



Illustrated by Eldar Zakirov

To Fight the Colossus

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The aftermath of the great war deposited me on a breathtaking port city called Aeskir, on a dazzling world called Aevii.

This was about as fine a place to end up as I could have hoped. Many thousands of worlds across human space had been scoured of life by the savage conflict that would forever be remembered as Cort's War, but Aevii had survived intact in large part because all the worst fighting had taken place systems away. It resolved itself, or rather the woman the war was named for found some way to resolve it, long before any of the fires got to Aevii. It made the world much more important, politically, than it had been, and there was already talk after the destruction of New London that this should become the seat of the new alliance that would take over after the fall of the Confederacy.

I had nothing to do with that debate. I mention it only because it was a world that had become important, and that I was out of place because sudden peace had made me unimportant.

My many years of fighting had left my sense of beauty intact, and I had to agree that Aeskir qualified as that, what with the gleaming emerald towers, the cold scarlet clouds, and the phosphorescence that forever danced in the waves of the rivers that wound between the buildings and under the connecting bridges. There was always distant hypnotic music, air like perfume, and crowds of people who, self-engineered to the height of beauty, might have struck the primitive people of earlier times as titans or gods.

I did still appreciate what I saw, but years battling the ugliness of war had left me distrustful of beauty, that pernicious lie about life and the nature of existence in general.

I sought balm. I spent my days in shocking indolence. I slept with men and women of exquisite charms, and with sexual-service mechanisms that had more tricks than either. I ate meals delightful beyond description, and while I had taken pleasure in the flavor, none of the joy lingered.

I wandered past the tented markets and over a series of narrow bridges to the shores of the ocean, where the air temperature was not being controlled by the climate engines and where it was just cold enough to discourage any wanderers who prized comfort. My breath fogged when I hit the great terraces over the water's edge, and still I walked, hands firmly in my jacket pockets, until I was so far past the city's crowds that I felt like the only living thing in the world.

And then I met Griff.

I spotted him by the sea. He sat on a little bench around the next bend of the terrace, glowing a little red in the sunset, with the separate light of the phosphorescent waves also dancing on his craggy features. He currently wore the features of an old man, though of course he might have been any age at all; sometimes, people just want jowls and flinty folds over the eyes. He had ragged scars on both cheeks, signs that at some time in the past something had almost opened his jaw all the way to the hinges, and much could be made of the happenstance that he had not arranged an inexpensive repair.

As he glanced at me, with what was at first only casual interest, I clocked the moment that he saw in me what I saw in him.

We had never met, but we understood the essence of each other at once.

We each saw that the other had killed. We each saw that it had happened often.

I indicated the space on the far end of his bench, one where I had space to sit and still leave a buffer between us. "May I?"

"If you must."

His profile was a fleshy edifice dominated by a broken nose and a shining line of tears down one cheek. I did not attribute those tears to emotion. It was a windy twilight, and wind always summons the false protection of tears.

I said, "I'm Esker."

He said, "I'm Griff. What is this about? Are you deciding whether to attempt killing me?"

I said, "Not one of the options I'm considering."

"But you're wondering whether you could."

"I always try to come up with a game plan."

"If it came down to that, I would win."

That jibed with my impression, but I refrained from agreeing out loud.

After a few seconds, he asked, "Where were yours?"

Anybody who had lived a life of peace might have puzzled over the meaning of the question, but to those who had known war, it had only one meaning. He wanted to know where I had fought.

"Lysofan. Negerev. Naaxin. Many others."

"Meat-grinders, the lot of them."

"Yes, they were. And yours?"

He grunted. "I had others. Also meat-grinders."

"I don't think there have been many conflicts that weren't."

“No.” But this seemed to have exhausted his patience. “What exactly do you want of me, Esker?”

“Company. Conversation. Old war stories. A drink with someone who lived it.”

This time his pause was fleeting but resigned. “All right.”

* * *

On most worlds, the default definition of “a drink” is alcohol.

On other worlds, there are intoxicants of different kinds: buzzpatches, nanite infusers, dreaming jewels, hallucinogenic gases mixed into the usual oxygen-nitrogen mix. Drinking has become the umbrella term for anything one might do to jettison the harsh weight of reality for a while.

The two of us ended up in a place with chambers that broadcast direct neural interference. I don’t understand the science, but the interference defused difficult emotions and made most complicated thoughts more trouble than they’re worth. I’d had it done before, and it was like the most amount of concentration one could muster hit its brick wall at vague stupidity.

The Tchi proprietor, representative of one of the races that had been involved in the recent failed attempt to exterminate all of humanity, asked if we wanted to be suppressed for only a couple of hours, or for a long-term stay that could extend for months or years.

Griff said that we only needed a few hours, and so we entered our padded chamber and got comfortable while the indicator lights came on to indicate the onset of the enforced numbing.

The background grief did not go away. It only ceased to matter.

It was like being only dimly aware that some part of you is on fire.

The chamber offered us soft stringed music, with some lyrics sung from a voice that sounded female but was also clearly not human; either a species we knew, or one we didn’t, and though I wondered, I’d be lying if I pretended it mattered.

I asked Griff if there was anybody after him.

“More than any man can count, and if I thought you were one of them, you’d be dead already. You?”

“Some, I suppose.”

The mechanized servers brought in some of the food and drink we’d ordered before entering the fugue chambers. There is a reason why you order first, in such places, the same reason why you do not take access to your life savings into a casino. You set limits beforehand.

The servers withdrew, and I said, “Many years ago, I was in the ground invasion against one of Magrison’s strongholds.”

“That piece of shit deserved to die badly.”

“I would have liked to take him prisoner. To have an hour with him and do what damage I could instead of forever being objected to the theories about how he escaped or where he’s hiding.”

“He is dead. I promise you, he is dead.”

“You cannot know that.” A sudden suspicion flared. “Unless—”

“I was not there, but my current backers know everything. He’s gone.”

“That’s good. I hope it hurt.”

“From what they say, he died a withered, senile old man, writhing on his deathbed, with none of the medicines that could have spared him some of the pain.”

“Good.”

Our conversation drifted. Griff spoke of an idyll he’d once known, in a small cabin on a hilltop on some region of a world where the sole human population was far away and had no reason to hunt him; of the special quality of the air there, which was as good as banishing personal nightmares as the chamber in which we sat; and of the woman he had known there, a “sweet thing with skin like molten stone,” which is the way he put it and nothing I could translate into terms I understood.

I spoke of my best friend from a conflict long past, a man who never should have been allowed anywhere near any life-or-death task let alone a war, because he was incompetent at the least of the tools a man needs for living, and when the time came only passably talented

at dying. The story of that man's death was horrific, and it was also woefully funny and I descended into hilarity, just relating it. Even Griff came close to a smile at that one, though whatever amusement he felt did not reach his eyes. We told rude stories of our carnal pleasures too; the women we had known, the men we had also shared beds with, the creatures neither men nor women, born of different worlds, who we had tried when bored enough to attempt anything.

Then one of us, I don't know which, made a passing reference to the Silent Colossus of Par-najan.

It was one of the stupider legends that people argued about, usually over drinks. It was reportedly a humanoid figure the size of a world that drifts through interstellar space following the trajectory a world would. Clearly an artifact of some kind, it retained its form even though anybody who knows how gravity wells work would expect the tidal forces commanded by anything that size to urge an irregular shape like a human body into something closer to a sphere. Its reported location, never better than vague, always shifted outward, chasing the frontier because it had never been found in explored places.

As with stories about the Holy Grail, fugitive dictators faking their deaths to labor as chefs in isolated backwaters, Jurassic creatures lurking in Scottish lochs, and hidden oracles that dispensed universal wisdom from ancient temples on hidden asteroids, the Silent Colossus of Par-najan was just something people wanted to exist, and so there have been entire novels about the thing, and vids, and neurecs, and it was all nonsense, the moss that grows on any dumb story if it possesses sufficient longevity.

He asked me if I believed in the legend and I said that I did not.

"It's real," he said.

"Have you seen it yourself?"

"Not yet," he said. "Someday soon."

"Then when you find it you must tell me what it's like."

"You mock me," he said. "But I have sources I trust. Backers. Powers that would never lie about this, even if they never lied about anything else. The Colossus is real."

"Again: you must tell me what it's like."

His eyes drooped. "If I see it my days of telling any other human being anything will forever be in the past. But it is real, all right. And if you stick around you may get to see it with your own eyes."

I had heard variations of this exchange in any number of drunken gatherings, any number of late-night story swaps with other soldiers and killers. *Yes, the Silent Colossus—or whatever other legendary bullshit I happen to be selling—is real. No, I haven't seen it for myself. But it's real.*

I saw no reason to consider Griff's bullshit anything but more of the same.

The numbing effect reached its climax, and I fell into a sort of blissful emptiness, thinking how wonderful it would be if nobody were dropping bombs, nobody was clearing entire populations with flechette weaponry, and nobody was trading knife-slashes in close quarters.

Then clarity returned, and I gradually became aware that there was a body lying on the table between us. It was the proprietor, who had input our preferences and our orders, who had accepted our instructions that the numbing effect should only be light.

