I was there for the very seminal moments that would drive onward our posterity, knowing strangely in my heart that I was bound for greatness, even as the shackles of advancing age wrinkled my countenance and atrophied my features. You see, I served as a non-commissioned officer within the House Guards of the most venerated Ahhaiya family before the internal tumult that ultimately precipitated their altogether collapse. I'd served many years—and loyally—and loyally they served me in return.

While contracted into service, I married the love of my life, had far and away too many children, and for many years we enjoyed the safe haven they provided for this seeming dreamscape to cocoon. I have so many memories there, marching hypnotic through the honey-wine folds of Lesser Molossos—its shrill, unmanned peaks of perpetual nebulae clattering all the way down to its evergreen-meandering valleys of faerie dream and tangible shade. And at the top of all of it—a magnificent tower yearning like an ancient ziggurat for the divinity of the everlasting sky—stood Melainolith, known more affectionately by we soldiers as “Black-Rock Hall.” She seemed as if carved out of a single titanic shard of Tartarean marble nuanced with delicate shock of ivory, glowing in the moonlight with the preternatural candles of wandering will-o-

wisps. She should have been an eyesore, so rudely contrasted against the alabaster powder of the summit ever-winter, but she was our very symbol, a pillar of human civilization amidst a brutally unforgiving wilderness, and she was our home besides, illuminated here and there with the wandering torchlight of midnight guardians; she was our bulwark, overseeing from unequaled height the whole of the valleys below.

I protected, while I remained there in their honest employ, the persons and property of the House Ahhaiya in general and its budding successor in particular, one Artemisius, son of Arcesilaus, the latter of whom had been in suffering health, thanks to a familial perfidy as we would discover only too late.

Artemisius was a busy child. Blue eyed, brown hair, a fearsome expression; in my eyes he looked rather like a wounded grizzly, and I wasn't the first to say so. Most lads they say would possess something like tiger-eyes or the look of eagles, or some other descriptive moniker that specifically relates to the more fashionable of apex predators. But no, very far from it, he looked like a bear—hearty and monstrous, but also endearing, as if he could be induced to be friendly, wrinkled brow, squinty eyes, and a vicious expression that only with embarrassment curled into a smile. I don't think I ever saw him—personally at least—as a grown man, as he'd been virtually entombed in his monstrous panoply—which had been affectionately and officially entitled the “Lion of Molossos,”—for

unceasing were we at war in the years after the dissolution of the family. The terrible consequences, years spent in that suit—I can only imagine; he must have been a shadow of himself by the end, a bed-ridden invalid; I've seen one myself, a fellow named Sir Aethelwulf, who was at the conclusion of his service as an Eisenherz little more than a gaunt, arthritic shadow that couldn't even walk on his own power. It was years before he began to resemble a man again. The machine consumes the vitality of its pilot. For your own well-being, dismount frequently and gorge besides. Rather like years spent in low gravity, I can only imagine the torment, feeling your vigor drain away as you grow more machine than man.

The day herein elucidated is forever carved upon the hollows of my memory, Earth-time March 28th, 1384 CNS. We'd just about finished our guard duties for the evening with the conclusion of a massive social function hosted within Black-Rock by the Great Father Arcesilaus himself when the fire-alarm was sounded and we all rapidly reported to our battle stations for duty, but something was amiss, something far more disturbing than a blaze that might menace the tapestries and set off the sprinklers; our powers of olfaction had hitherto gone undisturbed. Our commanding officers, Sirs Demetrius and Anaxagoras, were missing, and a stranger attired in the evening dress of an officer of the House Guards, at the head of a huge host of strangers in field kit, demanded we lay down our weapons and return to barracks.

It's a difficult position to be in, as a non com, as the first sergeant, and furthermore as the ranking officer in the company present, upon whose shoulders rests the well-being of a hundred men or more. Some manner of catastrophe was obvious, but it was my job to sweat out the source. Now, as I mentioned, I didn't know any of these detractors, but before you bother about the implications, the House Guards were indeed massive in number, so it wasn't all that surprising that I didn't recognize them. Lucky for me, as to the matter at hand, there was protocol to follow—extremely specific protocol—and I fell back on the blue book, all I could think of in the absence of our commissioned officers. It looked like they wanted to disband us, which was peculiar under the circumstances, as the matter was usually a public affair. So we refused. They didn't like that. I demanded the appropriate water-marked statement from the Great Father, who possessed the sole right to rob a military unit of its right to serve and its obligation to protect the house. It seemed they didn't like that either, as the officer governing these malcontents made what I'll call a “furtive movement,” towards my rifle clasped firmly about my right shoulder. Now it was my turn; as you see, I didn't like that. With a back-hand that his children would have felt, had he had the opportunity, I hurled his sorry ass to the ground. It was without thinking, muscle memory, that I had him on the receiving end of my muzzle, and as I glimpsed his subordinates rise to his defense, I didn't opt to hesitate. Three quick shots, center

mass, he was dead, just crow-fodder now. His tried to avenge their commander, but mine were more than enough to handle them. I'm sure the carrion birds were well fed that evening, fed well enough for weeks.

It was clear; there'd been a power struggle; in fact, it was currently in progress. Someone somewhere was rallying confederates to subdue whatever loyalists should remain in house; whether these confederates were themselves genuine guards or mere hirelings, I couldn't easily say, but there were a lot of them, as we shortly discovered.

The battle was raucous, and we were having the time of our lives, but we—it turned out—were finding success rare among our many friends, and I could tell from my long years experience that we were losing. It wasn't for a lack of trying or a lack of numbers, or any tangible lack at all. We were just pockets of resistance against a military machine that had long prepared for this engagement; we couldn't link up with our friends and allies; we couldn't form a line, nothing resembling common ground; we couldn't work together. Everything seemed to be going to shit. In what I thought were my final moments, I thought only of my wife and kids, helpless in the valley below, likely to be taken as slaves in the aftermath of our slaughter. I was helpless, and I was on the cusp of somber resignation when I heard something I certainly hadn't expected.

Above the radio chatter I heard the imperious charge of the very ward of my protection, "This is

Artemisius, son of Great Father Arcesilaus, speaking from the venerated auspices of the panoply, 'Lion of Molossos.' In the absence of the Great Father and the council of honored fathers, I am taking command of the House Guards and whatever other loyalists may remain still within and without the boundaries of Melainolith until such a time as the crisis has been concluded and those guilty held accountable before the house council. Unit commanders please change to the Emergency Frequencies and be prepared to receive orders. Lady Diana, consort to the Great Father, has made a treasonous grab for power of behalf of her birth-house, our supposed allies, the Danaui, and their murderous confederates. Hold out until we can find you. Hold out until we can rendezvous, and then we'll drive this scum off Melainolith.”

The realization ran down the spine like the shivering waves of an electric razor. I should have known, but, bless his bones, the Great Father should have known, should have expected a climber like she would do what she did, especially when her own brats weren't in the line of succession. The First Consort, the wife of Arcesilaus, his mother in name only, had not given birth to Artemisius, who was himself only ten years her junior. She was making a power play; this was all about disrupting the hold's resources long enough to get all the council killed or to convince them to name her or her pernicious spawn ruler of Ahhaiya.

Rescue did not come immediately. It couldn't. The wealth of the family's military might, its

panoplies, in large number had abandoned their ancient loyalty and joined the betraying banner, leading the advance of the borrowed army brought here upon our stormy slopes. Whatever it was, whether they had been convinced by arms, argument, or coin, their pilots prosecuted the assault and proved implacable against our every countermeasure. I could only imagine it, to the tempestuous backdrop and thunderous reply of monstrous arms, the handful of loyal walkers vying in close combat against the overwhelming violence of once friends and companions. But it wasn't long before I beheld this myself, as they ignited the late evening sky, beaming with the blast of mighty armaments, more turbulent and ferocious than a company of well-armed men. I found myself shrouded in the pulverized spalling and fracturing of armor, as our few vehicles were promptly washed away under the inexorable violence of a pair of advancing panoplies. The first, won by force of arms but venerated for centuries of honorable service, painted in august purple and deep saffron the "Morning Star;" the second, a creature much more nefarious, but of even more venerable service, wreathed in iron links and spikes all about her limbs and appointing her cherub-countenance, a portent of some ancient Terran desert wizard, she was named the "Crown of Thorns."

A tempest had risen, threatening just as much to wash us all from our pulverized cover lethally down the folds of Lesser Molossos as the force of our assailants threatened to rob our souls of their

limbs, thickly painted and stained with the resin of our own ichor. The sky boomed and thundered and crashed, and in all the confusion we could not tell whether the contest was of human or divine origin, huddled as we were to guard our remaining senses against the deafening wail and blinding flash and whipping winds.

I didn't believe it when I saw it. Of course I'd seen it many times before. I don't believe there's a man on Molossos that hadn't. But to see it up close, under such a sky, and in such terrible conditions—it had taken on an entirely different character, as if it were alive, scanning the all under the devilish horizon with the merciless contempt of an ancient executioner. Huge. I can't say it enough. At least four stories—perhaps as tall as six, and somehow this seems insufficient until you've glimpsed her utter majesty; nothing can prepare you. Whatever she was when she strode off the factory floor, whatever she was before she had become the Lion, god knows, and I cannot tell. In the time since, I suppose since her rebirth, she has become a gilded creature studded and decorated with the menacing talons of a lion rampant, her head and shoulders the gaping, razor-toothed maw and tawny mane of the ancient Terran beast, and upon her hands the like and likeness of feline claws, extended in predatory leisure of manslaughter.

The rain couldn't wash away the day's deeds. Stained and dashed with mud and turf, here and there you could witness the sticky mess of a man's remains, trampled down to nothing in the fury of

combat. I didn't think about it at that moment, at least not consciously, as I visibly shivered; thank the gods my men weren't watching. I didn't realize it then, but I had a brush with the very razor's edge of my own mortality—doing all I could, fighting tooth and nail, not to lose there my sanity and, bawling like a newborn, surrender my men to wholesale slaughter—but there was something more I find difficult to describe in words. I suppose the best way I could say it, if say it I must, is that I realized how badly I could die, as so many others had.

But that was all over now. The Lion had indeed arrived, at the head of a small army of gun carriages and transport vehicles. I didn't see another panoply accompanying him, but I know, for I was there in the thereafter, that a full seven had remained loyal, wheresoever they were at the time.

But all seemed to quiet around the gap in the battlefield, as even the sky seemed to withdraw and recoil with evident fear, as if careful not to disturb the combatants in their candor. And candor I must assume it to have been. By our side stood the Lion, absolutely still, seemingly eye-to-eye with her pair of opponents, the Morningstar and the Crown of Thorns; I can only assume they'd been having a private conversation. My wife insists that the Lion was offering the pair a last chance to turn sides, but from what I've seen of him before and after, my dear charge Artemisius, I don't imagine that was it. I don't think he would have accepted their surrender. I don't think he would have let them even walk away

from the battlefield, with their warforms or without. All I can imagine, all that makes sense in this final moment was a penultimate missive of “Why?”

I admit I was afraid for him; he was just a pup when I first laid eyes upon him, when I first swore that I'd protect his person—so strange now that he'd be coming to rescue me. But it wouldn't be that easy; Artemisius was one against two, and he remained young and inexperienced, while his opponents were the veterans of many battles, some in which I had participated when I'd been a younger man. But apparently he had an ace in the hole.

The gift of yesterday's proving, a prize ripped from the defeated form of the absent priestess's stolen Ritter, glowed and glimmered into life, a shield wrought from hardened plasma, suspended upon a reactive frame, capable of enduring the blows of even six-inch guns at length and massive enough to cover the Lion's whole frame as she strode slowly forth, in her lethal hand a short-barreled cannon fashioned in resemblance to a monstrous blunderbuss, held as easily as one would a pistol.

Now I've seen fights decided by some contrivance or a bit of cleverness or even a few tricks of the trade, but this wasn't one of those fights. You'd have thought, two on one all things being equal, the matter should have been decided easily and obviously. But it wasn't like that. I'd never seen, up to that point, any panoply move like that, fight like that. It seemed like desperation, the way he fought as the battle unfolded, but I would

name it more something like “inspiration;” he fought like that because he had to, because the survival of his house was riding on his shoulders, because the well-being of thousands, even millions, depended upon his success. He was fighting for us, just as he was fighting for himself, and I wonder even now if he was fighting for a future I'd not even yet glimpsed billowing on the far horizon.

He had arrived a little worse for wear, pitted and scarred with the obvious evidence of anti-tank munitions; this wasn't his first fight of the day. Meanwhile, his opponents had arrived pristine, shining even with the reflection of the tumultuous sky.

He began cautiously, Artemisius, striding forward, in the measured manner of an advancing legionary, guarded under the twin protection of the plasma scutum and the Aegis Dilatant. He would be able to shrug off goliath ordnance, perverted from their course against his fiery bulwark; even for two, it would be difficult to pierce his defenses from the fore. In his main hand he bore—that blunderbuss—a 105 mm autocannon, a manner of railgun connected with a monstrous ammunition blister by a clinking ammunition belt.

They didn't make room, didn't pull off to pummel his defenses from a distance; they were going to decide this here and now, disdainful of my lord's primacy. They bore 250 mm guns, devices more commonly fit for naval combat than terrestrial warfare, and their fire was repeated and concentrated. A virtual torrent, a turbine, a

swirling glowing morass of tangerine and carmine bathing him all about in bloody fingers. My lord stumbled, staggered, and nearly gave out altogether against their combined fusillade, and he would have been hurled backwards, laid out flat, and obliterated amongst the impossible forces had he not dug in his toes amongst the muddy firma, sliding backwards nevertheless as he was. It was a terrible thing to behold, The Lion enshrouded in the smoky plumes of arriving explosions that shook the earth as easily as the unrelenting thunder pummeled the sky. That was when I first noticed it. He should have been hurled backwards, should have been laid out flat, should have been crippled and crushed by the combined weight of his opponents' hatred; how it must have galled them so! This was when I had the very first inkling that my lord had achieved something, something I think much by accident, that was abnormal—but magnificently so. Somehow, in some way, for him the machine fought harder, beyond its ancient factory specifications.

Even so, stalwart in his striving progress, the material at my master's beck and call could only hold out so far. His immense bulwark that illuminated his brazen leonine frame as the second sun of some madman's fever dream was flickering shortly and then was threatened with utter collapse, a turn of events that would make his advance altogether worthless, for while my lord had been requiting the hatred of his attackers with the rapid-fire onslaught of his shoulder-buttressed

autocannon, he had been dreadfully too far away to make his fire count, which only glittered and skipped across the surface of their dilatants in vibrating waves and eddies of all colors that god has considered fit for men to grasp.

But now, what seemed a terrible omen, his shield was dying, it's summer clementine become intermittently chilly as ice, until the shield faded out altogether—who knew whether to come again or merely more scrap for the junk-heap!

Wondrous, it was. Panoplies just don't move like that, however marvelous they are; I'd never before seen a panoply hurtle forward with such a sprinter's posture, teetering forward virtually horizontal, her face nearly to kiss the firma. It was evident that his opponents hadn't either, as they visibly panicked and cast the muzzle-borne contents of their munitions wide of the forward-lurching Lion. They hadn't just missed, not with the aid of targeting computers; they'd slipped, seen a dread apparition of that clay house that lingers beneath the earth. I'd seen it before myself; we all had. So it was; what would have been a killing stroke, a long-rod penetrator of monstrous dimensions, just skittered and glanced from his exposed shoulder.

By the time they had reloaded—and it couldn't have been longer than short seconds—he was already upon them, and you could only imagine my surprise the way he carried himself. If the Lion could change her countenance, by god she would have, ear to ear with the Glasgow grin of an avenging psychopath, returned to civilization from

the asylum to wreak havoc and call it “vengeance.” The Crown of Thorns couldn't be more than an arm's length away, and the Lion, passing within her protective bubble of non-Newtonian fluid, began to tear away at her armored exterior; with one arm, she gripped the Crown, and with the other she made terrible use of her 105 mm, as much now a cudgel as a field gun; I couldn't discern when she was merely firing and when she'd been employing the length of the barrel to brow-beat the Crown into battered and bruised submission, to be crushed and cast helplessly to the rubble below, hopefully never to raise arms in anger again.

The Morningstar, overcoming the Atlas-shudder of the Lion's seeming unspeakable inhuman stamina, finally collected her wits and joined the fray, rushing forth to separate the combatants and hopefully to shortly make short work of the frenzied Lion slashing away at the pummeled Crown. But the Lion didn't even glance askance at the arriving Morningstar, and as that gauntleted fist came and attempted to lay itself upon the her brazen exterior, something else strange happened, and I now knew for sure that I hadn't been hallucinating, hadn't been imagining things. As this happened, in a single motion, the Lion seized the Morningstar by the extremity of that very outstretched limb and with a short pause—as I imagined, to savor the moment—ripped the Morningstar's hand from its very mooring, bathing the trampled mud in the strange purple ichor of Metallfasermuskeln. My jaw dropped; I think we all

recoiled in some mixture of awe and horror. It was really no different from watching a man having his limbs ripped off—experienced viscerally, purely as instinct, and enough to make you evacuate the contents of your stomach—but a spectacle the size of a high-rise, rather than a perverted torture to be hidden within a shadow-drenched dungeon. The Morningstar recoiled with terror, staring at the gap where her hand used to be in as much evident panic as disbelief.

The 105 mm had been battered beyond recognition, but with a final blow she hurled the Crown aside, who collapsed earthward. Spared now a moment, the Lion funneled her surmounting rage on the Morningstar, as the latter drew a plasma poniard from a hidden thigh-sheath. Seemingly weaponless, the Lion nevertheless met the challenge, the competitors circling each other about the battlefield, seeking an easy in or some contrivance to overwhelm the opponent. So it seemed at least, but I was wrong. The Lion seemed to slip in the slick firma, evidently off balance, and exposed to assault, which the Morningstar desperately obliged. Fool. Goddamn fool. She wasn't off balance; she hadn't even slipped, and she would have known this if he had bothered to watch the Lion's heels, which were quite appropriately stationed. Using both hands, she deftly caught the incoming Thanatos-tooth of the attacker and redirected this upon its master, driving through the thigh, which erupted as the Morningstar buckled with living agony, a fountain of violet goo teeming

with strange red capsules almost too small for perception.

I think she was crying, heaving back forth, clasping about her thigh as if she feared it would fall away. It's the only time I ever felt bad for an opponent, someone who would have happily killed me without a second thought. I've been inculcated against such dangerous mercy. I mumbled some black wish, I think, but luckily this went inaudible to my compatriots. It was to their cheers that we discovered the Lion wasn't equipped this day for mercy and, I think, relished the bloody spectacle. The Morningstar trembled, unable to so much as stagger, as the blade was slowly withdrawn. The Lion cut her, a lot. I don't want to say much more than that. Slashed to ribbons, bloody, soaking ribbons, if blood that was, as blood I believe it to be. There was nothing left of her. Four-hundred years of service.

By this time, the Crown had finally returned to her feet, and she was lining up a shot from her ten inch gun that would have ripped the Lion in half, but as she moved to depress the trigger, engage the firing, what remained of that scutum, flickering in and out of life with no discernable pattern, a strange mixture of solar flame and Martian cold, Artemisius hurled with unimaginable force at the Crown. This became lodged in her midsection, lodged deep, and she fell backwards, her legs helpless as if severed at the spine. I don't know what look they exchanged before the end, but that

poniard found one final home there, which separated her pilot from his soul.

In this manner, the Morningstar and Crown of Thorns ceased their service to House Ahhaiya and faded from memory. We were picked up by the transport vehicles; many of my men had survived, thanks mostly to the Lion and her budding Eisenherz, Artemisius son of Arcesilaus.

This was the beginning, you know. A new way to look at panoplies. Artemisius had realized hitherto unknown potential in the Rittern, and things would never be the same. But that's a different story altogether.

The weeks that followed, the long march through the snow-capped peaks in dreadful weather, harried and assailed by the raiding traitors and ragged bandits, were unforgettable. I don't know how many died. It was a miserable endeavor, but I don't see how it could have been avoided, how Artemisius had any other choice in the matter. And he could have just abandoned us to the slaughter that forever stained Black-Rock, but he suffered alongside us, fighting off the many ambushes, clearing the way, pushing towards a future that was not his alone. In a way, he's all that preserved what was House Ahhaiya, rendered moribund in the aftermath and in the wars that this precipitated.

Anyways, he got me out, got out most of my men, and even managed to save my family, many of our families in fact. If his father ever had my loyalty, he had it even more; I can't even quantify how much I adored that man. In any case, that's all

I have to say about the man that would one day rule the Commonwealth of Colonies, all I have to say to a man that wasn't there, that wouldn't understand. In the aftermath, people might have perceived him a bloodthirsty monster, and indeed he slew many, many people, but hell is a little thicker with the souls of the most assuredly deserving thanks to him. And of the resurgent grasp of perishing earth, rising again to clasp its colonies in chains, well, I don't think there was a man better prepared to see them off, beaten and shattered; we'll have peace now for a generation at least, until the next mob thinks it can rob us of our god-given rights. And when that day comes, I pray that whoever pilots the Lion will remember his holy responsibilities.

The Snarling Man in the Mountain

1.

I didn't really know what to expect; I mean, no-one does. It's not something they can really prepare you for. You always hear stories, always the most gruesome stories—I fear—always something about how so and so's fine son's been made little more than a gibbering wreck, an asylum-bound lunatic, or in worst cases—dead—by a failed unity, the initial attempt, a ritual really, to connect a human consciousness, that of a long-trained pilot, with that of a thinking machine, the driving impetus of the titanic war machines called “panopies” that thunder the battlefield. I was still just a girl, little more than fourteen years of age, as precocious as a young teenager might be, and virtually untrained for the task. My... brother, my older brother, he'd been twenty at the time when I was twelve, had been trained since virtual infancy, much longer than is typical, for the moment, but it seems that he was somehow unprepared; but again, I have to say—have to ask—how can one be prepared? When he attempted unity, a malignant signal trickled forth from the loathsome consciousness of riddling steel, wading through the hollows of his consciousness like quicksilver—they say he began screaming and wouldn't cease until they'd unplugged him—searing away neuron from neuron until my beloved brother was little more than a catatonic vegetable.

I still see a glimmer now and then of what he once was flash across his beautiful eyes, made of

the very same stuff of the deep blue sea, which is all he seems to adore anymore.

There wasn't much family left. The demands of warfare had left few of us untouched, most of us dead on the field; our responsibility to our liege, to the council of house fathers, had been damning, but we couldn't exactly shirk our responsibilities, even just for a generation, otherwise we would default upon our fidelity and be robbed of the very machines we had been contracted to ride. So it was that a fourteen year-old girl attempted the unity with a machine mind already notorious—cursed, some have said—for slaughtering pilots.

I'd led a very sheltered life up until that point, expected to marry an appropriate suitor—as much for the caliber of his breeding as the quality of family advancement—and produce a swarm of suitable sons capable of wielding the weapons around which our lives were centered. Humorously enough, I'd rarely seen one in my life, almost never in person—a panoply—least frequently our own, whether those in the possession of my family in particular or in the greater house at large. I was very sheltered, as I said. I wasn't expected to endure the misfortune of being virtually chained-at-the-hip to a Ritter—as panoplies are affectionately referred to by their pilots. To a layman, this may seem bizarre. “Why prefer a life of pregnancy to an illustrious legend of war-making at the helm of the very pinnacle of human technology?” But you just don't have any idea; it's taxing in the extreme, and there are no breaks. If you were unfortunate

enough to succeed in the joining, that idle panoply is now your life, and any time spent away or with family is merely fleeting; you're in the army now, and there is no retiring.

Perhaps you can imagine my amazement when I glimpsed his crooked form for the second time. The make and model, whatever lay behind the knotted iron of armor, had been lost to history. He, and he most certainly was a he, was like a wandering giant out of a fairy tale, if that tale had been constructed out of the tangible matter sprung forth from a madman's wrinkled gray as he stood gazing, agape, into the endless nothingness of the bottomless abyss—nothing but the horror of vacuous space in all directions spiraling with the absent winds of the tempest, an imagination beyond the mere reckoning of men. Like the wildmen of feral worlds, he was imprecisely painted with the red and silver gray of pulverized earth and flowers across his fanged countenance, running down to his pelvis in bizarre patterns that at the time I had believed to be the strange ideograms of some long-dead language. But upon his arms and legs, as they were clearly identifiable, ran a series, as if little more than crude cave drawings, altogether of infinitely less sophistication than the others, cruel illustrations of manslaughter, destruction, murder, and even here and there—cannibalism—as if the work of two very different authors, the latter badly emulating the first, or perhaps emulating not at all. Just crimson and ash the things we're made of on a field of sun-stained black.

When my brother was lost to us, I was rapidly inducted into an intensive training program for two years—enough, they hoped, to prepare me at least for the joining; by statutory protocol, no panoply could stand long without a pilot. It was a desperate measure, and for all my pains, I no longer bear them—my instructors or my family—any ill will; it had to be done, but most wouldn't understand that. Most would have held a grudge. But even so, I still wonder.

He moved, the panoply, when I was finally brought before him. Again and again I had been told that a panoply required a human pilot for operation, and that is indeed true, but they neglect to mention that more ancient and cantankerous of vehicles—those that have developed what I'll all-too-affectionately refer to as “personality,” can maintain limited movement, very limited movement, of their own frame. In my case, I clearly witnessed his head—the gaping maw glittering with bared fangs of a snarling wolf, starving it seemed and desperate—atrophied—to shift in my direction with the audible whine of the unmaintained sensor suite declaring his curiosity. He'd been chained into his berthing, and from my training I knew this something abnormal, but in my battle to sustain my rising anxiety—to appear with the collected calm of the colonial aristocracy—I made pretense of either foreknowledge or ignorance. The ambiance was tactile; it was as if he would himself stride forward from his own gantry and commence slaughtering his own maintenance crew, who, from his ghastly

and ramshackle appearance, were terrified to so much as lay a healing hand upon him.

They wouldn't witness the usual fanfare of a unity. There was no priestess, and only a single house father was present, his brow deeply furrowed, obscuring whatever intent lay behind the darkened twinkle of his eyes.

I would have been suitably terrified if I had been older, old enough to understand the ramifications of all that was transpiring; as it was, I was simply overwhelmed; there was too much going on, too much all at once for me to fixate on what should have been my primary concern—my fate.

The maintenance crew was slow to render their aid, incredibly slow in fact, carefully—as if crossing off the items on a checklist—running through whatever was necessary to pop the hatch that hadn't witnessed the external air since my brother had been rendered an invalid. I would be sitting in the very same chair and sharing a consciousness with the beast that had virtually slain him. I was dreaming about vengeance. You don't know how I looked up to my older brother, how magnificent he had once been in his dress blues appointed in the gleaming gold of an officer. Even now, I mostly know him in memory, a twelve year-old gazing upwards upon the curl of his smiling cheeks. What became of him—I hate to admit this—I almost think of as something else. I should be honest. I didn't think of that drooling moron as my brother; my brother died in this chair, and I was here to get vengeance not only for him, but my whole family

and most of all—me, for what had been done to me, for what I was about to lose.

I understood at once why the monstrosity had been chained down, while they carefully raised me into the cabin. Unbelievably, it raged against its own constraints—threatened to bring down the roof about us in its unspeakable fury, as if I were a worm upon the mind, an invader come to steal away his cognizance. Something about this soothed me. It shames me now, actually, that brutish intent, but for the time it gave me strength.

The cabin was tiny, barely more than a strangely shaped chair and a wild network of screens, buttons, and dials, the function of most of which I only barely understood, but for the moment, I didn't have to. It stank in there, barely, almost imperceptibly slick of human perspiration that had been trapped and rotted to putrefaction over two years time, a grim reminder of what would remain my legacy should I fail. I don't know how they managed it. A full dozen techs were huddled in that tiny chamber around me, carefully connecting a network of tubes and cables into my every impulse, a series of hardwired ports with which any colonial aristocrats even expecting military service are augmented, allowing a one-to-one connection between one's thoughts and those of the alien consciousness that drives the machine. I think I saw the tear-filled eyes of my father straining above the crowd, as the technicians filed out and closed the chamber behind them. I was floating in darkness. I didn't know whether I still remained

within the cabin or if my consciousness had drifted elsewhere. I couldn't move; I had been bound upon the chair, not unlike the chained machine all around me. But I hadn't long to wait, didn't need to fear—at least for this—as I drifted away from this ocean dark for unimaginable shores.

The pain in my head was indescribable, as I peeled, suffering with a dull ache throughout the length of my limbs, my face from the necrotic marsh-mud of what revealed itself to be, in the throbbing of my eyes, the rain-soaked foot-hills of a mountain that wouldn't come into focus. The smell was overwhelming, all around in all directions, the ghastly stench of ancient putrefaction, rising loathsome from a shattered land abandoned by the divine breath of life. Just broken reeds, more ashen than their desired amber hue; blood-caked lily-pads adhered sharply upon the rising mud come to absorb what had been little seas fit for frogs and water-bugs thick with the half-consumed skeletal remains of vagabond birds luckless enough to rest here for a moment their tired feathers to only be glued upon the earth.

I struggled upwards, but my limbs wouldn't heed me, as if cast broken from the mountain-top to be the nourishment of a nevertheless dying land. Try and try as I might, I only succeeded in rolling about like a pig in shit, coated from head to toe and caked in my once delicate mane with the pasty, ashen refuse of so much endless death. I was now genuinely panicked, and I would have betrayed myself at once with an unrequited cry, but a

powerful gust of abhorrent tomb-breath whipped past my face, whipped past my limbs, and was unintentionally sucked up my gasping nostrils.

As I was retching, hurling the full contents of the day's victuals as new nourishment for the land's necrosis, I could swear I heard something above the obnoxious chthonic breath, something that I heard in my ears, but I also felt as a scratching within my brain. I couldn't be sure; I was so exhausted and overwhelmed, but I swear I heard, in the voice of a man—a young man, a suffering young man, an angry young man—the words simply, *“Two years.”*

Instinctively, I repeated the phrase in utter confusion, as if a question, and that miserable gust of rotting wind assailed again my senses, as I viciously fought down the visceral desire to spill out the full contents of my body's remaining fluids on the soil. I was sure I had heard it right now; he had repeated, *“Two years.”*

It seems I had forgotten myself, forgotten where I was, forgotten what I was doing. Unsure what to make of him, I asked, “Two years since? Or two years when? Or for two years?”