I said, "What the hell?"

The Tchi proprietor's blood speckled Griff's cheeks. I discerned bright white teeth on that mosaic of gore, and through those satisfied teeth the satisfaction of a killer who had killed well. He said, "This piece of garbage had an additional means of income: robbing his customers when they were too diminished to perceive it. I suspect that our losses would have been small, but I felt no obligation to tolerate them. You concur, I suppose."

"I do."

The Tchi moaned. Surprising; he was alive. From the likes of Griff that qualified as charity, and I could only wonder what that meant. As it happened, that wasn't the question I asked. "I'm impressed that you were able to throw off the numbing. I was a million kilometers away."

"I'm always numb, and it doesn't incapacitate me even when it's accentuated by places like this. Come, Esker. I have a place in the Diamond Quarter. I can introduce you to my friends and our project. Between us we are looking for the single greatest battle any human being has ever fought."

* * *

The Diamond Quarter—which was a community of transient villas overlooking a central wooded area, and not a "quarter" of anything, a discrepancy that must have come with a back-story I had no desire to ask about—was by the time we got there being misted by local rains. Whether it was artificial local weather, or the natural thing, was another question I didn't care about. What mattered is that we entered the district at its lowest level and then ascended the steep ladders from terrace to terrace until we reached an L-shaped home of iridescent glass, that out of some design quirk appeared to be floating a full meter above its own patch of earth. There were creatures like snakes nesting in the darker shadows it cast at night.

I'd been staying in a cubbyhole on the central carousel that smelled a bit like the body odor of whatever transient had stayed there before me. I could have afforded more but I did not know when or if I'd be employed again. Maybe Griff was a recruiter. Or maybe he'd better handled the task I'd been only passable at, holding on to his money.

We entered via a telescoping set of stairs and entered a central parlor beneath a ceiling that illuminated multiple places to sit beneath a soft crimson glow. There were three doors, or door-shaped panels, on the longest of the walls. He muttered something about the others still being asleep and returned with a glass, naming a liquor that cost more than I made in six months, Mercantile Standard. I dipped my thumb, which was equipped with chemical sensors, into the liquid, and was assured that the stuff was exactly what it seemed to be, with no unpleasant additions. Good. I'd been afraid that this was one of those cases where I'd wake up in a bluegel crypt on the way to some conflict I hadn't signed up for, paid in starvation wages instead of true deposits to my account.

I continued to survey the room, which was typical of transient quarters, including luxury ones, in that it betrayed no individual's actual personality in any way. The shelving units had various sculptures that managed to occupy space but communicated no meaning except for, I suppose, a general pleasantness. A massive vase housed a tree with leaves that inflated and deflated, like miniature lungs, giving off a mist that freshened the air but further enforced the place's overall flavor of anonymity. A transparent cube housed some brown dirt with little to distinguish it from any other form of brown dirt. There were actual printed books, and a neurec emitter that must have provided hours and hours of entertainment to visitors who wanted to feel the recorded experiences of other people, but which I doubted had any appeal to this man who claimed to have traveled so much. There were a couple of decanters that could have included anything, anything at all.

"Nice place."

"A comfortable place, paid for my backers. It is not a home. It has been many years since I had one of those."

"Tell me about these backers, then."

"They are beings with a functionally unlimited budget, to whom questions of cost mean nothing. They've been paying my expenses while I train for this battle like no other. The last battle, you could say. I ask for a place to stay, and this is the kind of thing they give me."

"A means of securing your loyalty?"

"No. Financial considerations are just so superfluous to them that they don't care how much they spend on me. I guarantee that if I asked for more, palaces, power, a harem of possible bed partners beyond the ones I can arrange for myself, luxuries I cannot even imagine, they would indulge me."

"Rich people," I said.

"Not people," he said.

That's when I got who were talking about. "The AIsorce."

"Exactly."

The ancient software intelligences known by that name were far older than Man, and far more powerful. It was said that they had fingers in everything, though of course they did not have fingers. It was also said that they'd had a part in the last war, both as instigators and as peacemakers, and in the last hours, when the woman who had unwillingly become the face of that war successfully negotiated their enforcement of this uneasy peace, her own private phrase for them had spread and entered the vernacular of those who know what strings get pulled: *Unseen Demons*.

He continued: "All I've ever needed to do is agree to an arranged fight. And what makes me attractive to them is that they know it's the fight, specifically the fight, that I want. I won't become some pampered fop, forever putting off their purposes in the hope of some more shining silks. I'll hit the ground the instant it's time."

I said, "For what reward, if you win?"

Griff gave me the oddest look, one that did not seem at home on the features of this man I'd come to know. If I had to deconstruct it, I would say that it contained irony, and pity, and above all disappointment at the sense that I didn't get it. "It's not about reward."

I thought I understood. Combat is a drug, and for some it's an addiction that has no cure. I of course now know that I understood nothing, that the price he was willing to pay was far beyond any coin I had ever spent.

"It's a bit much to talk about right now. May I show you something? I'd like your reaction."

"Indulge yourself."

He put down his drink and went to the shelving units, returning with the transparent cube I'd noted earlier, the one with the layer of what I'd judged to be undifferentiated brown dirt at the bottom of the container. From my seat I would have judged that the cube was a sealed object with no separate lid, but he removed the top with no trouble and poured the dirt on to the table between us. It still looked like dirt, though dirt so fine that it seemed more liquid than sand.

He used the side of one hand to sweep half to one side, turning one pile into two.

The two separate piles wasted no time flowing back together, rejoining like a subdivided cell that regretted the act of mitosis. The two halves mixed, the surface of the combined liquid looking like it was like boiling but may have been, for all I knew, vehement relief at being reunited with the parts that had been taken away. And then the surface smoothed, and the material once again returned to being a pile of brown mud.

I shrugged. "It's an interesting trick, at least."

"It's no trick," he said. "It's nanotech."

"Ah."

Nanotech was common enough; many applications.

He said, "These devices are smaller and more versatile in purpose than any nano that humanity has ever conceived."

"We have nanites that are only a few complex molecules in size."

"Behemoths compared to these, which are not sub-molecular but subatomic. The people who built this have built ones that can fit inside the diameter of the hydrogen atom."

I laughed the way one does when bullshit exceeds the barriers put in place to contain it. "That's nonsensical. You can't build anything smaller than the most basic building blocks."

"No," he said, "you can't. But you can do the next best thing, leapfrog over that limitation by manufacturing your devices in a pocket universe you call into being for that purpose, and designing them to extrude into our plane for only as much as you need to interact with the matter here. I don't have any of the stuff smaller than hydrogen; that's only for rewriting basic physics, something my backers do as easily as we breathe. I don't need anything as grandiose as that. But when our project is under way, we will need the stuff that can edit the very nature of mass."

"Really. I think you're holding back."

He ignored my mockery. "Don't ask me any complicated questions. I understand very little of it, and I'm nowhere near as smart as my backers are. But here's my jar: a little army capable of miracles beyond any tech we have. What do you think?"

"I think it's the kind of thing that a lot of people would pay big money for."

"My backers don't care about money."

That's when two of the long wall's three doors opened, and two sentients new to me emerged, blinking stupidly in the way that people do when they're still detoxing from sleep.

The first was a pale but lithe bald woman, wearing baggy silver trousers and nothing above the waist. She made gray eye contact with me, and it was neither self-conscious nor inviting, just an open acknowledgment that she had noticed the presence of another human being in the room. Her toplessness was anything but sexy, even in theory, in part because she was as colorless as refined sugar and in part because she did not carry herself with any noticeable humanity. She was accompanied by a floating silver ball on a tether attached to the base of her neck. The ball had no features but gave the impression of measuring the room, and me. The woman gave the impression of having no opinions whatsoever, a state that went along with what she was, something I had encountered before, on a world far from here.

Pet People were human beings who had sold themselves to the software intelligences. The floating silver ball on a tether was whatever the AIsorce had given her in fair exchange for her autonomy, a deal the Pet Man I'd once met years ago had told me bestowed a lot more than it took. I doubted that but did not possess the first-hand knowledge I would have needed to dispute it, nor the desire to find out. I'm a human being, not a pet.

I had not known that the independent software intelligences also possessed and therefore created Pet Women, as well as Pet Men. I supposed it just necessarily followed.

"Hello," she said.

I had never heard a greeting so colorless. "Hello."

"Are you joining us?"

"I try not to join things until I know what I'm joining."

"Something we have in common," she said. She blinked, and in the interval uploaded my name. "Mister Esker."

The other newcomer was a Riirgaan, another species that had participated in the recent war against Humanity. He, if it was a he—I had never been able to tell the difference between the males and females of the species—was taller than me or Griff, and possessed all the regular features of its race, including the reptilian skin, the triply-segmented limbs, and a face that was forever stuck in the expression our kind has known, through the years, as the dolphin's smile.

Another man in my position might have attacked the Riirgaan on sight. The race had pretended to be our allies, and it had been a leading power against us in the recent war of extermination. But I did not know what factors were at play here and so I remained where I was, trying not to let the murderous impulses show on my face.