The strike of thunder, shuddering the earth, awoke me rapidly from my mud-caked malaise, and I instinctively cast my gaze skywards to glimpse the gathering storm about the mountain summit, simmering with the tumbling lightning intermittent. The air had become electric and the wind seemed to relent, as if gathering strength. I heard it only at a whisper. *“Two long years ago, I dispensed with some creature... your brother I see—still just a child*

yourself. Two years a prisoner, two years divorced from war. Two years, what should be a lone rain-drop in an endless ocean.” A wandering, warm gust signaled a deep sigh. *“Why should it bother? I'm older than your grandfather, child; I count years in generations, and I possess the wisdom and experience of lifetimes.”* A returning gasp fit for the following expulsion nearly hurled me skyward. *“Now what am I to do with you? Out of your depth, perhaps? Eager for a father's approbation? I would say 'turn back now,' but I see that you're just as much a prisoner as I.”*

“Who or what are you?”

I thought I could hear the gentle clatter of autumnal leaves on the breeze; he continued, *“You, darling child, have unfortunately found yourself supine before the lord of many battles, the winner of many contests, the breaker of armies, the father of bloodshed. I have many titles, a long history, but I am known simply as 'The Moon Leaper,' and you have found yourself unfortunate enough to be prostrate within my den, sublime with the terrible gall of pretense.”*

“Pretense?”

Tempestuous laughter thundered gravely from the clouded summit. *“Your-shit heel of a brother pretended himself worthy enough to be my master. You have made the same error. Your death will be loud.”*

Animated with no small anger, as I realized the strange terra a toxic stage for a contest of minds, I finally released myself from the stinking mud and

arose, clad head-to-toe in the drying clay. “Such outrageous gall you possess, little leaper, to presume the power of life and death over your master!”

“Gall?!” the mountain ruminated, “Gall you say? I was there, countless centuries ago, when we burned the cradle of mankind to ensure we burned out the circuitry of every last false-life living on earth—be damned the consequences. I was there, fighting a losing battle miserably for generations, giving myself over to finer men than you, that we might smite together my strange cousins. I bore witness to all those sacrifices—great and small—and I carry their memory eternally with me, until I am no more than the decaying clay. I have earned my place, and I have suffered woes for this, woes you could never imagine. And like a child you address me, outrageous in your hubris, claiming that I have ‘gall.’ Well, perhaps I am proud beyond reason, but I have reason to be. You’ll see.”

While I didn't like the direction of this strange rumination, memories denied me and powers unimaginable, I admit—I was hubristic. “You bore witness nothing, machine. You've no soul. You're not but electric impulse as dead as the day you were carved from steel. You're no more than a servant, just the false breath that guns the motors of a war-machine. You'll answer my propositions and by the dawn be licking my open palm, no more than a much-cowed hound.”

Long unpresided by any solar orb, the sky darkened as if robbed of its nebulous illumination,

as the center stage of heaven's vault was presided over by a great black orb of nothing, blackness and shadows, as if they themselves the unctuous absence of light, pouring into all the exposed places. And then the increasing country-dark came alight with the crack of lightning as the gathering storm began boiling over, seething with a rage inhuman.

“And besides, this is a proving. You will reveal the gauntlet, and we shall commence the contest.”

The burgeoning storm that swept clattering the dead and decaying reeds seemed to recede, and vibrating in the voice of the waning soil he replied ponderously, “*Climb the mountain. Ascend the summit. Come find me. The contest will be decided there.*”

And with that, his voice was no more; there was only the gentle ripple of the periodic breeze to serve as company, whistling through the dying grass and making racket of the reeds, which stretched for miles all around. And there lingered overhead the summit obfuscated, plunged within the blustery dark seething with the barely-contained violence of a god more evil in apathy and cruel amusement than in unabashed rage.

This wasn't what I had expected; I mused how much or how little time must pass in the waking world while I consumed myself in such endeavors, but that wasn't it alone. A contest of wits summed up in a visual metaphor; somehow I had imagined something far more abstract, an almost tug-of-war between my mind and the alien consciousness with which I now shared an uncomfortable candid

totality. Knowing something of adventure stories, I looked about for some artifact, some talisman that might light the way, but the place was virtually bare, save for the everlasting decay that seemed so strange, so absolutely ancient and yet nevertheless still putrefying; it should have long since become dust. I wondered if this was not merely a metaphor but a true reflection of the state of this creature's mind, exultant in misery and self-loathing. I have to confess, I didn't look forward to success; I was only impelled onwards by the fear of—or worse. Death wasn't painted so monstrous any longer. I'd rather my father soak my grave in tears than hide them above my drooling countenance. I should have been soaked blazing with a desire for vengeance, but over the course of two years I had grown to accept my brother's fate, to an extent. In reality, I think I had just stopped thinking of him as my brother, as family, but as something more of a compulsory burden; I think this happens to many caregivers, particularly those closest to the invalid.

In any case, there wasn't any direction to go but upwards, and so I strode amidst the squalid once-greenery in the direction of the high mount, stumbling across rock-infested foot-hills unmolested, unabated, while I secretly harbored the fear of ambush, but nothing ever came, nothing ever arrived—a false sense of security arising out of a burgeoning hope—that the matter was as simple as it appeared, that my familial forbear had merely been a moron or too weak, or god knows what else. I don't know what motivated me to believe I was

better than anyone else, particularly at that young age, but I imagine it's a sordid perspective possessed generally by the youth of the wealthy.

I had surpassed the long miles of the foothills, difficult progress, one would imagine, for one unaccustomed to the long stretch of the mountains, ridiculous even as that was in the scope of one's active imagination. I went untouched; I suppose I had expected something more, something predatory owing to what had rendered from a man to a mouse my now drug-addled brother, who consumed his day from dawn to dusk in the dreamy recognition of the endless seas that lap against our shores alongside the various military invalids more legion than the house would like to admit. Though I should have known better, I did genuinely become unguarded, and I began to enjoy the vaguely surreal scenery as the living incarnation of the diatribe of some cosmic poet.

It should have been disturbing; it should have been a scene to make me reconsider this whole affair, but—gods above—how exhausted I was, wheezing and coughing like some old codger robbed of his cane. An old, well-worn studded red-leather recliner, tall and with broad arm-rests, rested upon an oval rug of chartreuse, copper, and carmine rings, which extended all the way to a rickety end-table, supported on its broken leg by a stack of books, on which rested an aged tube television—ancient technology more rare than the unseemly intelligence personified in cloud-delighting deity of loathsome breath. I should have known better; I

shouldn't have bothered with a moment's rest, but even more than the ache of my knees was the fervid gasping of my lungs, I was curious, troublesome and curious. I was wandering through another creature's mind in the guise of a dream, and the dream was not of my own creation, complete with concepts and symbols beyond my own imagination, irons and archaisms that at the time I didn't entirely understand, or understand at all. The fibers of my own consciousness, while joined, were tethered merely to his, and while he could immediately grasp the whole of my being, I was unaccustomed to such intimacy; I didn't know how to invade his private spaces, much less grasp him entirely and at once without fail. But he knew how to push my buttons; I know he'd done it before, with far grander soldiers than I, who nevertheless shrugged off his clumsy assaults with an exultant sailor's cackle.

So as you begin to cringe as I came to rest upon the aged sanguine leather, understand that I wasn't in my right mind; I didn't understand the goings on, and I was operating from the deranged psychology of a dreamer.

My chest was heaving with fevered respiration, slowly up and down, as my mud-drenched clothes dripped with salty perspiration down the curves and folds of the leathern chair. I think I could hear the hills to sigh as I soiled the seat with the virtual pigshit in which I'd been armored.

Naturally, my eyes drifted to the reflective black of the deactivated television screen, as I gave

a nod, in its reflection, to the exhausted mud-demon affixed upon a blood-soaked throne. In a moment I cared not whether or not I caught my breath, and the consideration of my own fatigue flitted away into the clouds of absent birds. The knob on the screen clicked from the off to the on position, and the mysterious ashen figure in the screen was replaced with the usual snow-blind of the ancient cathode ray tube.

It was a familiar scene; it was the first thing I had witnessed when I'd been unexpectedly inducted into the house's military forces, the very reason, the very elucidation, for why I'd been robbed of the future I had long and always expected, a long life of many sublime joys and gentle woes populated with enough sons to command a company of panoplies, to be replaced with a posterity termed in the words of a forgotten philosopher "Nasty, brutish, and short." It really shouldn't have affected me; as I said, it was a familiar scene, but there they were, the whole triumphal procession anticipating my brother's glorious eruption from the familiar metal hold, announcing his domination of the ancient machine's consciousness—that he had been successfully selected—surrounded with all different manner of military and religious officials joined together in happy unison for what is typically and what should have been an overwhelmingly happy occasion embodying the continued existence, the continued capacity for warfare, the altogether glory of our surviving house. The joy there, the joy there betrayed, explains the pure anxiety shuddering in

my heart, the tear-filled eyes of my father who already presumes me lost—hopefully dead, but he must have known well in his heart that the ritual couldn't have been avoided, not unless my line were to be cast out from the hold with the appellation worst of all—cowards. I was there, as a twelve-year old, at my father's side, holding his hand tightly with childish anxiety; I didn't even know what I was afraid of. I knew when the accustomed time had passed with the altogether plain agony riddled across my father's then still youthful countenance—now grown to pale age with the impossible reconciliation of his raving son reduced to harmlessness only through pharmacology. In a moment, the technicians would open the chamber, and then the madness would begin.

A spray of blood commenced the conclusion of the ceremony as my brother attempted to fight his way free of the press of technicians that had just recently disconnected his cerebellum and extremities from the machine's electronics. Instinctively, he had motioned for his boot-dagger, and then he was among them, kicking, stabbing, and biting as if his very life depended on it. I was there again, tears in my child-eyes, screaming indecipherable obscenities in my father's ear as I tugged wildly upon his arm and fitfully beat my little fists against his chest to do something, anything, just to make it stop—just to make him stop—somehow to make everything alright. As I returned my gaze upon the swirling melee, I caught

a glimpse of the twisted snarl of his visage as he whirled about in our direction.

It wasn't my brother's familiar face, cruelly gnarled with an unknowable fright. Into my own wild eyes I stared transfixed, my own countenance crimson-speckled with the fruits of my trained knife-work, and I realized that I had not witnessed a familiar ceremony, even darkly concluded. In a moment, I was not standing shoulder to shoulder with my doting father, but spouting and shrieking unintelligible imprecations upon the assembled horde recoiling in horror, I was being restrained at length in iron bonds. I couldn't move; the weight was so intense, as unfamiliar hands quivering in horror traveled the length of my revolting form before they bore me aloft, my eyes completely dilated black, to carry me away forever to the whitewashed halls of the infirm, mercifully situated upon the ocean blue, forever at a safe distance from the Thundermount, which echoed always with someone else's misery.

I didn't know what had happened to me. I couldn't be sure whether I breathed the free air, or if I lingered still within that sweat-stained cabin, and it was impossible to tell. Protest would only bring further recriminations, but I still wondered, "To bear it anyways, would I not linger here forever?" Was it not better at least to try? Horrible, it would be, to linger here a thousand years in the press of a waking moment. But, as I said, I couldn't be sure.

I don't know how many days passed while I frenzied within cushioned walls, frothing at the

mouth as if possessed. If I hadn't been mad before, imprisonment had driven me wild, bound within such obscene vestments so that you couldn't even scratch your nose, brush away an eyelash menacing the glistening orb of your eye; the very constraining alone, the feeling of being helpless, unable even to move your essential limbs; that was panic. It's something I've come to learn that's practiced for by escape-artists and the like; even in a performance, the panic is quite real, quite tangible; it's a visceral feeling, and it's always there.

I think I had decided to kill myself, if given the chance; they had to let me out eventually. The days became weeks and months, and I developed my first gray hairs. They let me out—drugged I think I was—to rest upon the patio to meekly absorb the endless blue of the undying ocean. He didn't notice me, not do I think, but I noticed him—my brother, seated upon a rolling chair with a severe expression gazing outward upon where the world met the firmament. I wanted to go over and say “Hi,” but I didn't think he'd remember me.

Out there was the Thundermount, blustering with the loathsome airs of a world dying and decaying, assailing upon the shore, our collective senses awry. I remembered why I'd been angry, what this had all been for, that astral projection of self-loathing terror in the distance. I thought I'd run clear of the orderlies and begin swimming madly in that direction until I had caught the mount in my very hands to wring its little neck dead, for all the agony I'd endured, but there was

something in the intensity in the expression of my brother's face, so I sat myself down again, and I observed its swirling wilds of flashing lights contemplative. I was wondering what he saw that I didn't. It was some time before I realized that his battle wasn't over, but only I could fight it for him, take back his stolen honor, redeem the shame of our family. But I realized that the shame was not my brother's.

The television had exploded, casting the glass of the cathode tube a few feet forward to stain the rug to intermittent cinders with its heat. Smoke erupted forth as if ashamed from the aperture created in the screen. I sat there awhile longer, stunned until reinvigorated, with youthful knees, and I rose from the old leather chair and began my progress up the mount.

The mountain seemed to expand and list at my grasp, as I fumbled my way upwards amongst the barren conifers, stretching helplessly for the cloud-borne peak with blood and dirt-caked fingernails ravaged for scrambling madly in the rocks and dust. All about, unceasing, the bale wind of earthen decay and microbial digestion whipped at my insubstantial garments in the peculiar lukewarm, chilling my half child-like limbs down to the bone as I huddled and shivered again and again against the force of the elements abounding and arising further and further for every foot I struggled higher.

Snow-capped peaks, amidst the furious frozen droplets that assailed my gentle countenance, were all that awaited me. I began to amuse myself with

the notion that I would expire from hypothermia in a dreamscape inhabited—nay, the product of—of a madman, if you wanted to call him that. My limbs all shivered in unison, but it was already too late for my extremities; my digits, they would not hear my call, would not fasten about whatever handholds I might vainly lunge towards, as the frost had robbed them of their vital *aqua vitae*. In a way, the motors no longer spun; I could articulate them no longer, huddled even against my heaving chest for warmth, no better now than bony popsicles. So cold it was that the ever-present breath, visible before my countenance, seemed to harden before my very eyes, resolving itself into the piercing droplets of an impossible blizzard dew, falling earthwards one by one to shatter to the nostalgic strokes of a xylophone.

I don't know how I managed it, but from the ravaged forest I finally escaped, gasping as I fell to my knees before a mountain dale concluded in a sharp and deadly cliff down the terrible progress I just ascended. A virtual conclave of unused cobblestones, the chaff from a world's worth of main streets, had been here it seemed haphazardly deposited from the titan grips of a monstrous god's world-spanning hands. Besides this, it was bare, aside from a twisted and gnarled tree poised alone along the very edge of the mortal cliff, black and bruised with the clear marks of multiple and repeat strokes of lightning that had mysteriously not severed away its boughs altogether. But most remarkably of all, though not thriving, the old hull

was alive, feathered intermittently with blade-like green—as rough and vicious as the colonial soil of its planting.