"Hello," he said.

His tone matched the woman's for neutrality.

Griff said, "The woman is Yrana, pledged to a special mode of the AIsorce. The Riirgaan is, believe it or not, *Bob*."

That was unusual to the point of being comic. Riirgaan names are usually driven in equal parts by long rolled R's, and by fricative pops. I said, "*Bob*?"

Bob replied, "Griff has elected my actual name unpronounceable, a convenient thing for me in that I do not want it pronounced. It is a small matter to let him name me. Someday, under conditions of advanced trust, I might tell you who I am. Until then—"

"Belay that," I said and glanced back at Griff. "Just what's going on here?"

"What's going on here," Griff said, "is the preamble to the single greatest battle any single human being has ever fought."

"I'm waiting for an explanation that goes beyond riddles."

He flashed a satisfied smirk. "It's so big that riddles are the only way to approach it, and I'm more than happy to start answering them if you decide to stick around. Want to discuss what the job pays?"

* * *

I was not as impressed by the figure as he might have expected, for the same reason I was

not impressed with so many sums promised for mercenary work, that the chief problem with any such amount is not just collecting it but also living long enough to make the attempt.

Still, I agreed to move into his house and see what developed, taking the third of the three functional rooms rather than what I half-expected, the other side of his own bed.

Surprising me, he stayed with Yrana, though I detected no chemistry of any kind between them, not even the mercenary sort that would have applied if she was for some reason sleeping with him on the orders of the software intelligences. I didn't imagine any sex between them, if it was sex, to disturb her untouched expression, or to involve any effort on her part but thinking of other tasks she might have to take care of later in the day.

The next morning, he ordered me to the backyard. He tossed me a sleek ebony dagger, pulled out one of his own, and ordered me to kill him. I obliged. Or at least I tried to oblige. I was trying to drop him. I think he was just trying to keep himself occupied. By the time I drew blood, I had lost much of my own. By the time I gave him a serious injury, I was fighting one-handed, the other one held to my abdomen to keep my guts in. I fell to the grass, dying, and he studied me for a long time and after a while said, "Tell me if I'm right. If you could get up, you would come after me again. Yes?"

"... yes."

"Even though you know that I'm stronger than you, have better reflexes than you, and am faster than you. Even though you must already sense I have advantages you can't even quantify, that I would kill you in any actual engagement. You would continue this fight."

"... yes."

"Are you a fool?"

"... no."

"Are you suicidal?"

I hesitated. "No."

"You are just a fighter, made for this."

"Yes."

"It's the fight that matters. The part you can't give up."

"Yes."

"You will fight even in agony and at the brink of death."

"Yes."

"It would of course be helpful if it was also a cause you believed in. Just not required."

"Yes."

"You'll do."

And he carried me back into the house and placed me on a surgical shelf where nanites—not his advanced one, but the ones who were available locally to anyone who could pay the AISource medical subscription—stitched me back into a semblance of health.

By that time, he was gone.

I slept, had bad dreams, woke to an empty main room, and after too long waiting for anybody to emerge, left the house AI with a message that I had loose ends to take care of before I returned to work with Griff full time.

There were damn few actual loose ends. I took a walk. I deposited my advance in a bank and had the majority of it sent to a certain address many light-years away, belonging to a child who was mine but had never known my name. I retrieved my go-bag from the cubby hotel where I'd been shelving my body during the last few months. I stopped at a sidewalk stall and ate some euphoric pastries so sweet that they might not have required the mild narcotics to give an ordinary person joy. I only noted the flavor, measured it, and found it wanting. I allowed some of the filling to fall on my chest and did not do the military thing by immediately policing my suit.

I then went to a little anonymous house I knew of and let myself in, passing through the charmless furnishings that did not even clear the charm bar accomplished by Griff's quarters, and left through a sliding door in the back to meet a woman I knew and liked more than either of us pretended.

Her name was Jenjii Hvask, and she was both very old and very fat, though we live in a time

when nobody needs to be either. As far as I knew, she had installed both conditions as a form of self-punishment, for sins committed during her many years in the old Confederacy's intelligence services. I don't know what she did for them or how high up she was, but she had been connected; from a past reference she'd spent some time working closely with the Andrea Cort of "Cort's War," though it would have had to be before that famous and dangerous individual changed what she was and stopped using the name she was known for. That fact I tried not to think about very much. To quote something a mutual acquaintance had said about her, referencing a historical personality I'd needed to look up, even knowing someone with that connection was like shaking the hand of someone who'd shaken the hand of Hitler.

I supposed that I could have updated the metaphor by using Magrison's name instead of Hitler's. It made more sense anyway. Magrison had been worse.

Hvask reclined in a roomy, reclining chair that did not look at all roomy with her in it. Her fat was so voluminous that it eliminated her lap down to knee-level. Her ankles were swollen into unpleasant-looking sacks of meat. I had to remind myself that this was the appearance she'd chosen, down to every flap in her abdomen. She had to be tended by flying servitors, some of which were tethered to her exposed upper arms by tubes of some sort, pumping unknown substances into her. We did not see each other regularly, and she was substantially larger, and more a threat to the structural integrity of the chair, than she had ever been.

We had made love once. Years ago, after first negotiating the agreement that it was just to occupy some time and that there were to be no emotional entanglements afterward. There hadn't been, but these prior arrangements guaranteed that the aftermath disappointed neither of us. We had both passed any possibility of love, I suppose, but we remained kindly disposed to one another.

"Esker," she said, without joy. (I could not avoid associations with Yrana, whose bland visage was also without grief. Hvask was if nothing ripping herself apart, for reasons I could guess at but never know.) "What brings you to disturb my retirement?"

"Don't lie to me, dear one. You are not retired. You will never be retired."

She spoke in short bursts, only a few words at a time before her air had to be replenished with a wheeze. "Don't give me more credit than I deserve. I'm a pariah in the old intelligence community. The sins of humanity under the Confederacy were much of what caused the last war, and I am still so associated with those sins that no one still interested in playing the game is interested in pursuing any connection with me."

One of the servitor mechanisms dipped down on fluttery wings, stuck a long sharp probe into her forehead, and then fluttered off, as if intent on sharing its find with somebody. She did not react at all. It was her routine and beneath her notice.

I said, "You're still collecting information, though?"

"For amusement's sake. I can't just put down the professional habits of a lifetime. What about you, Esker? What criminality are you engaged in?"

"Maybe you can tell me."

I described Griff, and Yrana, and the Riirgaan named *Bob*. I did not mention the nanotech, simply said that they were well-funded and that connected to a good source of cutting-edge tech; tech that struck me as a potential threat. My reticence had less to do with care for the damage they could do than with avoiding any interference by what intelligence sources remained, with whatever benefits my connection to Griff's operation could make earn for myself. Mostly, I just wanted to make sure that I wasn't putting my head in a noose.

Hvask coughed for about a minute and said, "It already sounds like the kind of enterprise that would send any smart person fleeing for her life."

"Because he's promising the greatest battle any human being has ever fought?"

"For that reason, yes. Also because the Pet Woman's presence testifies to AIsorce involvement, if only at a remove. Because the AIsorce are officially supposed to be retired from the history-manipulation business, even if the smartest people refuse to believe it, and I am among those smartest people. Because they are so far ahead of us that we've never been able to trust their good will in anything they do, and because they've never been one giant collective, but

an uncountable number of smaller entities, some of whom are benign and some of whom are downright malignant. The particular intelligence behind this Yrana woman could be capable of anything. I would run like hell.”

It occurred to me to remark that she was not exactly equipped for running. I thought about it but not speak it out loud. The cold calculus of war had made me a prolific killer, but it had never made me rude. I said, “And if they’re a threat?”

“Don’t be inane. Of *course*, they’re a threat. With the AIsorce involved, they cannot avoid being a threat, maybe only to you personally and maybe to the point of extinction event. The question is just what you think you can do to counter it, even with all that blood on your hands. You’re like an infant trying to roar louder than the T-Rex. You’re doomed in the very attempt.”

I said, “And if it’s a battle worth fighting?”

“Yours? Or the one he’s talking about? This supposed *biggest battle any human being has ever fought*.”

“Yes.”

“You can still die, and you probably will. I don’t know. Maybe it’s what you want.”

I had denied suicidal impulses to Griff, but Griff and I did not have the history this woman and I did. “Maybe it is.”

“A suicide pill would take less time.”

“Look who’s talking.”

Anger flashed in those hopeless eyes. Then it flickered out, replaced by resignation. It was shockingly fast. Maybe, when you’re as deep in the process of self-immolation as she was, fighting over casual insults is just plain not worth the trouble. After a few heartbeats of centering herself, and one lengthy interruption by a servitor that did something terrible at the base of her neck, she said, “I probably can’t help you with the woman. She’s an AIsorce Pet, and that means she’s given up being most of what qualifies as humanity a long time ago. She’ll also be the most dangerous of the three, what with whatever holds her leash doing everything it can to monitor you as potential betrayer. I might be able to get intelligence on this Riirgaan, but my instincts are that if there’s anything actionable in his past, it’s so well-buried by whatever these people have going on that I’ll likely come up empty. I will get you anything we have on this soldier who nonsensically claims to have fought in every war. And I will give you that, free of charge, on one condition, one I want you to put at the very top of your mission statement. Do you hear me? This is what I’m charging for my services today.”

I thought that I knew what she would say. She was about to tell me to never bother her again. I would be fine with that, I guessed.

She said, “Get yourself a life worth living while you still have a chance.”

I said, “You first.”

* * *

I returned to Griff’s house. He was packing a valise at the time and was neither pleased nor displeased. His demeanor was that of a man who had issued an invitation on a whim and now wished that there was a polite way to withdraw it. At the very least, my return seemed to strike him as inconvenient, the addition of a factor that he failed to account for, that would add to the flurry of considerations that would now have to be handled. He said that he’d be back in six days and that I should use the time as I wanted, but that it would be helpful if I got to know Yrana and *Bob*.

I still don’t know what his personal business was. Maybe he wanted to go glare at some more bodies of water. Maybe he wanted to find some other exotic forms of intoxication, or maybe he just needed a quiet time to confirm that this war of his would be worth the fighting.

I don’t know what he planned to do, but I know that it was something like that. These are things that mercenaries do, whenever sanity objects to them diving into another meat-grinder. It was not a time to get to know me.

So I did what he wanted and tried to get to know Yrana and *Bob*.

Talk about impossible missions!

It was not so much that they refused to talk as what they had to say revealing almost nothing.

“*Bob*”—whose name was always within invisible quotes, for me—spent most of his time in his room, only rarely emerging from the climate-controlled interior trailing the environment he had programmed within, a hideous dry heat. He always said something polite but meaningless, some reference to the time or to the general, undifferentiated nature of the day; the kind of thing sentient creatures say when they wish meaningless sounds to pass as communication. I once came out and asked him how he’d met Griff, and he said, “He was looking for someone who’d seen it.” Once I witnessed him praying, and I tried to engage him on the subject of his deity, and though his people were physically incapable of altering the shape of the smile that already adorns their faces, he cocked his head in a manner that gave the impression of cruel amusement and said, “My people do not expect their prayers to be heard.”

“Really,” I said, and could not resist adding, “What about the prayers of your victims?”

“Ah. You refer to the recent failed war of extermination. An interesting rhetorical tactic given how many genocides you must have participated in yourself.”

I winced. All war is genocide, of course. None are honorable. I had never personally slaughtered civilians, but I had fought in wars where it was done by others. “Answer the question.”

“My answer for your people, Mr. Esker, is the same I was taught as a child. In the religion of the community where I was raised, God is just a convenient philosophical construct, the cartoonish representation of blind fate in our own image. The difference is that we know this, and only use the premise because it makes certain discussions easier to grasp. Your people believe the nonsense, some of them, and from a distance it seems to have caused you no small amount of trouble.”

I said, “It has. And what do you pray for, *Bob*?”

“Speaking only for myself,” he said, “More dead humans. Stacks of them. Entire fields of bleached skulls. Your race remembered, in the great encyclopedias of the other sentient races, only as a plague that has long since been wiped out.”

I didn’t ask him why he felt that way. It was a common assessment of the species. “Were you in the last war?”

“I was. If you knew the things I had done, you would likely kill me.”

“And how does that make you better than me?”

He emitted a short, appreciative bark. “I am not better, Mr. Esker. I am a creature of the same madness as yourself and Mr. Griff, of your species that is so talented at doing that kind of thing. It is part of what has estranged me from my own kind, and part of what I am trying to atone for, with my participation in this project. Please do not mistake that for friendship. If I have the opportunity, I will someday kill you. But for now, if you permit, I will go.”

* * *

Yrana wandered in and out of the room she shared with Griff, without much in the way of engagement. She remained bare-breasted most of the time, only occasionally donning a gray and shapeless top that seemed to appear at intervals wholly unconnected with either exhibitionism or modesty. There was certainly nothing sexual being communicated.

Whenever she and *Bob* appeared at the same time, they took no particular notice of each other, acting less like companions on an enterprise larger than any of us than elementary particles that could travel through the same space without colliding or being affected by their respective gravitational pull. She treated me much the same way, speaking only when there was some absolutely necessary piece of information that needed to be imparted, something like *please hand me that thing behind you* or *excuse me, I am trying to get past*. She gave all my questions either yes or no answers or silences.

Only once, on the fifth day, did we have a longer conversation. I found it in the courtyard in the back of the house, performing an intense physical workout. It involved running in place, throwing punches at invisible opponents, and stretching her lithe body in ways testifying to some work her masters might have done, to enhance her flexibility past the strictly human. I said something, but she did not reply. Figuring that she had the right idea, I began my own routine, a series of mental and physical exercises designed to mimic response to unseen enemies, and after a couple of hours, I was ready for a break but she was, if anything, accelerating.

I said, "Are you even there?"

Her eyes seemed to focus for the first time. "I'm in any number of places."

"Really," I said. "Such as?"

She was performing deep knee-bends at the time, all with the unchanging rhythm of a piston, the precision greater than any I'd seen in any squad formation or any exercise by any merely human athlete. Her respiration, deep but not labored, forced her words into controlled bursts, in rhythm similar to Hvask's—but Hvask had been laboring at rest, and this woman was laboring with activity that would have pushed many people to exhaustion.

"Some of the places I am are just virtual models. They keep my mind occupied with entertaining problems while my operators run my body through the intense tedium of physical upkeep. I have always despised repetitive activities like this and appreciate not having to be present for it. If you mean to ask whether I noticed your presence here, the answer is I that I knew you were here but found it irrelevant. Understand that you may find me more talkative when interaction is necessary."

I said, "Thank you."

"I perceive the sarcasm but say: you're welcome."

She had not missed a beat.

I said, "Do you know what Griff's up to?"

"Yes. I find it pointless and tragic. I don't know whether you'll agree with me. I think you'll either also find it pointless and tragic or consider it noble enough to emulate, which would define you as also pointless and tragic. I'm here because my operators in the AIsource find it convenient to have a human figure as their representative in this project."

"Which is?"

"Up to him to explain, of course. You cannot have spent even your brief time in the same house with me and come to consider me capable of being seduced into giving up vital information. You'd have more luck trying your gentle interrogation techniques with the Riirgaan. At least he would have entertained you with his theological models. Is there anything else, Mr. Esker?"

I had spent time with murderers, predators, torturers, war criminals and people who had so obliterated whatever soul they'd been born with that they might not have recognized another human being even if a helpful annotator had drawn a red line around them and identified the nature of the organism with labels. I had seen people commit acts of incredible depravity, for momentary military advantage, and not shown enough emotion to flare their nostrils. I had seen the chill of sociopathy, and had even detected it, more than once, growing in myself, a by-product of the life I'd lived. But this woman was cold in a way that I'd never known, bearing the kind of chill that came with spending all her time in a teeming internal landscape designed by her masters, while all human concerns were reduced to contrast to a patch of detail almost too small to be noticed.

I had seen awful things in my line, but I think that what I said next came from the small part of myself still capable of feeling horror. "Is it ever lonely?"

"Do you mean, life as what I am?"

"Yes."

"I am never lonely, Mr. Esker. My operators always keep me company. Interaction with other human beings is not impossible, but it is superfluous. Whatever else I might think of you, you are too intelligent a man to take this personally. Interaction with you requires a degree of focus more difficult than not taking notice of you."

I could only return to sarcasm. "Thank you."

Her expression did not change. "For the first time it occurs to me that these questions might come, at least partially, from sexual longing. The prospect is as dull to me as this physical activity, but if it's what you want, I have no problem indulging you. Just be aware that it will be a mechanical activity without passion, also shepherded by my operators. I will not be present for it any more than I have been present for this. It will not bother me nor engage me. Is this what you want?"

I confess it; I'd had the thought. I had not intended to pursue it, mostly because it had not

occurred to me, even in the slightest, that she might be interested. I was also not the kind of guy who poached on the relationships of others, even if it now seemed to me that whatever physical arrangements existed between Yrana and Griff could not have possibly ascended to the level of relationship. The woman was an operating system running multiple programs simultaneously, and any people who happened to exist anywhere near her amounted only to the smallest and most insignificant.

I said, "No. It is not anything I want."

She said, "Then we will speak again when there is something to speak about."

She had not paused in her workout for even a moment during our conversation, and so it would be inaccurate to say that she went back to what she was doing—but she did go back to it in the vast unknowable space behind her eyes, orbs that could register my presence but had written it off as irrelevant, of no possible interest to her.

I stayed long enough to satisfy myself that she was gone and went back into the house to shower, prior to going out.

* * *

I wandered in through one of the city's more dangerous sections and was set upon by a gang of four, three women and one man, who wanted to rob me. All had low-level enhancements that would have rendered them lethal to most human beings. For me, it was a routine incident with nothing to distinguish it. It did little to dispel my tension.

By twilight I was with Hvask again.

She said, "You have not found yourself a life."

She occupied the same backyard lounge where I'd found her the last time. She might have even been wearing the same clothes, but somehow I didn't think so. The sameness was her situation, not her externals.