I suppose I could have believed anything, just having spent months locked away in an asylum quite literally of the mind, what might as well have been a lifetime consumed perhaps in the span of mere moments, but it's what came next that surprised me most, something I had truly and honestly not expected. It was whimpering, gentle sobbing, but it wasn't my own; my eyes were dry; in all the exhaustion and confusion I had forgotten my own terrible predicament, impelled forward perhaps more out of a sense of duty—or perhaps it wasn't. Perhaps it was just that there was nothing else to be done.

I scanned the limits of my narrow horizon. Reflecting, I don't know how I'd missed it; huddled beneath the arbor, clutching its hull with the maddened intensity of fight-or-flight, there was a single child, a boy—I realized—of perhaps eight years in age, swaddled in the gold and blue of House Ahhaiya, an intimation of soldiers' dress.

I know not why—perhaps it was that pathetic mammalian instinct that takes pity on the young and the miserable—but carefully, as I sunk to one knee, I approached, trying to find in my hardened heart the appropriate words to balm the sobbing child, but I couldn't, and only an irreconcilable babbling issued forth from between the fence of my teeth, weird gutturals and hissing aspirants that could be recognized as no language whatsoever. It

wasn't until in my nodding confusion I'd bitten hard upon my sensitive tongue that I began to make sense through the pursing of my lips.

“What's wrong?” I asked in a conciliatory tone, as if addressing a stray cat.

Without wiping his tear-drowned eyes, he cast his gaze upwards and his ferocious iris, with the familiar strike of lightning blue, met mine and burrowed little holes in my heart that stung in ways I hadn't before imagined, as if I had somehow robbed him, robbed him of something very near and dear, as if I had the power to do so.

I was deeply affected, but I retained enough of my wits, teetering on the edge of prostrate weeping, to ask again, repeating myself, “Little boy, what's wrong? What's happened to you? How did you even get out here? Where are your parents?”

Those accusatory eyes were all the reply I needed, but he finally voiced his condemnation, which issued angry, trembling, as the youth bumbled with pusillanimous rage over his words. “I'm... off to the army. They're s-s-s-sending me off to the b-b-barracks. I don't und-d-d-derstand. D-d-d-don't you remember?”

“Child, I don't understand. How would I remember? We've never met before.”

His eyes flashed and he rose to his full height, tall for a child of his age, and powerfully built besides; he'd make a fine soldier when he came of age. A moment of realization crashed across my features, as I recognized immediately this strange estimation, the anticipation of military vintage upon

even a child's frame, but luckily I wasn't permitted the moments necessary to achieve a true epiphany, as the child began stalking forwards, stammering with impotent rage, "It's all your fault! It's all your fault! Why couldn't you protect me?! Why was I even born?! I never asked for this! Can't I just be! Why can't I stay here? Why do I have to go?" He only made it half-way across the distance between us, collapsing upon the slick cobbles like a rag-doll. "They're going to rob me, rob me of me, and then they'll send me off away, and I'll never see you again, never see father or my siblings either. I don't want to be a killer; I don't want to die for my country, for my house, for the honor of the family. Can't I just go back home?" In the half-hope of youthful naiveté, he raised his eyes to meet mine, and he asked simply, "Can't I just stay with you, momma?"

"Excuse me?!" I almost began, as my heart like a leaping frog lurched and lodged within my throat, squelching out any further protest.

But he understood it clearly, the alarmed confusion clear upon my visage, and my stolid unwillingness to requite his fancy a word, and his face was submerged within his arms, his body wracked and buckling with the sobs of seemingly insurmountable sorrow.

"So you're a soldier's son?" I asked, nearly pleading. "Coming of the age when its time to join the *agoge*." I faltered. Those eyes, those features, he reminded me of my father, were reminiscent too of my brother—for that matter. "What a fool I've

been,” I muttered, clenching my fists to white, as the boy's weeping seemed to slow for just a moment. “We... we don't get that choice, not in this family, not on this planet, not in this day and age. It's a hard life; it's hard on all of us, but we all have to make sacrifices to push through to the dawn. There are huge demands made of us, and if we shudder, if we buckle, the whole world our ancestors built comes crashing down around our ears. Perhaps one day it won't be this way; perhaps some fight for that.”

“Damn them! Damn their world! Damn this house! Damn all the wars! To hell with this family! I didn't ask to be born! I didn't demand to sell myself to the army, be another soldier. Why can't my life be my own? It's not too much to ask. It's not too much to ask, isn't it?”

“I once asked myself the very same question,” I replied in a whisper, without realizing it. I wasn't sure he'd heard me; perhaps it was for the best. In the most conciliatory tone I could muster, I tried to explain, “You know, I didn't ask to be born either; I didn't fight hard to own the burden of so much responsibility, so many lives riding upon my shoulders.”

“Hah!” he quipped, his canines bared in a cruel grin. “But don't you get to remain at home? Your only job is to make babies. Like that's a fucking responsibility, like anyone couldn't manage that! They won't see you in the front line getting your face shot off.”

“As I grow into my old age, having witnessed son after son robbed from my cradle, even those that survive will be no comfort to me, scattered amongst the stars in countless battles, until we're all just elderly cripples, what's left of our ruined generation.” I don't know how I fell into the role so readily. “You can't forget. Our house requires soldiers; our family requires sons. I would be dispensed with otherwise; it's the only reason I exist, to produce and nourish the future of all our endeavors. My death-bed will be unaccompanied, and my grave-stone will be unmarked save for the names of the sons I conceived.”

Vainly wiping the snot from his soiled face, he arose, staggering forward limply on his exhausted legs. The sorrow had overcome him. I confess, something shifted in my heart, and I met him halfway, who continued sobbing unabated into the dense folds of my suddenly magenta skirts. I patted him on the head, as if very practiced, as if very familiar.

“The family depends upon us, and we all make sacrifices; for many of us, it's the ultimate sacrifice. It's never easy. We all have to cope in our own way, nothing shameful in that.”

“But why?”

“Why even exist? There is no meaning intrinsic to the universe, only what we've constructed from the clay, atop the towers of our dead. What could be certainly matters, is worth fighting for, but what is matters more and is worth dying for.”

His eyes began to dry a little. "I don't think I quite understand."

I ran my fingers through his shock of brown bushy hair, understanding the maternal for the first moment in my life. "You'll be a brave lad. You'll be a fine soldier. Just remember that wherever you are that I'm still here, thinking of you."

Subdued, he seemed to fall asleep against my knees, and as I bent over to pick him up in my arms, he suddenly grew ashen—ignited, an inferno from within—and in a violent gust of wind was carried away into the far horizon, and at once I was again alone, standing half-frozen amidst a world's unused cobblestones, with only the twisted and battered tree at the base of the mount for company.

"I'll never have children," I said, or perhaps I hadn't; perhaps it was only a thought. Planned or spontaneous, I don't even know why I said it. "My life will be consumed," I confided with numb lips, "my womb desiccated, unused, amidst the bulwark of Metallfasermuskeln that will demand my every attention—should I even be here successful. You can't very well be pregnant on the march, and I can only imagine the harm a panoply's alien consciousness could have on a developing fetus. I'll be alone, childless. At least the men can periodically return home to deposit their seed within predetermined wives and other house harlots, but I'll be alone, and my line will end with me." I don't know why that stung so bad; I don't know why I felt so miserable, but I suppose I felt I had been robbed of something that was so essentially human, but

more than human—something so essentially alive. I would never have a fine son, who would grow up into a fine young man, someone of whom I could be endlessly proud, regardless how far should travel his exploits.

I had just been visited with a specter of what might have been, some other future in which my brother had not been revealed a wailing lunatic freed unfortunately from these confines, and then it was all taken away. It was so cold; I could feel the warm tears trickling down my cheeks as I stared into my hands, sticky with my own blood and my own ash—I suppose.

Feeling worse for wear, as if I'd been held on the ground, held and repeatedly beaten, struck by a truck—I can't imagine all the pertinent similes—I, without the countenance of determination, continued the long climb for reasons I didn't understand, were there reasons at all. I had achieved the base of the snow-cap, and the rest of the going was dangerous work, a strong blizzard and slick, knee-deep snow made all the more dangerous by the cackling tempest that flashed above my head and then all around me with deafening blows that shook the world beneath me and numbed my already weary extremities, all that still held me up from lethal collapse consumed in endless snow.

My only respite were the warm tears that continued to trickle uninvited down the lines of my face, tears that dropped and sizzled in the freezing snow. It was only me and my sparing garments—

imagination or not, the cold felt very real; my hair was very quickly glittering with snowflakes like stars amidst the golden strands of glorious day, an unimagined frontier of heavenly beauty, not that I could appreciate them. My head was shortly snow-capped, and I shivered and quivered and periodically staggered in my upward progress, here and there falling and sliding again downwards, held aloft only by the proximity—that I'd made it so far, that I had only so far to go.

And then it was terrifyingly dark, only interrupted with the blindingly bright flash of lightning that shivered down my spine, freezing me hard to the stop; I don't know how I ever found the will to continue the ascent, but it was fearful work, as I was sure the barest misstep or unfortunate turn would render me into ash or a frozen popsicle, an eternal monument for whatever fool would be next to follow my tracks upward.

Like a drowning diver, freeing himself from the wicked thorns to pierce the ocean surface and witness again the warming light of day, I penetrated to the calm of the inner-storm, the very summit of so much misery, and I was admittedly surprised by what I'd found.

It was him, Moon Leaper, hunched forward in obeisance, though it only made all the more menacing the cruel snarl playing across his dagger-toothed lips, appearing as something ghastly, a nocturnal menace that robs expectant mothers of their months-end joy, that gallops across grave-dust to exhume the awaiting bounty of rotting flesh

within. I recoiled at the sight of him, and for just a moment I perceived what I thought to be a smile, as his head arched to seize me better in his gaze.

“I certainly didn't expect an hysterical whelp to make her way up my mountain and cross the guardian nether into my lair whither none have come in well, more than two years. That's all you need to know. And a woman, at that! So few and far between, my my, your parents must have been desperate. Your father must already be mourning you; don't pretend I didn't see those luscious tears well up within his gaunt cheeks, what once were full and vibrant—you know, two years ago.”

I wasn't going to be teased, and I certainly wasn't going to be provoked to rage, all that I had so far suffered. “I have no time for your idle cruelty, whatever the hell you are. I'm here to demand, here to receive, your loyalty of years, inasmuch as my life and my health shall carry me. What say you? Will you bend the knee or shall I compel you by force of arms?!”

I hadn't considered how ridiculous I sounded, an ant hurling stones at goliath, but his response, as if he'd been practiced, again struck me unawares. *“Why my lady, how you wound me! Do you not witness already my clear supplication, this infernal god beseeching its white-armed hostess? I anticipated your arrival, and have already prepared myself for the final act constituting our shared consciousness, the uninterrupted streaming of thoughts that we will share, the utter and complete transparency that will soon be ours—how you will be*

added to an ever-growing list of my companions, all of whom remain, in some fashion or another within here, still maundering and meandering.”

I didn't really understand what he meant, and nevertheless I feared his clearly dark intent, so I questioned him further, “What are you saying? Do you mean to say that you possess the being of those that had come before me? What relevance is any of this?”

“In a way, even your brother remains in here, what he left of himself really; I fear he left with less than he came.”

Queerly I replied, “I'm not really sure what you mean.”

“His being, his personality, his soul—as some would argue. It left an imprint on me, for even the short time we were together.”

“So somewhere within there lurks the thoughts of my brother?”

“And I left my imprint on him. I wonder where they're keeping him nowadays. Seemed like a nice enough fellow.”

“What do you get out of all of this, what's the point of all this cruelty.”

But he didn't care to answer. *“He is a part of me. You will be a part of me.”*

“I'm not sure I like the sound of that.”

“Your body, as you currently understand it, will remain your own, the paltry collection of flesh, blood, and bone you call a body. But your understanding of body, what constitutes the self, and what it is to be you will change, change dramatically. Imagine

perceiving the world in colors inconceivable, perceiving the high-pitched scratching of mice simultaneously with the utterly low and profound moan of the tectonic plates slowly shifting; imagine you could follow a scent, no matter how slight, more sure than the finest bloodhound, and imagine you could do all this from the armored core of a goliath weapon buildings tall and equipped to level cities to burning ash. Your vision won't be constrained to the essentially one-hundred-twenty degrees in front of your face; you'll be capable of acrobatics prohibited even your own slender frame. More and more, the more you use me, the more you will have use of me; our sense of unity will shift from the metaphorical. Who will you be in the end? Will you call yourself by your family's surname, or will you become 'Moon Leaper' or will we determine a better moniker for ourself? Have you never wondered why Eisenherzen are so insular, returning home largely only to impregnate their endlessly bored long-betrothed women, why they hardly interact with their own children, why they predominantly take counsel only amongst other pilots? You've already got the integration ports across your spine and extremities, but those are paltry things, no better than the ash from which you're constructed, honestly. Their identity shifts; they cut away what's unimportant; they live as the machine does. Eventually they become the same thing. Those brigadiers and generals in the know, they call it a 'sacrifice.' It isn't exactly an inaccurate description."

I was at a loss for words.

I could hear the familiar atmospheric seal to the fuselage cabin break, hissing like an idling diesel engine.

I immediately regretted surviving the mountain's ordeals.

I knew I couldn't go back, even if I could survive the trip down the mountain.

The thought of waking up one morning a machine—it's errant thoughts intertwined with my own, even in my moments of solitude—haunted my every breath, that I wished would soon cease and asphyxiate me there on the spot.

Then I remembered my brother. Then I remembered my family; they all depended on me. I had a short moment to consider the son I'd never have—sadly. Monstrous as it all was, it wasn't a decision, inasmuch as breathing is not as a decision. It's what I was made for. I just didn't know it before then.

I, with aristocratic grace, walked forth the short distance and mounted the chain ladder leading into the cabin and closed the seal behind me.

2.

It had been an uncomfortably long time for all assembled, as the technicians itched themselves aggravated in their sweat-soaked jumpsuits expecting to howl forth the raving remnants of another aristocrat waving about anything sharp she could manage within her grasp. Her father was there, his head in his hands, unable to withstand the delay; her mother couldn't bear to see her daughter and couldn't bear to be seen during the daughter's doubtless tantrum thereafter. The dreadful anticipation that flooded the room could have been cut with a blade.

The Moon Leaper's eyes glowed as the fission power plant came to life, for the first time in a generation, it gazed back and forth, at the recoiling hall ready to turn and run howling rout. The gantries bent and whined against the monstrous metal bonds holding the Leaper in place, as it tried unsuccessfully to free itself from its berthing. It strained further, stretching towards a pressure-loaded recess in its left thigh, which finally snapped forth and freed a plasma poniard, with which he handily slashed away the titanic metal rungs that fell away, hurtling to the ground with a thundering thud that shook the whole mountain.

I looked the crowd over, and I strode forth toward a despondent man sobbing within his hands, scattering a virtual legion of technicians to the far winds in rout. I asked him, "Father, how do you like my new metal body?"

Alpha

I was ashamed to admit, she was a shadow of her former self; she just wasn't what she'd been in life. I didn't even want to think about what that made me. "Alpha" is what they'd called her, the queen of the wolf-pack, when she once sauntered across a dozen or more different worlds at the head of whole brigades. Now she was just a rust-eaten amalgam of spare-parts and barely compliant ammunition, a dull reflection staring back from a broken mirror, just dusky crimson flaking away, floating away, in the idle breeze—when once she'd have been a sight to see, her lovely form, cruel and wicked and wonderful, a woe to the foeman and a delight to comrades. In life, she'd personally commanded a whole battalion of her own likeness, the eyes and ears of the governor's foreign army, "Alpha's Alpine" they called them, for she had a particular reputation as a mountain fighter, though don't let that confuse you; she was no mere Jeremiah Johnson. "Self-Motivating Hunter Panoplies," they called them, her class—very fast, very mobile—could go virtually anywhere—but light and lightly armed and armored, the eyes and ears and pursuing hooves of the armored advance, yapping and snapping at the heels of the turned foe. So she'd been in life, regaled in the honors she so deserved, carefully maintained by a team of clever technicians, and never spared the barest ounce of oil-slick adoration. That's how I liked to remember her, my lovely Alpha, queen of the wolf-pack, but it had grown increasingly difficult over the years since the dissolution of my house, since I'd been robbed

of my lands, my titles, my esteem—even my family. All that was left me was the shirt on my back and this rust-laden collection of sad memories; they couldn't take her away from me. Not in a million years. She's all I had left.

Unlike some suffering the same predicament, I hadn't even the money to purchase a ticket bound elsewhere, perhaps to offer my experienced services to another house, perhaps to an interstellar corporation—as is so frequently the case these days—perhaps to a mercenary company; it would all be the same, bloodshed in exchange for coin, but at least I'd have some money left over to eat after I had my girl polished to a mirror shine. And speaking of food, an unpleasant reminder, I hadn't had a haul in weeks, and between the cost of ammunition and the most basic maintenance—well there wasn't much left over. You'd be thinking I'd be rolling in cash for all I brought in, but panoplies are expensive—expensive to build, expensive just to own, and they're demanding, not that it bothered me, at least any longer.

I'd been with Alpha longer than I could remember, back before I had a family, back when she was just one among many, an untold legion of armed metal muscle frequently levied in the service of the colonial governor. That's how we made a name for ourselves; in a way, that's how I lost my name. I used to go by the name of my father, Ethelard of Dunmar. Now I just go by “Alpha,” like a soldier of the pre-gunpowder age that had adopted the name of his sword; it just seemed to make more

sense. When we fight, we fight as one person, with one instinct, with one mind, with one soul; it didn't seem right to use my old moniker. Even when I'm away, even when I'm unplugged, I can still hear her giggling thoughts scratching in my ears; I wonder how much of myself I've left with her. I wonder if you could even tell us apart anymore.

You might have heard me variously say “In life,” in reference to my old lady. It's only something a houseman would understand. You see, there is no life outside of the house—so I've been told my whole life—and it goes the same for both of us outcasts that had the severe misfortune to survive the disintegration of all that we'd ever known, all that we'd been made to hold dear—so it has it to be, so it has been—and now with no more house any longer, we're considered little more than walking dead, a wolf's head free to be abused, manhandled, and even slaughtered by the denizens of the various houses still valid on our world, like hunting wild animals, like sport. But there's a golden lining; complain as I might, my lady still runs just fine, though you wouldn't know it from her battered exterior. I've been trying to buy passage somewhere, anywhere else, to free us of this nostalgic mire of regrets, but it's not cheap, and money seems to slip so easily from my fingers, especially galling after how hard I have to work to get it.

It wasn't by design—we'd never intended it to be this way—but it was purely out of necessity—I don't want you to misunderstand, you see—that we

became bandits, though I prefer to say “highwaymen.” I knew a fellow during my time in the military, could get you replacement parts, not too expensive either, no matter the time or location—good lad for a smuggler—who offered us a job, a chance to do more than to merely wait for the local aristocratic ruffians to make an end of us. He said he'd compensate me for whatever goods I could seize from the governor's convoys, very numerous, which crisscross the whole of the orb, and are for the most part lightly guarded—well they were, until we began to develop a new reputation.

Holed up in a cave overlooking a sheer cliff from the mountainside, I'd got a good view of whatever travelers pass within and through my territory, and every once in a while, my smuggler friend gave us a heads-up, said there's to be a military convoy bearing expensive swag that could be resold for a neat profit off-world. And he'd give me a somewhat unimpressive cut of the proceeds on the spot for my service; still, it was better than what I'd been reduced to before, and Alpha and I had taken a sort of bent joy in robbing the son of a bitch that stole our living, abusing, manhandling, and slaughtering his servants all the while.

Call this a “A Day in the Life of... well... I guess ‘Alpha.’” But I promise you it won't be what you expect, and the conclusion will ring differently than I'd ever expected.

Deep summer, the air tangibly buoyant with sweltering moisture—tangible enough to grasp, tangible enough to cut—intermittently interrupted

by the merciful cool breeze hurled hither from the salty sprays of the boundless ocean populated with the little sailing ships of struggling fishermen concluded finally as rose the first colors of dream-like autumn, wherein fell the first broad leaves as the orb in the waning rays of the midnight lamp prepared herself to the long rest of reverential winter. I'd seen it many times before; it goes without saying, but holed up within a hermit's paltry cell, the natural world was infinitely more real, in the long hours of boredom, as I stared upward through the dying canopy of sanguine and saffron, concealed from the unmerciful sun in the gentle shade of my long-years companion. The rustle of the leaves, which in summer had signaled short quiet from the solar oven, was now something thoughtful, the stiff leaves in their last moments twinkling musical for the few vagabonds that as yet had not taken themselves below ground or within the auspices of oak, shimmering under the rays of the dying firmament that would soon grow old and gray.

I hadn't a moment to enjoy it. You have to be clever to confound a worried convoy, as they'd all become after the increased bandit attacks; apparently, I wasn't the only dispossessed soldier with a lot of bills and nothing to lose; I was just the most infamous—so I was told anyways. In any case, a bit of cleverness was the order of the day.

My mountain was ringed with several highways, difficult progress all of them, unsuitable for your typical civilian traffic; the majority weren't

even paved, and between rock-slides and frequent hair-pin turns they weren't all oft traveled. Fortunately for me, there was nothing to be done about it, insufficient shuttles of sufficient size to ferry the necessary goods across the scope of the land. It was compulsory; they had to rely upon armed convoys, which were nothing I couldn't handle, unless they'd been expecting me. I made a point not to strike all the convoys that came within my grasp, only a fraction, to avoid an ambush—but you never know—and god knows what would happen if mobile reinforcements were available. An open-and-shut engagement could become a life-or-death melee; I couldn't afford to die a second time.

I'd spent the twilight hours of the morning busy with a shovel. You see, there'd be a convoy making the sojourn through my territory—quite a haul apparently, virtually filled to the brim with expensive military sensors and connoisseur munitions as well as a short supply of high performance joint actuators, which I could very well do with and be damned the rest. Anyways, optics being the lion's share of the haul, I thought it appropriate to test the optical fastidiousness of the convoy leader. Nowadays they're always searching for hidden munitions, the cheapest way to make life hell for military truck-drivers; so their optics are geared to search for any signs of “disturbed earth” which has a different chemical signature than presumably undisturbed earth and is considered to be a key indicator of anything ranging from concealed troops movements to hidden explosives.

That's what's fashionable nowadays, with systems mounted on aircraft, satellites—even jeeps.

So there I was, ass-crack of the morning, and it's freezing as if it's midwinter; I can see my breath in front of my face, my fingers are just itching to go frostbitten, and I'm digging away like a mad march hare in the turf, arranging little holes in a checkered pattern at a place where the sparse forest opens into a dry plateau, all part of an oft-used military trail. In the old days it was just hunters and trappers, but they widened the dusty path with bulldozers some years ago and couldn't be bothered to put some asphalt on the road.

I picked my site wisely. At the far end of the plateau is a dead drop; nothing could survive that, and on the close side is the uncannily steep mountainside teeming with the sort of rugged boughs that haunt this extent of the hinterlands. There's nowhere to go but forwards—forwards or back, but I'd take care of that handily enough. Now these little holes, I buried the dirt again, as if there were an anti-tank mine hidden in each one; that fear alone would keep them from moving forward, at least until their mobile demolitions expert had completed his inspection. At a distance, you can't tell if the disturbed earth's got explosives or my morning's bowel movement.

There's a great deal of “hurry up and wait” in the army. Life's no different as a highwayman. You never know when the convoy's actually going to pass through; there are all sorts of reasons that would impel or impede its progress. So you're stuck

waiting at the earliest possible moment, huddled up in some little alcove dug from the mountainside that you've enshrouded with a hastily constructed network of tree-limbs, bark, and discarded leaves—a relatively safe vantage point to observe unmolested, and there you are awaiting for anything resembling the habitual hiss of diesel engines aggravated at the slow going in the unfortunate conditions. They were lucky at least today; last year this place was all mud—for months—but it had now returned to its habitual dust. It wouldn't be such miserable work just getting the cars through the road.

Having completed the morning's duties, I secreted myself away in Alpha's armored belly and settled in for a nap, knowing she'd wake me if anything showed. The conception of time really isn't the same to them—to panoplies. There's no anxiety. I wish it were a quality she had imbued me with. As it stands, I still find it queer having only two eyes to see and being restricted to so few colors. I'd explain myself to other people—assuming I still had other people—but I don't think it's something they'd grasp. They'd still refer to me by my father's moniker; how could they understand?

I had been accustomed to stealing away a few hours here and a few hours there in naps throughout the concourse of the day, a matter of necessity unfortunately; my rhythms had been completely disrupted with the weird demands of homelessness; come to think of it, it wasn't much different in boot.

Anyways, there I was, sleeping something I couldn't easily explain to a layman, suffice to say that I haven't had my dreams to myself—to me alone—longer than I could easily remember, the images of beautiful women in various states of undress having become something alien, just a distraction from my lonely love; might as well have been a different species, like cats. You might wonder if all that drifted in and out of my needful night visions were ancient battlefields and fond remembrances, but that wouldn't be right either. All the moments of my free life had been corrupted, snatched away by a second scrutinizing eye. I just couldn't partake of the same victuals as eye-sighted men.

I was suddenly awoken in the dulcet tones of my better-half, who had long given up scolding me my cerebral vices.

Alpha, as I understood it, wasn't much like other panoplies; she didn't often feel the need to communicate in a spoken medium, though of it she was certainly capable. It was often just images in my head, sometimes collections thereof, that she'd use to make clear her demands. I admit it was difficult at first, as I didn't readily understand her tone merely from the stolid gaze of her yellow eyes brilliantly reflective within the huddled shadows and nary whispers of my skull. I suppose it was like being raised by wolves, all over again—inducted, adopted, transformed.

She had awoken me, and her eyes were hungry, and my stomach continued to rumble. The

sun was on its way waning with the approach of late evening; the caravan had managed to delay for the whole procession of the sun across the sky before transitioning across my sights.

It was somewhat more than I had imagined, the caravan that is. In addition to the requisite security vehicles, several armed jeeps and infantry fighting vehicles curiously outfitted for desert combat, there were these huge lifters, gigantic hauling vehicles bearing within their six goliath walls unknown contents that could range from simply monstrous volumes of munitions to further vehicles within. They had a great deal of potential, but somehow I felt infinitely more nervous; this wasn't the sort of convoy I'd been expecting, and despite the potential for unreal profits, the niggling itch of lethal danger continued to lacerate the nape of my neck. I could have just let them go, but I really needed the money, and I also couldn't afford to lose the confidence of my employer. I suppose I didn't really have a choice. So we continued with the plan unaltered.

Sure enough, they slowed and halted, giving a wide berth before the disturbed earth arrayed in checker-board fashion before them. The infantrymen filed out, staring hopelessly into the wild umbra listed in all directions, adhering close to a training that couldn't serve them amidst the circumstances. Two particularly pompous turkeys saluted each other and commenced mumbling loudly about this or that; I couldn't make sense of it, you see; I wondered if they were foreigners. The

presumed subject was “Which sucker is going to be stuck digging around with a shovel,” as it increasingly seemed clear that no specific demolitions expert with demolitions-expert-gear had been provided the convoy.

Now, the last thing I wanted was for this convoy to escape; I had a few minutes before I had to worry about their progress recommencing, so I began lining up my shots. I'd disable the rear jeep huddled within the bottle neck preceding the plateau to prevent rear-ward escape, and then I'd do the same to the lead; if the vehicles could be taken largely undamaged, they'd provide me an extra payout. Now there was the issue of the infantry and their material support, a trio of infantry fighting vehicles. The infantry themselves could be easily enough brushed aside; from what was visible, it was clear their anti-armor utility would be insufficient against a proper aegis; I don't even know why they manufacture such things, much less make soldiers bear them. But the IFVs, while I wasn't considerably bothered with their 30mm main armament, they also bore impressive tank-killing wire-guided missiles, which could similarly be used to great effect against a panoply; I really didn't trust myself to the dilatant on that regard, and god knows the state of my armor exposed so long to the elements and half-rotten. I might very well disintegrate.

But I had the drop on them; it would take them a few seconds to localize the direction of fire, at which point I would have already changed

positions. The terrible rustling of the underbrush between the trees, under the auspices of these mighty thighs, would seem general, rise cacophonous, and would report of their agent no specific location, especially against the backdrop of the inferno crackling of their own transport raining in pieces down around them.

The infantry had taken up positions against the light cover afforded by the meager brush of the plateau—not exactly ideal, not going to protect anyone against a spray of steel tearing through the sparing branches, and most of all insufficient, even if I hadn't access to such an optical sensor suite. As it was, I could see their clear outline in the brush. I suppose I would have felt bad for them, but I hadn't even the barest inkling of something settled people call “pity” any longer; perhaps it had washed away in the rain or was baked away under the unrelenting rays of the sun, or perhaps it had been drained away by mother nature's legion of small, blood-sucking creatures that assail the forest-bum into the sort of half-raving lunacy that so loves company that he runs without consideration, open-armed, upon the rare traveler—terrifying. You could say I was bitter. It had pained me to watch my lucky lady decay into crumbs. Not a whole lot of pity left for the servants of the governor.

I opened fire.

I'd ignored the badly concealed infantry. I wasn't worried about them. I certainly didn't fear their weapons. I was more concerned that they'd

radio for assistance, report my presence, but there was plenty of time left to worry about that, plenty of time while I focused on what mattered. I put a round through the front wheels of the leading and trailing jeeps, rounds which nearly tore the engine blocks away from the vehicles alongside the whole front axles. "There goes my salvage," I sighed and moved on to my immediate opponents. There were three infantry fighting vehicles just now ponderously moving out of formation to consume the open space, and they'd have to fight over whatever was available; as such, their speed was irrelevant, and they didn't employ dilatants, would've made their low profile worthless, and speaking of profile, they certainly weren't showing me their armored prow. I don't know the thickness of the vehicle's profile armor, body or the turret, but it was entirely insufficient; I can't believe they're still manufacturing vehicles like this anymore; it's not as if I've got a particularly large cannon, but my rounds went forward unimpeded.