The Bursteeni have a saying: The essential nature of damnation is that it's eternal.

I said, "You should take your own advice."

"This is how I process my shame. I can tell that it's not the way you do."

I had somehow not thought of my current life in those terms and wasn't sure that I agreed with the characterization, but I also couldn't think of any argument that would mark her as wrong. "Maybe it's been processed enough?"

"I know exactly how long I will have to stay like this. It will be years, yet."

"Tell you what," I said. "Free yourself from this self-imposed prison and start trying to live again. I will drop my interest in Griff's project and travel with you, anywhere you want to go. It will not be love, and nothing like a marriage, but it would have to be better than holding on to our respective bullshit. I'd do it in a minute."

"I believe you would. But your sins are not as terrible as mine."

I said, "Do you know the most insidious thing about guilt? Not that it makes us any better. Just that if it's sufficiently terrible, we water it like a plant we raised from a seed. We raise it until no human arms could possibly carry it. I'm telling you that I'm willing to walk away from mine if you're willing to walk away from yours. That can be our project, in the time we have left."

She was silent for so long that I feared I'd been too eloquent and hand-walked her to a yes. And *feared* was the right word. In truth, I did not want redemption any more than she did, and offered a ladder up only because of some vestigial sense of duty.

Then, just as I had made up my mind that she would take me up on my offer, she said, "Do you want to know about your new acquaintances, or not?"

Back to business. I relaxed. "I do."

"Then please take the advice already given. Run."

I showed teeth. "Anything more specific than that?"

"Certainly. Run far away."

"Hvask . . ."

"Very *very* far away."

"*Hvask.*"

“Sit down. I have intelligence. Just not any advisories more concrete than that.”

I sat, and she briefed me while her attendants fluttered and fussed and added some substances to her bloodstream while removing others, in a great ongoing project that appeared to affect her motionless hulk not at all.

She did have information for me, more than I ever could have wanted.

She knew Griff's birth name and his real name, neither of which gave me any more than his current alias. She unsurprisingly told me that Griff's repeated nonsensical claims of having fought in “every” war was lunatic hyperbole. He had participated in about twenty, some briefly, some for years at a time. He had been a man useful for dirty jobs, and he had committed more than his share, including at least one close-quarters assassination of a planetary saint, beloved by his constituency but loathed by the parties that made money off of him. There was still a significant bounty on his head for that crime alone, and he'd remained free many light-years away not because the aggrieved couldn't find him but because of the staggering political barriers to arranging the necessary extradition. Such things had been difficult before the Confederacy broke up and were next to impossible now that so much of its official territory was now either burned-out from the war or separated into little independent fiefdoms.

At least twice during his time on this planet independent contractors had come after him in isolated places, intent on snatching him. There were no witnesses to whatever happened, but two men and one woman had been found dead, and one, if alive, would have had to go find a place he could pay to grow him a new arm.

I noted this and thought of the evening I'd approached him, intent only on conversation. How close had I become to being yet another body, left cooling on the path? Had I still been close when we spent those hours in that Tchi's establishment? There was no way of knowing. But it occurred to me that it might have been easier, in the long run, if he'd made his move and I'd been forced to drop him, in self-defense. It would have never struck me as any more than a typical encounter with just another traumatized, hair-trigger casualty of war whose experiences had left him too dangerous to approach.

He might still be. The demonstrated nanotech aside—and I had no real proof that it was any more special than the nanotech humanity was familiar with—this whole project of his could have been the delusion of a man who wanted a perfect war and could only concoct one in his imagination.

The available information about Yrana and *Bob* argued against this.

Bob's real name was exactly as hard to pronounce as I expected, the usual Riirgaan combination of a deep throat-cleaning and glottal pop. He had been in the war and had been given custody of a human world for a while. The world in question had begun the conflict with a population of about three quarters of a billion and had reached post-war with about fifty thousand.

What *Bob* had done, what he was known to have done, was introduce into all distributed food supplies a viral agent that interfered with the absorption of calories. The civilian population had eaten as much as they wanted, considered themselves lucky to live on a planet with a military governor who didn't want them dead, and gradually grown weaker and thinner until they were skeletons wrapped in thin layers of skin. By then, of course, all available supplies were infected and there was nobody with enough strength to fight, let alone anybody to fight for uninfected food.

After the war, he'd disappeared and even the Riirgaans, intent on living with the declared peace, had gone along with the calls for his head.

I remembered him praying for *more dead humans*. “Why is he still free if anyone knows his whereabouts?”

“He made a deal,” Hvask said. “Provided vital intelligence.”

“A deal that was worth letting him escape prosecution for three quarters of a billion dead?”

“Apparently,” Hvask said. “Our authorities might have pursued it, but he went and sold himself again. He's officially an AIsorce asset now. Protected under diplomatic immunity.”

“I could still kill him myself.”

“The AIsorce don't take well to people murdering their assets. And you would, of course,

likely ruin whatever operation you have going on with this Griff person.”

Which, of course, might be worth it. I rested my chin on my knuckles, contemplated the satisfaction I would get about adding the contents of one Riirgaan corpse to the blood on my hands, and decided with great unhappiness that I needed to put that project off to later, if at all. “And the pet woman?”

“Her identity, pre-alteration, is unknown; they tend to be, as the lengths the AIsorce go to, in order to avoid them ever being recognized by anybody they might have known during their prior lives does include substantial cosmetic alteration. They might have changed her face, her shape, her skin color, her apparent age, her gender; she could have been anybody, to start with, and her reasons for becoming a fully-integrated pet with no past might have included anything from unbearable personal trauma to desperation to avoid personal prosecution.”

“Or,” I said, “fanaticism.”

“Yes. We don’t necessarily know that she was running from something. She also might have been running *to* something. Whatever greater existence she thought the AIsorce could promise her.”

I could certainly testify that she seemed to have enough occupying the confines of a once-human skull to distract from whatever pull the human world could possibly have on her. But that didn’t explain what she was doing with Griff, whether what she was intent on helping him accomplish was for the benefit of her masters, or merely a project that she was being allowed to get involved with, in between whatever they might want to order her to do. With assassination and genocide and whatever awful crimes existed in my own past already existing in that house, her own agenda could have been anything at all. Though a full charting of the possibilities would certainly grow sparser on the part of the curve that mapped anything possibly good.

Hvask said, “That look in your eyes. You’re fascinated.”

“I am.”

“Please don’t pretend that your interest in finding out has anything to do with preventing whatever evil purpose they might intend to pursue. You are caught by the joy of the thing, by the opportunity to be near the chaos, and likely part of it, whenever it manifests.”

This hurt. It was also likely true.

I said, “Maybe I can do both.”

“Maybe you can. Just don’t pretend that any positive result is anything but incidental.”

There are times in the life of any mercenary soldier when whatever justifications we employ to support our causes grow so thin that the hollowness behind them can be seen. But I was used to that. I had fought in many wars and come to know what they usually were: which is to say, the stain left behind when the justifications were burned away by blood.

I said, “You know me so well, Hvask.”

And she said, “I wish I didn’t. Knowing so many like you is the key reason I choose to live like this.”

* * *

Griff returned to the house with a limp and a lump on his forehead. But even without these leftover wounds—wounds he could have had healed with a quick visit to a med booth—I would have known that he’d been fighting somebody and that it had been serious. What I sensed in him was not the leftover trauma of someone who’d had to fight, but the spent hunger of someone who’d needed to, in order to satisfy a need for the experience, an itch that could not be satisfied any other way. I confess to feeling left out. I always felt the same hunger.

He said very little to me upon his return. Instead he communicated something silent to Yrana, which she immediately understood. They vanished together, inside their shared quarters, and made not a sound for the following three hours. *Bob* emerged only to collect a meal of what looked like sand from the house’s shared larder and paused in the center of our shared living room just long enough to glance at me, in the chair where I sat trying to read some article I’d accessed on the hytex. I couldn’t tell whether he was wondering why I didn’t find some better activity to occupy myself, or giving me a paradoxically human leer, about whatever was going on in there.

Then Griff emerged alone, with his minor battle wounds gone and a fresh walkaday suit on his back.

He said one word. "Dinner."

I got up and followed him out the door, into a late afternoon that had begun to transition to twilight. It was a warm day, and this added to an environmental odor rare in this city and on this planet: something was burning. Out of wartime habit, I took a deep breath and tried to catalogue the ingredients, in particular to determine whether any of it was flesh. But it was just a haze of something that might have come from outdoor cooking, or a burn-off of some of the forested land outside the city. If it changed the chemistry between Griff and myself, the key effect was a little added alert on my part, the sense as he led me into some of the older and more labyrinthine sections of the city.

By the time we entered a twisted little alley so narrow that we could only walk in single file, and in particular a part of that alley where the shadows had gathered in inky wells, I was waiting for him to whirl and confront me.

He did, and when he did, I was ready.