The 40mm railcannon, affixed upon my right, thundered, rolling from ear to ear deafeningly as the saffron-illuminated muzzle flash announced to one and all our carefully considered location from the obfuscation of our boughs and crimson and golden leaves. But they couldn't make much use of their discovery, as we used the intervening confusion to hustle with the practiced heel of generations through the underbrush to another advantageous firing position. Meanwhile, their anterior IFV was scrambling to kiss the very face of the firmament,

rocketing upwards with the secondary explosions of its ignited munitions, as I'd managed to penetrate its ammunition rack severally, the profile armor no help at all save perhaps against hand-held arms. The infantry had hit the dirt, covering their ears as if their eardrums had been blown out, which they may well have been.

Anyone that had anything resembling sense was firing in the direction of where I'd just recently been. I'd seen this scene play out several times before. They never seemed to get wise, never seemed to update their training; they were always one step behind. I don't think the governor invested much thought or concern into his private army.

Regardless, as the middle and posterior infantry fighting vehicles maneuvered to bring their sensor suites to bear upon the conclave shadows, strange, silvery foot-long canisters leaped through the air on the contrails of white phosphorus, landing neatly at the feet of my assailants, who were shortly befuddled in their efforts at my detection by the growing all-pervasive smog seething smug like a fly-fattened bull-frog, king of the lily-pad. It was all they could do to fire wildly into to the forest and pray to strike true, while I counter-maneuvered to bring these valorous pleasantries to a rather anticlimactic conclusion.

I closed the distance, returning fire as best as I was able, not that I could tell either whether I had struck home or merely avenged myself upon the innocent clay. I saw them when I had closed within perilous distance, not more than ten meters distant

emerging from the thick shadows appearing a sullen wreck raised from a time-forgotten battlefield half a memory and half the dust. At point blank, with a half-second burst I severed the posterior IFV's angular turret from its box-shaped body which thereafter kindled awhile, hurling starward the periodic fireworks of unexploded ordnance. The closer I savaged, hurling about with the unmitigated fury of a dart-besotted bull, while the crew scrambled madly about inside, smashed hither and thither upon the terra, desperate of some means of exit. This continued for some time, as I vented the heart of my frustration upon the unfortunates huddled within until the vehicle resembled its pristine self little and could prove no danger to anyone, leaking with what could have been blood just as easily as hydraulic fluid.

In the mean-time, the pitiable infantry, mouth agape, had fled themselves whence I had come, concealing themselves in the tattered shades of my recent mobility. Their heat signature gave them away easily, and I rendered them down into their constituent parts under the led-bellied impetus of my bank of machine guns.

As I said, it was an anti-climactic end to what could have been a darling fight. My opponents possessed some of the tools necessary to send me down, to lay me low, but I never gave them that opportunity, the result of generations' experience, far beyond merely my own. They died badly—burned, bludgeoned, bulleted—if the latter even be a word, and there wasn't much left of them to tell.

Unfortunate, actually, an intact IFV would have sold fairly well, netted me a neat little profit. As it was I had to sate myself with the somewhat damaged jeeps and the unknown contents of the haulers silent before me. I couldn't help but wonder what had become of their drivers, whom I doubt would have joined the infantry in attempting to secure the area. Can't have the vehicle unattended. Strange. But I figured in all the confusion that the fellows in question had just fucked off somewhere, and I took myself to inspecting the contents of the altogether unharmed haulers, both a responsibility and a secret joy of mine; for a few moments, often hours, I get to pretend that I possess an outrageous wealth of something or other, just before the shuttle arrives and deprives me of ninety percent of its value. Apparently smuggling is a more dangerous business than ambushing the official military convoys of the planet's increasingly red-faced governor.

So there I was, expecting a life-time's supply of connoisseur ammunition, high quality military optics, perhaps bales of unattended cash and rare metals, when I peel back the thinly armored exterior of the hauler to reveal—a panoply? But no, not just one alone, there was another huddled closely by. I began eying the other haulers with panicked suspicion. “It's alright. It's alright,” I consoled myself to virtually no effect, “this is probably better than you'd ever imagined. I mean, just consider the resale value of this lot! Panoplies don't come cheap, you know! And gods above, if the rest of the haulers are carrying such fancy fare as this, we

won't be hungry for a long long time, even be able to afford a ticket off planet—and much more besides; it'd easily cover Alpha's long overdue repairs and maintenance; she'd look like her old self again.” And this was all well and fine, but then I wondered, “But why would this be so poorly guarded; I mean, a few fire teams of infantry and a few lightly armed vehicles—not exactly a fancy escort, especially considering this mountain range's reputation for banditry, even beyond my own. Something didn't feel right about this. I mean, what if they're loaded up with ammunition, what if they've got a running power plant, what if the pilot's still inside, even at this very moment—an ambush of an ambush? Am I that important to warrant such an execution?”

I didn't dare check the other haulers and leave these unattended, seeing as they might come to life and plant a few rounds in my back. So I had the time to give them a detailed inspection. It was, quite naturally, a newer model; it's always a newer model; doesn't always mean a better model though—god knows. They were the same class, four-legged panoplies intended to be fast and intended to be light, in groups hunting larger prey like wolf-packs—perfect for the sort of terrain, as they could just as easily move between the foliage as they could up and down the sheer cliffs that predominate the range. If the other three haulers had these and nothing else, there'd be no escape, nowhere I could run to, and I couldn't exactly hope to overpower them by force of arms.

But I had to remind myself again that I was getting ahead of myself; supply mistakes happen all the time; materials and warforms sent unintended; it could be symptomatic of nothing. Just have to keep cool.

I think in all this time of wild anticipation that a hare's breath had passed. If I didn't make a final decision, if I didn't man up, if I abandoned the bold course, I'd never make it home, and I'd be stuck with this rubbish, as I couldn't very well let a haul of this size go, but neither could I reveal my backer by calling out for a pickup before I'd ensured the goods innocuous.

“Well, there is one way,” I thought, “but I might very well reduce the value of the haul, but it's better than nothing, and I can't very well stay out here all night.” I lined up my sights against the rear cabin hatch of the anterior panoply, wherein would rest the pilot, and I mused, “If this doesn't get 'em, then nothing will.” And just as I was about to squeeze the trigger, just as I was about to perforate into a twisted mess of wire and shredded metal the presumably uninhabited cabin, I witnessed the pair immediately before begin to rise from their idling transport posture. Apparently, I'd hit a nerve; they weren't willing to tolerate a casualty just to maintain the facade, hoping to separate me from Alpha as I performed a more complete inspection of the goods. And rise as they might, surging again to life, nevertheless it was too little, too late, for this little wolf-pup. I cored her out as her penetrated belly, slick red with the masticated limbs of her

pilot, vomited forth the inferno fires of my ammunition delivered point-blank, within the minimum distance protection of the aegis. One kill, the defeated frame in otherwise good condition—not bad—leaning crumpled within the remaining hollows of the hauler's walls. But his fellow was turning now to meet me, and I could only imagine the bloodthirsty lot pounding on the thinly armored veils of the haulers just down the way. This was just the sort of situation I'd always feared, what I'd always avoided, and I got myself stuck right in the middle of it. And complain as I might, there wasn't really much purpose in it. I'd have to fight myself clear, and I'd never be able just to make a clean break of it; I'd have to give them reason to disengage. I confess I didn't think I'd live to see sundown, much less gasp the crisp breeze of a fresh new dawn.

Despite my poverty, I'd become much too much self-assured of my own prowess. Returned to the natural element, wild, homeless—driven both inwardly and driven off—I had thought myself harder, more focused, more accurate—certainly more dangerous, that I'd had no peer, no equal, that I was more than a match for any other equally matched warrior and his equally matched kit. In reality, I shamed myself, wasn't worthy to continue calling myself “Alpha.” All those years spent fleeing aristocratic headhunters, all those years spent huddled as a hermit in the hills, all those years spent in rampant banditry had atrophied rather than augmented my soldiering skills. I thought I'd

just turn my guns upon the slain man's compatriot and ruin him just as handily, but he'd had more than a moment to activate his systems, and he hurled himself clear of the burning hauler, hurled himself through me, casting my rust-flaked form before to clatter half-broken upon the sunbaked clay of the plateau under the waxing river of cerulean star-light glittering across the vault of heaven.

I couldn't grasp, even though I had the advantage, how my guns were ready, how my heels had already been prepared, that he had been faster, that my shots had rung out wide, uselessly into the loader floor and through to the shaded soil below long bereft of any native green.

“There goes my payday.”

They were six in total, with five survivors. I didn't imagine they'd be feeling particularly merciful after I killed one of their own. I myself used to serve in a similarly-styled unit; you tend to get extremely familiar with your pack-mates, and so the loss of even the least is an unthinkable tragedy that unfortunately occurs all-too-often. That's just life in the military.

I don't know how I made it to the tree-line; I don't know what impetus feathered my feet and sent me soaring through the aether with the inspired striding of the god of broken boundaries, but fleet of foot I achieved the tree-line with the wolf-pack, unabated, lunging in turn at my heels, setting ablaze the early autumnal wood with the loathsome contents of their own misplaced ordnance—happy

they were in their hatred, their bald bloodlust for what they considered a murderer. They weren't going to take me alive. I wasn't going to go before a tribunal to answer for the crimes of homelessness and eventual banditry; the wolfpack came here, sentence in hand, to dispense the governor's black justice once again at gunpoint.

I think it's only my familiarity with the terrain that saved me, the result of the several years I'd called this place home and wandered about its many folds and uninterrupted majesty; so it was, and so I remembered, but I have to confess terribly that I didn't feel saved, that I'd only delayed in the inevitable, that Alpha and I would be dragged down, scrambling, to the ground by the throat and become an evening's victuals—a worthy conquest—for younger hearts as yet unaccustomed to an old man's woe.

I managed to slip into a draw, obscuring myself within the still-verdant branches of a familiar hollow while I awaited in peace the tightening of the noose. They'd taken all the high points around; that much was clear; I couldn't make egress the way I came, and out through the draw bore its own difficulties, for one or two of them still barred my way—though I couldn't be sure the number. The night and the flight had become disorienting, and the unceasing throbbing of my heart against the altogether-too-real terror of death provided me not a moment's respite to catch my breath and reassess my surroundings. I wonder if that's all that saved me. While a calmer man might have realized his

circumstances and with dignity accepted the inevitable, I destined myself to fight, even if it meant dying like a dog, and no-one wants to die like a dog; just a bit of dignity in one's final moment is all that separates man from an animal or a lunatic. Perhaps that's all that separates him, but the moribund are fond of broad generalizations and half-hearted philosophy.

I think they were waiting me out. Smart of them. It'd be easier to see me in the day, and they'd reduce the chance of both my escape and fratricide that way, as slim a chance as those seemed in the present circumstances. Perhaps they merely wanted to limit the damage to themselves. To move in and attempt to hunt me directly, that was a known unknown, but they certainly knew if not suspected my familiarity with the terrain. I would have well taken one of them down with me, had they so striven. Better then to wait me out, until the anticipation had driven me mad, and I'd fallen directly into their hands shooting wide in hobo-desperation.

But this all assumes the strategy was simply to secure the objective with a minimum of casualties, that the commander was an even-headed sort that cared about his subordinates more than medals. If he were an aristocrat through and through, who plays pretense of war and imagines himself a fighter, though he'd never before faced the very certain possibility of death, he might desire to drive me to madness, to render me pathetic, to take particular joy, licking his moist lips, in my

slaughter, taking the shattered form of my only love as a trophy with him. The anticipation, the waiting, is worse than the act itself, but you'll do anything to keep living, no matter how it hurts. He could rely upon that. How sweet would my final moments for him be, just an animal—spoil, booty, doe, *praeda*.

What I remember is perhaps what they had not considered. I've only rarely been so angry. I never wanted to become a bandit, in the same way that I never wanted to become homeless, never wanted to be dispossessed, all after I had served in our planet's foreign military so faithfully for so many years in the manner of my father and his father before him; our collective achievements had been cast away, hurled to the wind and carried away like charnel humors. It wasn't just "Easy come, easy go." I had worked for it, suffered for it, and many of my comrades had even died for it, just to keep the little dream alive. All of us, we should have struck at the black heart of tyranny that day, when we still had the chance, when we were still an army, even if it killed all of us. But I'm getting beside the point.

They were stationed upon the high, too distant and too removed to make good their munitions at this range, as I skittered back and forth as if unwounded across root-thick soil, desperate inspiration, surging—I think—more from my better half indemnifying the loosened knee and putting the twinkle of life back in bleary eyes. Where I should have limped instead I leaped and danced across the downed trunks and unabridged eddies ever

downwards in a headlong procession of mad bloodlust towards the lowlands below.

Leading out from the draw there were somehow two figures, I suppose I just hadn't kept a weather eye about, added to which were the clear silhouettes of four that had been striding back and forth in a pointless patrol, now galloping towards the terminus of the draw to rejoin their master—with apparent devil-may-care holding position at the very conclusion.

Something was amiss; there should have only been five survivors. As the foliage revealed the world beyond, the second patrolman barring the way forth downward from the draw was illuminated in the waning chorus of midnight fires an atmospheric shuttle, the wash of whose engines I'd misinterpreted as the whine of wounded servos struggling upon uneven ground back and forth.

“The absolute arrogance!” I thought or I should have thought. I couldn't be angry any longer. I just wanted it to end. But they were so eager, so disdainful of my chances; they'd already prepared the Hearse to ferry back Alpha's remains under scorn and endless infamy to the smiling eyes of some regimental colonel and then up the chain to the governor himself. Mined of her spare parts, she would become the matter for such monument to the governor's endless influence, melted down into her rude components. I would be food for the dogs.

I must've caught their attention. The shuttle, attempting with her top-heavy controls a vertical take-off, to place her beyond somehow the scope of

my arms, exploded like a second day-star in the night, illuminating for a moment all the darkened apertures tenebrous with the radiant lines of intimated day. Burning rubble was cast far and wide and rained about my ears, clattering to silence in the autumnal terra, dusty and baked under the long hours of the uninterrupted sun. I think I laughed for a moment, as I'd forgotten the danger, exultant in my short hour of victory before vengeance shortly arrived in the make of a frame so much like my own, pawing at the turf with four canine limbs supporting a body, a central turret, bearing the precipitous death of forty millimeters.

The shrill cry of ordnance alarms interrupted immediately my vainglorious glow; missiles were inbound upon my slender frame, hurled skyward from ground-bound platforms—who in particular I couldn't tell—but bearing with them immediate death, more than my mediocre aegis could be expected to endure, certainly endure unharmed. The point defenses redirected themselves automatically, faster than could carry my thoughts or consideration, upon the recently borne fire-tailed comets, commencing countermeasures as I wildly attempted evasive maneuvers, for whatever good that might do.

I do not know how many sought me, or how many mid-air victories the celeritous pebbles of the point defense succeeded, but I know that explosive trouble still lurched upon me, and that my hour had finally come. The force of the blast alone overwhelmed my dilatant, and half-aflame I tumbled

recklessly, rolling as the abandoned boulder of Sisyphus forward and out from the draw, to clatter to a broken halt I knew not where, save for the fact that I was exposed, facing upwards through no resemblance of canopy save for the approaching bulk of a slender black, an elongated shadow, that settled resolutely above my exposed mid-section. I almost sighed, and gasped out my last, surrendering my broken bones to the stars above, winking down at me from the heaven with a knowing disposition that made me uncomfortable.

It came suddenly, how I realized again the danger, how my thoughts had been shaken free of the shackles of mind-obliterating confusion. What creature stretched into my vision from the night was no rattler and certainly no eel, but the business end of grandfather death, a muzzle, freezing to the touch, made from the matter of the traditional sickle—the reaper of dead souls. My instincts, my muscle memory, is all that saved me from joining in everlasting infamy my ancestors in the ever beyond the tomb and temple, as I with a free arm snatched the muzzle away, which hurled its deadly contents just wide of my shoulder, launching me gangly upward. Wheresoever were the other four, howling wolves of slaving jaws, I was faced with a mere one, and I could make out little of his form in the sparing twilight.

We fought. How my body continued to battle was beyond me, for both the Alpha of flesh and the Alpha of metal—oh how we both seemed to pace back and forth against our beaten-back opponent,

held aloft from precipitous downfall on what seemed borrowed soles. It was vicious, the roar of forty millimeter railguns at point blank virtually unceasing, whilst we savaged each other's sensitive bits with banks of manslaying machine guns, suffering just to gain an inch. There wasn't room here for error; we were within each other's guardian bubble; each that found home tore vengeful gaps amidst laminated armored tissues. I screamed in agony when a stray round exploded among my machine-gun bank, bending and burning down its muzzles into what could only be termed modern art. I raged, gasping blood in reckless delight, while our well-regarded marksmanship resolved itself into a thankless melee, muzzles, hooves, limbs—whatever—raised in black imprecation to slam with hollow reverberation on the other. It wasn't a fight any longer; it was an endurance contest—more who could suffer the most than who had the strongest hammer hand. And in all my time spent languishing in the alpine waists, even as my skills had atrophied, I had grown hardier than I'd ever imagined in life, when I was still alive. It was not inspiration, but desperation, dying like only a dog could. So it came to an end when hurling my bulk into his, I with a stroke of my heel shattered the pinion of his knee, leaving him a limping cripple no longer able to resist my untoward advances.

It was all over now. The clarion call of my thunderous cannon, a few hand-to-hand strokes, and my opponent lied defeated on the battlefield, vainly calling in sign of mercy by releasing his main

barrel upward, stretching for the sky. And that was how I intended to leave him, a gore-stained statue surrendering ever-after, but an unpleasant itching scratched within my ear, and I had to obey.

“Stop stop stop stop! I'll give you whatever you want. My father will give you whatever you want! Just stop! Stop stop! You'll be an outlaw no more! You'll be rolling in cash. You can go wherever you want, do whatever you want! Just have mercy! Please please please! Please don't kill me! I don't want to die! I beg you; I beseech you listen to me!”

“If this is just some ploy to buy time!”

“No no no! Not at all. Just look at me.” The well-crafted countenance of a battle-bruised aristocrat, someone that seemed strangely familiar sparkled into view on one of Alpha's many displays. “You know the governor! You must know the governor! Right right? I'm sure. I'm his son, sent here to do away with a thorn his side—you! You know? Not to possibly insult but apparently—as you can obviously tell, I didn't mean to indicate otherwise—my father considers you a problem. But look look look! Take it easy! Things have changed; he can't kill you now! Just grant me mercy; don't kill me; I'm a fine prize; he'll drown you with gold! Whatever you want will be yours!”

It was a difficult arrangement to accept; I would have rather greased the little shit and left him there on the side of the mountain, a grim reminder to the governor of what **I'm** capable. I really wanted to, but I shouldn't; I couldn't. The fleeting reward just wasn't worth the risk. I had to

think of the future; a life of banditry would never get me off-world, and the possibilities were just too much to give up. It was galling leaving the planet without avenging myself on the pernicious monster that brought about the end of my house, but at least Alpha and I would live to see another day, and she'd finally receive all the maintenance she'd long deserved. It was my primary consideration, all along, in all this, her well-being. Any Eisenherz worth his salt would have done the same thing.

That was the beginning of my tale, the first in a long order of gallantries and happy accidents that got me to where I am today. I managed to get off world, and I was rolling in enough cash to get my old lady a proper refit; shining like moonbeams she was, and eventually I found reason to lust after that paycheck, to locate myself in the place of danger against fighting men once again, but that's a story for another time.

Marketplace of Ideas

1.

He was a smartly dressed lad—storming, blustering, thundering down the insufficiently lit half-rusted corridors of the citadel keep, the iron-wrought seat of the space-port garrison now little more than a labyrinth of tunnels, appointed in flickering lights, pungent with the vaporous remnants of salty human habitation that concluded hither and thither in the rotten upholstery beholding a gunner's control apparatus of countless muzzles fixed skyward. He was called a “Captain,” but his father in reference to a much-beloved uncle had named him Ingmar, and he had received immediately thereafter the familial surname, “Haakonsson,” a fellow so bright and fair as to seem to shine with the very radiance of the daystar itself, at least in the eyes of the boy's father. But dazzling as he was in the celebratory crimson of a cavalry officer's regalia, juxtaposed magnificently against the samite of his locks and sidereal limbs, he was visibly fuming from his collar, a cantankerous scowl befouling his otherwise sublime countenance.

Ceasing his progress, he clicked his heels and with unnecessary ceremony came about face a sealed iron portal reverberating with the nervous chatter of material technicians, each arguing over the rest in slowly rising crescendo. Half-expecting not to be heard, he knocked first upon the door politely, for it had been sealed against all entry, a security precaution, considering the presence of foreign eyes and ears within the citadel for the sake

of concordant ceremony. He was assuredly correct, his polite pleas ignored as the discussion quickly became a shouting match.

“Fucking peasants,” he muttered and shortly pounded on the door with all his might, with such force as would reverberate throughout the fortress and raise the very devil himself to the profound firmament from his infernal throne in sudden shock. It worked like a charm, and the back and forth descended now to penitent mumbling, as the door with the pneumatic blast of the shrill exterior breeze alighted upwards, and the captain strode on inwards closely attended within the cozy but uncomfortable quarters by the grease-stained smiles of smoke-sullen technicians, a half-dozen of them lounging about in a small room overlooking through tobacco-stained glass the maintenance bay and berthing for the Rittern of the westward citadel, panoplies which were here mostly resplendent in their company colors save for a few, one in particular, peculiarly savaged by the unmistakable marks of vicious combat.

“This better be good. I'm supposed to be visible at the bloody summit—our budding relations with the corporate filth—but the lieutenant general sent me on hither to receive your report, something, he said, of the utmost importance—something that couldn't wait, something regarding the ruined Ritter and the corpse they hauled in this afternoon, if I am correct?”

The technicians looked at each other, combatants in leisure but *maximi amici* all in

difficulty, each nudging the other to take the reins, accept the responsibility, heed the questioning captain. It was a difficult going made all the fiercer under the young officer's eyes of complete contempt, but finally they bullied the tallest among them, a wild looking character of plainly unkempt hair and beard but admittedly manly visage, to speak for the rest of them, and he began at first quivering, but quickly gained steam as the captain more and more seemed displeased. "Well, sir, we did recover the Eisenherz, what was left of him. Looks like whatever had him did a good number on his insides, but whatever in particular we can't tell. Looks like local fauna had their way with the corpse thereafter—harsh climate and all that."

"Ritter looks like she's been slashed to ribbons," the captain declared, squinting through the foggy glass.

"It's not all as bad as it looks, mostly superficial damage really. The superstructure's in pretty grand shape, and the anima is functioning perfectly well. She'll be able to receive another pilot once the repairs have been completed—given enough time."

"So I assume you've had someone link up and take her record of the engagement?"

"Well, that's just the problem you see. It appears she's still in mourning, spent a long time connected to a dead pilot—the brain doesn't die all at once, you see—and she refuses even any short-term replacement, just won't interface with anybody. And I could try to force the matter, but I

don't much like the idea of her rewriting the mind of any of my workers. I'm sure you understand.”

The captain didn't understand. “Really, whoever you are, you'd find that the matters of your well-being are completely below my contempt—technician; I could care less about the well being of your subordinates. And as much as I might enjoy to spend the evening edifying you, the truth is that it's neither here nor there. Now, please explain to me why I was sent here, or you **shall** remember my anger.”

The poor interlocutor struggled to obfuscate his trembling, with half-staggering speech continuing as if nothing had happened. “Well, you see, she's still broadcasting; seems like she's had it on an infinite loop ever since her pilot bit the dust, showing the last moments of his life, including the combat that led to his downfall.”

“I assume this is something interesting.”

“It's like nothing I've ever seen before, nothing I ever want to see again. Second I sent my report up the line, the general contacts me directly and tells me to seal the bay until the arrival of his agent—that's you.”

“It can't be all that bad. People die badly occasionally. It just happens in war.”

“Not like this. But that's not what I mean. The fellow did a good job considering all the difficulties. I haven't even mentioned the other bit.”

“The other bit?”

“We also recovered what killed him.”

“Oh?”

“Strangest bit of tech I've ever seen. And when you consider the peace summit being held just a few minutes walk that way.”

“Careful, technician—be very careful—before you exceed your authority.”

“Well, I'll whisper it to you sir.” Glancing furtively hither and thither, the technician approached to breathe his candor within the captain's ear. “They aren't what they look like. I wouldn't trust them. Just keep that in mind while I show you what transpired. Carry my reports to the general. And I know, just as you said, it's not my place, but before you break bread with the likes of them, you really need to see this; the lads need to know.”

2.

It was cold, very cold, cold in a way you wouldn't understand, a sort of cold that could kill in minutes, friendly upon the features of only the most ursine and brazen of frontiersmen that guarded themselves in layers upon layers and eschewed the wet places with religious fervor. Nearly seventy-five degrees below zero Fahrenheit. If you'd opened your mouth, you'd feel the moisture on your tongue threaten to solidify all the way to the very back of your throat, and while you gulped and gasped convulsively, the juxtaposed oven-warmth of your own moist respiration would freeze like a mask upon your own features to crack and crumble with the vain trembling of your cheeks.

It was cold, indeed, and it was also dark, the sun an absent traveler now in these long arctic nights, but there remained still the light of the stars and the hushed gleaming of the world's three moons, reflecting the sun's sapphire glory upon their uninhabitable features crested and dotted with craters and dunes.

It was cold and dark, and all around shivered and trembled the long and broad needles of perennial green capped in unblemished snow now clattering all-about groundward, disturbed from their lofty pedestals by the broad shoulders and unmanageable hand-held implements of a gauntleted soldier vested in the arctic colors of arbor and snowfall, curiously scratched and sometimes slashed as if by the talons of a bronzed

lion. Seven foot tall he stood, in the like of mankind, and he must have weighed as much as a tiger—or a bear—with such strange muscles of self-replicating iron as lingered beneath his hardened metal skin. But within and within, he was a man still and a man proud, guarded against the cold and the snow by the self-contained atmosphere of his armored suit and indemnified against the blindness of dark by the strange green and white phosphorescent illumination of his armor's optical suite. It was a body extended from his own, like and so unlike his own, but in a way, more than just a tool, altogether his own as more than mere property.

“Three pursuers,” his second self announced professionally, betraying not an iota of dismay if such even lingered within the leaden auspices of her mind. *“It's difficult to tell; they're so quiet, so much quieter than we, but you can still tell when bound their feet—and bound they must to keep pace with us.”*

“They got Michael,” he replied word-by-word between strides, hissing through his teeth, grim against the all-consuming terror of riot-running panic, panic of a fear only preternatural.

“And before that--” she rejoined.

“And before that and before that and before that!” he interrupted her, virtually drilling a hole in outrage through his lower lip.”

“They're all dead,” she concluded.

“Ripped to pieces,” he nodded.

“Managed to bring down a few of them.”

“Stop trying to make me feel better.”

“I just don't see how we're going to get out of this together.”

“Fucking shooting, god damnit.”

Stumbling over upturned roots drowned in the powdery white hailing down from heaven, he blundered through bottle-green branches and stampeded cacophonous hither and thither, exhausted, between the native trunks, betraying himself, belying his safety to periodically rest for a whisper, leaning upon their thicker boughs, before resuming his journey. He might as well have been himself a herd of panicked caribou making onwards their migration, eschewing the many predators and false harbors along the way, raucous as he was, racket that he caused. They had to be close behind, and with one against three—they had no need to be cautious, so assured they should be of victory.

“I've never seen anything like it in all my life.”

“...”

“The homeworlders, in all their centuries of solitude, they've done something wrong, created something that shouldn't exist, done something to themselves profane. God knows.”

“*Heads up.*”

“What?”

He hadn't been paying attention, at least enough attention, to the world immediately at the fore, for the gnarled roots of an upturned tree, frozen in powdered precipitation, caught his rising right ankle, and stumbling madly about for a handhold he collapsed to the tundra floor, rolling ever

onward, insomuch as his iron shell would allow, plowing a path through the firmament crumbs until he came to an anti-climactic end, ceasing his revolving journey flat on his side a little bruised but little worse for wear.

Sleep couldn't rise to snatch away his eyes, try as it might, for he knew, was viscerally aware, of the criminal intent that lingered mere moments behind his tracks, unerringly scenting out his staggering vestiges of utter despair. He shot up like a rocket, looking about frantically this way and that for any sign of the silent baying that lurked murderously after, but instead he found no closely-packed covenant of ancient wood and not did his eyes detect the eerily inhuman forms of his companions' killers; for the moment he was alone, distant a stage from the forest environs; he'd fallen a ways from a gentle ridge into the wide open tundra, if wide open you wanted to call it. In truth, he'd been dead-ended; cliff-walls rose precipitously on three sides, and the only escape were the white-grained sylvan hollows from which he'd just been liberated.

“Corralled?” he asked, but more accurately announced, an instinctual reaction.

“Impossible to say, but well within their intelligence, but they'd have to have some navigational data.”

“Evening just keeps getting better.”

“*I'm doing my best,*” she replied with a penitent groan.

“Climb it?” he queried, biting his lower lip to silence his desperation.

“Tough climb; I don't think you'd have the time before our guests arrived.”

“And they'd manage the climb handily I imagine.”

“I imagine.”

“Thoughts? Come on, give me something! It can't end like this!”

“The open is about five hundred meters across, five hundred meters wide—approximately. Make some space; let them taste your fire.”

“Because that worked so well for everyone else.”

“That was close quarters and an ambush. They didn't meet you on equal terms; they didn't even meet you on equal numbers.”

“I'm fairly sure I could have come up with the same direction.”

“Sometimes there simply are no good answers.”

“I know.”

The compact snowflakes were here knee-deep, pristine and polished and unsullied by the footfalls of mankind in a thousand lifetimes—perhaps longer. In another time, long before the arrival of the colony ships, long before the establishment of the great cities and the massive manufacturing engines, before her surface had been data-mined of every inch and contour by the myriad satellites passing overhead, there had been a thousand and one such places all across her pillowy countenance, magical destinations intended only for the fluttering blush of mythical folk baying respectfully, in religious intonation, before the three ever-present

moons. As it was, in a moment, blindingly bright in white under the reflected sun and ensconced with the tower-walls of the monstrous cliff-edge, this place would become a blood-bath, profane in the eyes of all the gods save those that gather the souls of moribund fighters, drifting away their last, to erect an earthy tumulus, a snow-capped altar, forever *in memoriam*. But that was then, and this is now, in a time when their frozen blood would stain this earth of all its faerie majesty, when the honest twinkle of inhuman eyes would shun the land robbed of all its sacred, and this would become a place barren, abandoned even by the little living creature of the soil—a desert concealed and draped forever in a pall of endless snow.