What followed was a flurry of violence so brief that it would not have outlasted any known word for "confrontation." He had the point of his knife aimed at my belly. I had the cutting edge of mine at his throat. We each had a restraining hand on the other's relevant wrist. What I can say of the moment was that I'd won. If we both went any further, with our current strategies, he would have bled out in seconds. I would have had time for the most miserable crawl of my life, in search of help. Of course, there were multiple ways to alter our strategies, at this juncture. It was still anyone's fight, even if the odds right now favored me.

He had a decision to make.

The knowledge raged in his eyes. "You do know that this is not a stalemate. I could kill you with a twitch."

"You could," I agreed. "Will you?"

A full transcript of the eye-contact conversation that followed might have filled volumes.

He said, "You know where I was? This past week?"

"Are you going to tell me?"

"There was an old enemy, a minor one from one of my past wars. He was not a major figure but his incompetence got some people I cared about killed. Many of them, in fact. I figured that with this project heating up, it was time to take him off the board."

"And did you?"

"No. It turns out that I don't want to spill blood, anymore, not if I don't have to. I don't even want human scum to die, anymore. I may think I want it, but my instincts rebel."

"And?"

He withdrew his knife tip. "Dinner."

I withdrew my blade.

This is where a true bastard might have waited for me to relax and had another go.

I think the deciding factor for him was the knowledge that I would not relax, that I had in fact never relaxed. And maybe hunger, as well. I think he would have preferred to clean off and go have his meal with me left behind in that alley, but that he appreciated how continuing to pursue a fight to the death would have meant sacrificing the more pressing hunger to the needs of the other.

In any event, I allowed him to lead me to a little hole-in-the-wall place with no sign, beneath an ornate Bursteeni arch. Had I really given a damn about what we were going to eat, my crest might have fallen at that.

It is not that I hate Bursteeni cuisine, which to my palate remains edible even if it is also excessively sweet. It is that I despise Bursteeni table service, which is so obsequious that it feels like a meal-long apology. This went against my personal dining preferences. I like my meat bleeding and the waitstaff a little surly.

There were fifteen tables in a circular dining room where most of the ambience was the projected outlines of Bursteeni symbols, circling the walls like constellations projected from a lamp

in a human nursery. The music was low and had the cloying quality Bursteeni seem to prefer. I did not know enough of their tongue to decode the lyrics, sung by high voices I assumed to be Bursteeni children. Had I been dining there alone, or not still feeling the phantom pressure of Griff's dagger against my midsection, I might have stormed out or asked the Bursteeni proprietor, a bowing figure who seemed to regard us as his most honored guests ever, to turn it off.

Our mutual silent negotiation led us both to a table at the center of the room, giving neither one of us the tactical advantage of a wall at our back.

The waiter brought waters tinged with some blue Bursteeni flavoring and went off to get our appetizers. They are automatic in Bursteeni dining establishments. For reasons that defy explanation, they consider it rude to allow the ordering of the main course before the appetizers, which are chosen by the house, are fully consumed.

Neither one of us dug in. We were both still watching for another lunge.

I said, "You reserved the place."

"Yes. Before the Princess told me what you'd been doing."

"The princess?"

"A name I sometimes use for Yrana. It's appropriate enough, believe me."

This had the ring of a private joke, and private jokes do not become private jokes unless they're either based on truth, or sarcastic mockery of the truth. "She's the least princess-like woman I've ever met."

"Yes. Now. She's a Pet, not the person she used to be. But she comes from ridiculous privilege, wealth on a scale that might as well be royalty. It affects her personality still. She's fully-owned, all right, but still regal."

"Like a cat," I said.

They were a legendary companion species from the homeworld. They were rumored to still exist, in a few places. I had never seen one.

I did not remark on the oddness of Yrana giving up whatever life that had been, in order to operate as fully owned property of alien intelligences. I'd known enough children of the race to know that sometimes it was a life burden that needed to be fled. Instead, I just waited for Griff to ask a question of his own, and after a fleeting shift of agenda it came, the only question he could have asked.

He said, "What makes you think you could spy on me?"

I said, "Self-protection. You've given me nothing to go on. I wasn't reporting you, not to anyone who would share what I knew. I was learning what I could about you, from a source I trusted."

"An intelligence source you trusted. An inactive intelligence source you trusted. You will never know everything there is to know about me."

"No," I agreed. "Or you, me."

"Incorrect. The backers of this project are the most prolific gatherers of information in the history of the Universe. They were watching you and taking notes from the moment you started gulping air. They have told me everything important about you, including much that you neglected to tell."

"And yet you're so afraid of me that you're ready to kill at the mere possibility that I might try to improve my own store of information. Seems a bit one-sided."

He grunted. He sipped his Bursteeni water. He made a face. He put the glass down.

I said, "If you think I'm too untrustworthy to work with, tell me now and I can walk away, with nothing to use against you. Or tell me nothing and find some other project to occupy my time. I have no problem with it going either of those two ways. Or with us taking out the knives again. I'm willing to do that."

He maintained direct eye contact, furious, for a full minute.

Then the proprietor of the place placed our appetizers on the table in front of us. It was so soon in the meal that they must have been pre-made, and I have no idea what they were: a kind of leafy salad, covered with some kind of lumpy glop. Service included an explanatory note in Mercantile, for the benefit of the human beings who might have otherwise had no idea what

they were eating.

I did not glance down to read it. Neither did he.

After a bit he said, “Forgive my anger. I thought you were endangering the project, maybe even trying to stop it.”

“Should I?”

“You cannot. Even if you killed me right now, my backers would just find another man like me. It is better to have me, and another like you who can exercise judgement.”

“Then I need to know more.”

He sighed. “I am not planning a terrorist act or any war that affects human populations. What I intend—at least on my own part—is bigger than any human concerns, and outside all human concerns. It will take place far away from any human population, and for that matter far away from any sentient population of any kind. I wouldn’t mind adding a few billion Riirgaan or Tchi war dead to the last conflict’s tally; I hate the bastards and would love to do to them what they tried to do to us. But this is not that kind of battle. Not for me. Not one drop of living blood will be spilled. Does that satisfy you?”

“It’s a start. If I choose to believe it.”

“Trust me. I need someone without the nihilistic impulse.”

I didn’t know how to respond to that. I was unsure I fit the description.

He apparently decided to take my silence as assent.

“Tomorrow, if you still agree to accompany me off-world, I will take you on a journey to somewhere I am not eager to talk about. It is well outside human space and hidden from human eyes by technologies as advanced as those nanites I showed you. The journey will involve four years in bluegel suspension, each way. It would take a lot more, much much more from our current position, but we will have the extra advantage of AIsource tech. I think they could get us there almost simultaneously, but require the eight years as a sign of dedication. Eight years gone from the dreary process of human civilization, with no one knowing where you have gone; eight years of committing to this cause, without making any further attempt to obtain the specifics. I give you my word that insofar as it is under my control you will survive this journey and the journey back to any civilized port convenient to us, including this one. When you see what I have to show you, and not before, I will give you the remaining details and you may decide whether you still want to be involved. That is as specific as I am comfortable with, right now. But you will have to satisfy yourself with what satisfies me, briefings only on a need-to-know basis. Is that satisfactory?”

“I’ll tell you after dinner. When you’ll need to know.”

He was not a man given to laughter. Before then I might have heard an audible smirk, once. What he did at that moment was, I supposed, his version of a belly laugh, and it turned out that his version of the function was to flash a wide grin and to hyperventilate, all without making an audible sound. He wasn’t the first person I’d met whose most powerful laugh was inaudible, but the first I’d met who struck me as having trained it to inaudibility; who likely considered even that much a compromise with the silence.

He glanced down at the advisory card and read it aloud—a good thing in that it advised both of us that the Bursteeni plant was toxic to human beings and should not be consumed. We were only to eat the lumpy white garnish.

We ate the lumpy white garnish.

I report that the purpose of the plant material was to leak the toxins into the white goo, lending it a euphoric mildly paralytic quality. It was a pleasant form of paralysis that caused us to slur our words though it did not otherwise act as intoxicant. We became comical. It lent clownishness to our voices and served the apparent purpose of making light matters a bit more natural for conversation, than the grim ones that would otherwise command our focus.

Later, much later, I would read something to the effect that Bursteeni chefs tailor their mood-altering appetizers to counter any troubles that diners bring in with them, and think: *hub. They don’t trust their diners to order cocktails.* A dinner meeting between two morose and martial humans, clearly unpleasant even if there was no way the proprietor could have known that

they were ten minutes from trying to kill each other; all defused by a mild poison made to make them sound like clowns. And I would think: *the Bursteeni, damn them, aren't entirely stupid.*

For a bit we talked about anything but our war experiences or our journey of the next day. I spoke of a stupid barracks-mate who had fallen in love with an adopted local animal who shared his bed but sprayed the place with an odor that made raw sewage a comparative perfume; and he spoke of an eccentric woman he had known whose theories about the structure of the Universe made her willingness to love anyone who made the request with any level of reasonable politeness a case of having to wonder if one attribute was sufficient reason to take advantage of the other.

It was, god help me, fun.

Fun enough that we staggered home with our differences forgotten.

And in the morning, I welcomed his invitation to wrap up any business I had in the city, before our journey to whatever mission he'd been planning, and discovered that I'd never really had any choice at all.