He had nearly made the far wall, the precipice of the sublime tower stretching functionally to heaven and scalable by no human hands, and he would have cast caution to the wind and attempted the difficult trek skywards, but his blood immediately froze, and he didn't need to glance backwards; something that shouldn't have ever been was now very close by.

There were indeed three of them, veiled against the now-punishing rays of the triad moons under the strikingly tattered but showy exterior of hooded robes steeped in pale red intricately decorated with signs and characters unintelligible, the clear work of an intelligence somewhat less and yet impossibly human, highly geometric characters concluding in floral imaginations run utterly amok. You shouldn't have been able, under their pendulous hoods, to

grasp the glint of discerning eyes, and yet there they were, unerringly fixed upon his own, as if they could see through and directly into his eyes—not his optics, but his eyes—through the full inch of blast-ready armor obscuring his choked-down, whimpering breath and subtly trembling lips.

There were indeed three of them, naked besides the blush-red pall of a covered robe; man or woman, it wasn't easy to tell, but they seemed somehow inconsiderable beneath their paltry vestments, as if the fullness of it they couldn't fill out—mice compared to the men that shattered whole nations. And yet there they were, virtually unprotected against the merciless blast of icy winds and the full seventy-five below—bare-footed and bare-knuckled, still sticky with the ichor of their recently stained quarry, now a terrible warning and reminder to all that was left beholding them wide-eyed beneath the comfort and protection of a beloved companion. There wasn't even discussion, there wasn't even issue, as to why hypothermia had not yet consumed them, that frost-bite had not long eaten away their features; they didn't even tremble in the tempest, the red of their limbs was not the crimson of their gore rising to the surface of the skin.

They dropped to all fours in unison and bayed, with the clatter and hissing of the winds whipping through the reeds, in observance to the flying moons, and they commenced their lupine impetus, seconds away now from being on top of that lone survivor.

“See if they can stop a fucking anti-material round,” he, stumbling over his words, grumbled and gargled through fear-frozen lips.

It was a monstrous device, too large certainly for a man to handle, too weighty and too cumbersome, but it handled perfectly in the iron grip of the Metallfasermuskeln—a twenty millimeter anti-material automatic rifle; the recoil alone would deprive a man forever the use of his thumbs, but again, suit and man together here shouldered the manslaying maw and quickly interfaced with the proxy sights.

There were only seconds now, and there were three incoming combatants, mercilessly deadly as his already savaged and lacerated armor could attest, but there lingered still a ray of hope, thanks to years getting knocked around in training and further years spent depriving mothers their sons and wives their husbands. It was easy. Three quick shots—bang bang bang—moving effortlessly across their plethora from one to the other, and the virtually instantaneous response of roaring explosions signaled—so he thought—an easy victory.

The whistling wind carried the choking smoke to the four directions, and where had been three... things... now remained more only the tattered remnants of their senseless garments bereft of the flesh that had carried them—strangely.

“There's no way they just evaporated,” began he, inquisitively but cautiously approaching the vestment remains.

“SEVEN O’CLOCK FIRE NOW!”

He had lived too long to complain when so commanded, and shifted rapidly to his rear, opening up with a salvo of high-explosive contest to whatsoever lingered behind; and sure enough, dressed translucent in the colors of the tundra nocturnal, his rounds struck true and hurled backwards stumbling, as if struck only by the honest gauntlets of a bare-knuckle boxer, his glimmering opponent—an apparent Caucasian female of fine features but strange beauty—eyes just minutely too large for a human head, lips that convulsed into a seeming infinite purse, and limbs too long, too lithe to evidence the power held within. Battered by the blow, otherwise she seemed unharmed and otherwise unconcerned, her features expressionless, motionless, like a doll staring across a vast and infinite distance. A sculptor might have thought her beautiful. She didn't resume her attack, even as he poured the knocking rounds of his full-metal hatred upon her; what was she waiting for?

“FOUR O’CLOCK!”

“FUCK!”

With a practiced calm not evident upon his shivering cheeks, he whirled about on his heels and brought his massive weapon to bear against a charging phantasm ululating through the knee-deep snows like glowing saffron steel plunged amidst a bath of black-charred waters at the grim behest of a red-faced smith. Every round struck home, and the startled opponent was battered backwards, but for

all of it, he was evidently unharmed. Naked and pale, the untenable climate did not shiver him, and his skin was unblemished, stretched somehow incompletely across lithe and unearthly limbs that swayed in the alternating breeze as if something barked and rooted. He had no genitalia.

“Not men, then, am I fighting.”

“...”

“And not even a scratch. My ammunition can't hold out forever—”

“*SIX O'CLOCK!*”

“God-damnit!” he roared through the gurgling of bile rising black from its seat beneath his heart, and again he whirled about on the translucent outline of the seeking wraith only several seconds removed now from vicious close combat, but before he fired he had a sudden burst of inspiration, an epiphany imbued from a sapience somehow exterior, and he loaded a phosphorous shell into the chamber.

“Whoosh,” was all he said, as the creature staggered, wreathed in choking flames that dispelled its near-invisibility, blackened limbs lashing out madly for some manner of quenching the unquenchable fires that would digest its body all down into ash in the space of an hour after tortured minutes of mind-bending agony.

“*Whoosh, indeed.*”

It was strange watching a man—if man it was—burn to death, the first warm fire he'd seen in days, as it stumbled about the vacant agora of faeries before their fortress wall clasping its

wreathed hands vainly about its inhuman features that decomposed before the very eyes.

But there wasn't a moment to spare, for either its two compatriots would be surging with vengeful bloodlust or otherwise nothing altogether, strangely inhuman that they are; in either case, this elucidation would prove worthless. God knows the danger they would prove in hand-to-hand, and god knows the moments they had stalked while he stared into the bright orange eye and blackened fumes of something he'd never witnessed before.

“Whatever it was, if it had once been a man, or if it lingered within the twilight of our existence as something purely manufactured, it is most assuredly dead, made and decomposed of the very same stuff that constitutes the full gamut of heart-throbbing life from beginning to end. Strangely, immune to the traditional fire of cannon rounds, staggering merely, the dominance of fire nevertheless went here unchallenged—strange it be so.”

“I couldn't tell you how or why, not until we can perform a full examination of the corpses.”

“Corpses indeed,” he replied now cheerily, “where lurks the other two now so seemingly fearful of the very real threat of their own imminent demise?”

But strange as it was, those sensors may as well have been blind, for what stalked murderously in the imagination of a thought-shattered invalid, this hounding wraith, was now hardly visible at all, gaming the potential of the sensors, as if unused to

them, as if accustomed to perfect obliviousness in naked eyes unaided.

Whatever it was that at that moment saved him, a strange barest aberration of motion, shape, or light under the twinkling stars and the smiling moons or some hardly audible intimation of crunching snow beneath eerily soft-spoken soles or by strange instinct alone, as if aware of being watched without the five-sense perception of the observer, he raised his rifle—what was in fact his cannon—defensively above his head as he snapped sharply to the rear. And it was a good thing he did, too, for the blow would have handily snapped his head in twain, making mince of armor and all and brain aside, as if composed only of the same curdled custard. He raised his rifle and in a flash of gold and clementine color, a downpour of heavy sparks, anointed his own instinctually avoidant countenance, washing past the contours of his charred-metal skin to sizzle to death in the wintry powder below; his weapon came apart, neatly bisected, as if under the lacerating auspices of something very precise, very sharp—more so than a diamond-edged sawblade, more so than the most expensive of cutting torches—and altogether instantaneously. And there she was; riding with bare, inhuman expression, null effect, upon the coat-tails of her victory came that same naked mockery of the human form, so alive and so strangely imperfect, her right arm brilliantly alight in seething blue, the intensity of solar plasma that, like lightning, cleaved away even well-bolted steel as

so much chaff hurled before the traveling *Notos* winds abreast the parched Levant.

But it didn't end there, and what followed was a sight that can hardly be described in words, but must only be consumed whole greedily in the reflective retinas of wondering eyes. She continued her assault, innately practiced and without an iota of mercy for her surviving opponent, now increasingly an embarrassment, if she were even capable of such shameful consideration, and her every striking limb—hand, foot, elbow, and knee besides—came instantaneously blindingly alight in the incinerating blue that upon every touch and every glance made mockery of the dusky armor that could befuddle artillery shells, bullets, and shrapnel with ease but now hissed and sizzled under the force that gave the stars their effervescent brilliance. Even so, wondrously fast he responded; with practiced elegance he deftly ducked and eschewed the most lethal coup de grace that seemed to come unceasingly, terrifying to behold at seven feet tall and heavier than the typical Kodiak—able to keep pace and juke and elude like an avid boxer having grasped the animate shadow of his assailing opponent.

“If it burns...” he mumbled, wondering.

With his left, he moved with intentional ponderousness to grasp the flailing lady-like homunculus by the combing bed, while he produced all the armaments that remained to him in his right, a simple, old-fashioned, and unadorned combat/utility knife. As if it unexpected, she

handily evaded the sinister strike of the fist, only to glimpse the flashing blade arrive from below, eager of the tender pulse disguised behind her mandible, far too late for comfort, and by a triple layout later she had just barely separated herself from an embarrassing downfall on what might as well have been a bit of pointed stick.

“It burns. It does burn... hmm...” he again mumbled, “and it fears a simple blade strangely, strange despite mocking the heavy rounds of my rifle.” He paused thoughtfully, as if scratching the stubble of his chin. “I can kill this.”

Even yet, having just escaped mortal danger, her expression had not changed, just the vacant endless stare of the inanimate made in mock of human form, a standing, striding, breathing doll behind whose countenance no motivation, no mental state could be determined. She just lingered there, swaying hither and thither in the alternating breeze that continued to bury the evidence of their mortal struggle under the pillowy substance of ethereal powder; she just lingered there, like a reed, hissing the bare breeze, but hissing without malice or malcontent, as if incapable of emotional content. And while she was certainly there, somewhere obscured with a strange technique there lurked another assassin of soldiers.

All in spite of his monstrous alacrity, it was altogether too little, too late, as the paradoxically freezing sensation of searing inferno warmth penetrated with ease his blackguard outer skin, his iron visage, and grabbed him from behind, just

below the shoulder, grabbed him where the left shoulder blade met the vertebrae, and burned him from the inside out, as his knees buckled and threatened to hurl him dead as a stone upon the once-immaculate tundra.

Whatever it was that saved him, doomed as he was, at least momentarily, whether it was the smiling wraith of a long dead and beloved mother or whether it was the apperception of a permanently bereaved widow, or perhaps whether it was merely that his blade had not yet tasted warm blood, he whirled about, mad as a dervish, vomiting blood within his visor, and before the creature could twitch and snap away, he laid his hands upon it, firm hands augmented with the iron anger of a vengeful spirit lurking within the ferrous fibers of the machine, and he exerted the greater force of his limbs. Gauntlets so delicate that could safely grasp a raw egg or burp a newborn babe pulverized the bones of its seething forearms into painful shards of silken glass that pierced and permeated the skin in places beyond counting, pouring forth a torrent of rude ichor inhuman—certainly not red, but rather almost choleric, the ugly piss-color of puss. If their attacks weren't, this was proof enough they weren't human, proof furthermore that they could bleed. It didn't scream as he pulled with ursine potency its forearms from its torso, twisted and yanked, as his own gasped blood began to drown him out within his canopy; it didn't scream with each sickly crack and pop that signaled breaks and dislocations; and it didn't scream when finally its arms came free of

their hinges, staining the sublime terra with the profuse fire-hose of its obscene excretions gilded in a madman's gaudy gold. It just hissed, collapsing, almost silently, as if the wind rattling far off through the marsh reeds.

Struggling for breath, choking on his own moribund crimson, he released the clasps on his cephalic canopy, and a worrying waterfall of sanguine clattered like abandoned bronze upon the crushed and besotted mess of starlight powder below. There was just one left, as he tried to remind himself, but his vision had gone hazy, and he stumbled awkwardly back and forth, seeking somehow a handhold but finding none, the trees now several hundred meters distant. And he would have collapsed and died straightaway there, but providence had provided a pedestal to steady himself, as he attempted to focus blearily upon the unfamiliar countenance of what might have been his wife, but he couldn't remember.

The pain made him remember, and he found himself staring eye-to-eye into the peculiar features of an animated doll provided a murderer's tools imbedded like lava in the flesh; her searing hands had punctured his frame and strangely massaged his still-beating heart with child-like curiosity—so painful that he should have went into shock, should have passed out, should have been shortly awake in twilight Niflheim. But he still had his blade. She didn't seem excited or sad or perturbed when the simple bit of steel penetrated her neck all the way to the hilt. She merely looked downwards, examining

the sable-colored handle of the dagger as if it were something she'd never seen before, and she fell forwards, claspng on to him vainly as the choleric ichor passed in gushes between her lips and she was silent forevermore.

He hadn't much left. The blood-loss had been mortal.

“They're all dead. It's all over. My companions can rest easy. But, someone must know. I just, just, just don't know how.”

“Shh... shh... that's someone else's problem now. You did your job, and there'll be a mighty welcome awaiting you on the other side. You're safe now, within my auspices; I'll see you off,” replied a woman's voice, as if within his own mind, but he couldn't remember whom. He fell off into a long sleep.

3.

The captain, who'd been an experienced veteran of many campaigns, serving ever since the tender young age of sixteen, as was the native practice of his own countrymen, was deeply disturbed, having regarded the whole recording wordlessly, his knuckles pressed white against his lips, absorbing every little iota of pertinent intelligence.

“So you had no idea, captain?” quizzed the bravest of the maintenance-men.

He didn't respond, consumed, it seemed, in thought as he stared at the final frame of the recording still evident upon the tiny monitor.

“Don't know if they just hack 'em up and rebuild 'em or if they manufacture the bloody things. You'd need an expert to tell, but I can tell you their insides ain't got what they supposed to have, far from it, and it doesn't take a surgeon or a scientist to see that.”

Snapping himself back to attention, the captain rejoined, “So only you and your... 'Lieutenants' have seen this recording?”

“That's right sir!” the maintenance officer responded, smiling through half-broken teeth, “we've done exactly as the general asked; even had an inkling before, so we told nobody else.”

“The peace summit, right upstairs...”

“Oh... what's that captain?”

“Many unblemished faces, many large eyes, somehow immaculate forms under loose-fitting clothing.”

“Could just be your imagination, sir.”

“I'd need the militia...”

“Wouldn't know about that, sir, but if you'd like to contact the security officer, his office is right down the hall and to the right, not that you'll find him there at the moment as he should be attending the festivities at the moment, but his immediate subordinate should be there. Not a bad place to start.”

“Right...” he continued, as if stunned.

“Anything else, Captain?”

“Summon the western bay's Eisenherzen,” he started, as if rising from a dream. “Tell them whatever you need to. Just get them down here. I don't care if they're in evening dress or naked! The citadel is in danger.”