* * *

It made sense, I supposed, to tell Hvask that I'd be out of contact for a while, maybe forever, to remove myself from whatever function I might have had in the ruined life she'd decreed for herself.

I entered her home and made my way to the place where she was tended by her machines.

She did not respond to my hellos.

"Hvask?"

She looked like she had on my last two visits, except for the unmistakable impression that she'd somehow gained even more mass: not more physical substance but certainly more debt to gravity. Her mouth hung open. The sense she'd given before, of a human being who had become weighed down by a terrible and unreconcilable knowledge, was now absent. She was just meat.

"Hvask!"

Those fiercely despairing eyes were now blank and staring, what a medtech of my acquaintance had once called "doll's eyes." They registered the world not at all, and were windows to no soul.

"God damn it, Hvask. God damn it."

She was not present in her own head to hear me.

Just to check I went back into the house and obtained a handheld to shine in those eyes, finding, of course, that they did not dilate, that they did not even tear up. There were no remaining reflexes. She, the particular collection of memories and behaviors that made up the person I'd known, had been erased.

The machines still circled her and still kept her alive, and would I supposed always keep her alive, as long as the chemical processes that maintained life continued without purpose. But that mind would no longer analyze data and would no longer remember whatever foul decisions she'd once had to make, let alone waste any neural decisions on regretting them.

"You didn't deserve this, Hvask."

And I knew this was a lie, because I knew some of the things she had been involved with and by extension that if there's any value in debating what a person deserved, she deserved much worse.

But I had connected with her pain and felt her connect, at least a little, with mine. The overwhelming impression of her absence was that the Universe was now smoother, but less interesting.

The mechanisms that cared for her did not possess an interface that would cooperate with the curiosity of a mere occasional visitor, that is if they even recognized any difference between the person who had lived and the organism of mere flesh who they continued to nurse. There was no form of visual of neural feedback I could access, for a clue to the moment when what made her a person passed from this world into the next. But there were ways of maximizing the data I could possess, and as I did, I reached the point where I knew what I needed to know:

that this was not something that had happened to her, but something that had been done to her. Instructions had been uploaded to her life support, to spare her the pain that went along with thought.

Somebody wanted her to become this, and the chief suspect was Griff, who just last night had almost killed me for associating with her.

I wanted to kill Griff, now; I really did. But I was disturbed by the bloodlessness of this murder, if murder it could be called. If I'd found her with her throat slit, or with her heart carved out, or with her skull caved in from a blow with blunt object; hell, if the whole house had been burned down and she'd been reduced to blackened meat; or if a bomb had destroyed the entire neighborhood, I might have been more willing to believe that he'd done this. I did not know Yrana or *Bob* enough to know whether this made more sense for either, but even if I found out that it was one of them, I would then have to determine whether Griff had signed off on it, or whether the culprit had destroyed her out of a misplaced loyalty to what they thought Griff would have wanted.

This would affect whether I killed them all or only one or two of them.

But I knew, without rage, that it was now my primary mission.

I murmured a soft goodbye to my old information source and headed out into the street, leaving the mechanisms to do what they were best at, caring for a plant.

And of the walk back to the villa I can tell you very little. I remember that it was a very beautiful day, perfumed with the aromatic flowers plentiful in that part of the city. I remember the sky being very bright and very blue. I remember that somewhere along the way I bought a sweet drink from a vendor, and that this was a banal detail on a day that I expected would end with me killing somebody, but the kind of banality I had lived with before, and if I remained the kind of man I'd always been, would live with again.

I remember no other transition before I was taken.

I did not actually experience that. I can only reconstruct it.

The figure, human or Tchi, has been waiting for me. This has involved small miracles of stealth, absolute knowledge of where I would be at a given moment. I am unprepared when the teemer is directed at my eyes, when the fractal image it admits overwhelms my consciousness and drops me like a rag doll. I fall down, effectively comatose. I am transported out of public spaces and into a cargo container; where I remain as I am transported to orbit and shipped out of system.

* * *

Dreams that lasted years dissipated all at once.

I found myself coughing in a vessel of sticky bluegel, while Griff glared at me the way you have to glare at an untrustworthy ally who you have been storing in a box.

"You b-bastard."

"That's no insult," he said. "That's an accurate diagnosis."

"Traitor, then."

"I have not broken any promises to you."

The gel that remained in my windpipe trickled toward my lungs, and I coughed until my chest hurt: a common after-effect of the suspension process. I managed to ask a question. "Four years?"

"Seven," Griff said.

"Seven?"

"I know it's not what you agreed to. But did you really have anywhere pressing to go?"

I did not, dammit. I had no life, no family that knew who I was, nobody who would have missed me. With Hvask gone, the closest thing I had to a community was quite possibly this piece of garbage who might have killed her. "Why seven?"

"Our destination moved. Our nav-system required many course corrections. Our flight path was not a straight line, but a spiral, or rather a corkscrew, doing endless loops along our target's trajectory until its defense systems were willing to let us approach without any further attempts at evasion."

“Yes. And what else happened?”

He hesitated. “The AIs have politics, just as we do. There are some among them who object to our project. We had to be diverted until they could come up with a diplomatic solution.”

Bluegel suspension affects different people differently. Some report ravenous hunger. Some are overcome with desire. Others feel the sadness that afflicts some people on waking from deep sleep, the longing for the oblivion that has ejected them. I felt a certain purity of rage. “Very nice. And did you have to kill her?”

Was that regret in his eyes? Sorrow that I would blame him for such a dishonorable killing? “Hvask? I did not. I resented you sharing our enterprise, but she did not have the power or influence to stop us.”

“Yrana, then. Or *Bob*.”

“I don’t know for sure. It could have been one of her other enemies. She must have had many.”

And that was as far as his sympathy went, really. Somebody who had filled some value of friend to me was dead, and he now put that fact in a separate box, for me to investigate later if I really thought the effort worth the trouble.

He shifted topics. “The three of us have been awake for a week now, discussing what to do with you. I won’t tell you which of the others argued for your life and which argued for you to be jettisoned somewhere in deep space.”

“*Bob*, I suppose.”

“All you need to know is that I cast the deciding vote. You’re alive because I like you and I have a purpose for you. And because I want your eyes on the sight that we have traveled so far to see.”

“G-go to hell,” I said.

His lips twitched. “That’s the very point, Esker. I intend to spend the rest of my life there.”

* * *

Bluegel decontamination is the most unpleasant part of the suspension process. It involves the applications of multiple caustics, some of which are unpleasantly hot and others of which are gruesomely caustic. There’s a phase near the end that is downright pleasant. By the time you may leave the crypt, there’s no longer any gel in your hair or caked on the tips of your eyelashes. You are likely as clean as you’ve ever been, and you have been injected with enough stimulants to keep you awake for the better part of a day. A crash always ensues, when that interval is done, and I knew that time was coming, and as a result I knew that a fight would be a bad idea, because unless I made it final it would only leave me vulnerable when I had to sleep like the dead.

Pointless. When, as Griff had pointed out, they had not spaced me.

The servitors printed some new clothes for me, blue underwear and a yellow jumpsuit the consistency of paper, that I donned without complaint. I also drank four tall glasses of water, to combat a lingering gel taste in my mouth. Against my will I had to judge how I always felt after a trip in bluegel: good, filled with energy, and slightly sad because arrival at any destination usually meant that I was headed for a fight, with all the suffering and helplessness that implied.

Then I was allowed out into the ship proper.

It was not huge. It amounted to one corridor with three sets of quarters, each with a name emblazoned on its programmable name plate. One read *Bob* and one read *Griff* and one, that opened to my touch, bore my name. What lay inside was not a glorious stateroom: just a pull-down bed with a sonic shower stall. I nodded and climbed a short set of stairs to another sliding door that demonstrated its soundproofing by admitting the sounds of a spirited argument at the instant the seal was broken.

The common room was surprisingly spacious. It had an arched ceiling a lot like those of some churches I’d seen, and three chairs built for the human posterior as well as one built to accommodate the lumpier Riirgaan variety. The walls were monochrome and without distracting design elements. All faced what I supposed to be the forward bulkhead, fully opaque without a

graphic to render it a distraction from what was otherwise the most sterile of surroundings.

Both Griff and Yrana wore printed overalls like my own, though Yrana's collar-line was extra low in the back to accommodate the tether that attached her to her interface sphere. In a change of pace, it was *Bob* who was nearly naked now, wearing nothing but a light skirt to hide the Riirgaan version of genitalia. All three were smiling, though the human versions were not at all warm, and the Riirгаа's grin was just the curve of *Bob's* jawline, not a pretense of friendship but a function of his skull structure.

Yrana spoke first, with the same cool disdain that I'd learned was typical of her. "In case you're wondering, this vessel is the *Malsumis*."

I could not have cared less. "Did you kill her, Yrana?"

"Would denying it serve any purpose?"

"She was a friend." The word came unnaturally to my tongue, and I felt it necessary to repeat myself, as if only saying it more than once could have rendered it intelligible. "A *friend*. Did you kill her?"

"I cannot provide a denial you would believe. But what you need to consider is that through my interface I am attached to virtually unlimited computing power. Through my operators I can calculate consequences better than you ever have, in specific whether I would benefit from murdering a woman who was no threat to me or to this endeavor. Do you believe that I would do anything so pointless?"

"For someone who says she cannot provide a denial, that comes pretty close."

"It is not a denial. It is a summary of the key issue you need to weigh."

"Don't give me that," I snapped. "I don't know what's going on here. I have no idea what advantages or disadvantages would go along with killing her."

"No, you do not. My operators do work in mysterious ways. But you are about to learn some more about what we're doing. You may gather it now and apply it at leisure to the problem at hand."

Damned if she didn't have a point. I was outraged, and I wanted to snap her neck, but she had a point. I was in an information deficit.

Bob stepped forward, gave the little head-bob that preceded the majority of his contributions to any discuss, and said, "You know that, by contrast, I am a murderer. I have murdered many human beings. You know that I would have been pleased to murder another. What protects me from your anger now is the knowledge that I am not the only sentient in this room who has taken life, and that my past does not make me any more likely a suspect than Griff or yourself. I only present the case Yrana has, that given the available facts, there is no way you could know for sure."

I said, "That's the only thing keeping you alive right now."

"Yes," he said, with a little eruption of the trilling that Riirgaans use for laughter. "I do believe that this is the point I just made."

If he had said this to me on back in civilization, I might have murdered him right then, perhaps even murdered all of them, and taken the resulting uncertainty as the cost of doing business. But their bland logic had forced me into a logic almost as cold and forced me to remember that I had no idea where in the Universe they'd taken me. For the time being I would have to rely on them to get me back to the part of the Universe inhabited by human beings.

So I grunted and said, "Where are we?"

"That," Griff said, "is what it's now time to show you. Please be seated. I'm afraid that what I'm about to reveal may come as a shock."

If anybody else had said this, I might have laughed in his face. The things I had seen in war included many things that could be called unthinkable and many that were inconceivable. *Shock*, applied to sights too horrendous for the human mind to fathom, had long ago fallen into the category of civilian concepts, the affliction that only affected comfortable people who had never had their capacity for understanding stretched to the breaking point. But it was Griff who had said this, Griff who had included the phrase, *the likes of us*.

I found that I believed him, and I sat, my heart stony.

I feared what I was about to say, and I was determined to not let him impress me.

"Yrana," he said. "Show him the view from the bow."

The lights dimmed, and the forward arching wall became a viewscreen, displaying the nearest planetary object.

The giant figure of a man was orbited by two moons, one that Griff would later tell me was approximately the classical size of the home world, and one of which was the approximate size of the home world's legendary satellite; and as it happened, both were between us and the Colossus, casting their respective shadow against his impossible abdomen.

He dwarfed them, the scale that of an athlete kicking balls on a playing field, and the sight was so clearly insane that the shock Griff had promised almost leaped up and swallowed me.

"I'll spare you the math," Griff said. "He's 140,000 kilometers long. Tall, I suppose. About nine to ten times the size of those planets that orbit him."

It was impossible to believe in any race, including any as vainglorious as ours or any of powerful as the AIsorce, willing to go to whatever insane effort would have been involved in creating that large a representation of the human form.

And was it a representation, really? As sculptures go, the Colossus was an exceedingly crude one. It had a head and it had a torso and it had a pair of legs and it had hands and it floated there in space, with its arms and legs spread in what amounted to a parody of that famous anatomical drawing by the artist whose name I could not remember. (I later made a point of looking it up and the drawing was called "The Vitruvian Man," and it was drawn by some past savant named Da Vinci.) But it looked crude. No effort had been made to give the figure more than the crudest of faces. It just had the suggestion of eyes and the suggestion of a mouth, just as its body outline provided only the suggestion of abdominal muscles and the other muscle groups of the male form. I confess being mildly relieved that there was no penis, unwillingly drifting into thoughts of just how big one would have had to be, if proportional with the rest of him and after some unprofitable thoughts of that sort, finally arriving at the part that finally connected this madness with prior knowledge.

I managed to say it. "The Silent Colossus of Parnajan?"

"Yes," Griff said.

* * *

Then the thing itself revealed what he had been about to tell me.

It moved.

Rather, it thrashed. Its giant arms and legs convulsed and grasped for some form of purchase in the void. Its simple face contorted in a caricature of a scream, that of course made no sound, and that then settled into a devastated grimace, an awareness that it was damned.

I became aware of pressure on my back. It was the chamber bulkhead. I had backed away in a hurry, not even aware that I was moving until I met the first obstruction.

"It's alive," I said.

"'Alive' is debatable," Griff replied. "And I prefer the pronoun, *he*."

I almost protested that this was impossible. What stopped me was the awareness that one of them, if not Griff then Yrana or *Bob*, would have immediately responded that the evidence of my eyes proved the word inapplicable.

Griff was a distant voice at the edges of my consciousness, the actual sight of him unable to compete with the impossible image. "It's funny. Drunken fools have been regaling each other with legends of the Silent Colossus for generations. They all agree that he's The Silent Colossus of *Parnajan*. But nobody has ever asked just what the word *Parnajan* communicates. I suppose most people think it's a place. What it is, is a proper name. That poor bastard out there began life as a man."

"A man named Parnajan."

"A monster named Parnajan. One whose history proved him worse than either of us, by a factor of magnitude."

One corner of the projection now became the inserted representation of a man's face. It was no one I recognized, though I of course had no reason to recognize this figure whose existence

had not been known to me before a few seconds ago. He had the built-in anonymity that is equally appropriate to those who should be anonymous and those who require anonymity to escape the wrath of a humanity they have wronged; his eyes were like marbles, and the set of his jaw reflected no personality at all. If there was anything I found notable it was the patches of darkness under his broad almond eyes.

But it was also not hard to pick out the statue's resemblance to the man.

"He fought in many wars. Seven thousand years ago. I don't suppose there's a reason to go into his history. Suffice it to say that he was known for his ability to survive the worst that enemies could throw at him and for his willingness to then paint the landscape with their blood. At a certain point he found himself with a debt he couldn't pay, not to other human beings but to a faction of the AIsource, and he chose to become this because it was the best of multiple options he was offered. He's aware of his predicament. Screaming, eternally. But a person. Not the Silent Colossus of Parnajan. But the Silent Colossus, colon, Parnajan."

I have witnessed any number of things too terrible to even imagine, but the premise that this gigantic, awful, literally damned thing had been a person reduced them all to children's stories.

Griff continued: "He's obviously no longer made of flesh. Flesh would not survive the vacuum, or the background radiation, or the tidal forces that go along with being the shape of a human being but the size of a planet. What he is, really, is a nanite swarm, his smallest components like the ones I showed you before; the lot of them controlled by a machine in another plane, in aggregate so vast that your brain would probably snap in two trying to imagine it. I am not smart enough to understand the specs. Probably no human being is; it's AIsource tech, after all. But to him it's like being any other body in constant free fall. He can feel his lack of mooring in space, and the positions of his own limbs, and is aware of the passage of time, but is otherwise alone with his thoughts. You will forgive me if I say that after all the time he's been here, they're likely not worth listening to. Or incomprehensible. Or mad.

"I don't know how he entered the realm of urban legend. Perhaps our backers spread the word. Perhaps some fool passed through this system and returned with the story that he told with reasonable accuracy but that no one else thought sensible enough to go out and confirm. It's, you'll forgive me, a small mystery. I suppose our sponsors considered the urban legend useful, to keep the idea of Parnajan alive until some fool like myself came along, to see him as the opportunity he represents: the opportunity only a man like myself could want."

I could barely speak for the drumbeat in my ears. I had not yet put together what Griff was talking about, but I was something like him and so must have had some embryonic idea, must have felt some of the same pull that had called him from the interregnum between wars, to this place that could give him the only thing he wanted.

Yrana interrupted: "He's just become aware of us."

I said, "How?"

"My operators don't tell me everything. I know that his makers did not provide him with eyes, and the deep-space environment suggests that they wouldn't have wasted their time providing him with a sense of sound. He does have other means, unknown to me, of measuring alterations in his environment. It's possible that he, like me, gets regular internal advisories."

I managed to wrest my attention from the leviathan thrashing about before us, to the man not quite a companion, not quite an enemy, who had brought me here.

What had he said, that first day?

The greatest battle any human being has ever fought.

I had many times in my life killed because it was the only way to stay alive. I had killed many times in my life, sometimes because just to stay alive, because I somehow believed in the cause I fought for. I had somehow gotten to my current age, after wading through all those rivers of blood, without ever knowing what it was like to be driven to murder by sheer obscenity.

It made me unpredictable, I suppose.

Griff did not seem prepared for my punch to his throat.

It was a killing blow. Flatten a man's windpipe, and you might finish the job right then and there. Even if you don't inflict permanent damage, you might disable him too much for him to

defend himself against any subsequent applications of lethal force. But the instant I felt his throat go crunch, the second he stumbled backward and should have lost his feet, an inevitable cloud of little black gnats swarmed from his collar and formed a halo around his neck. The sound of tissue being reset, faster than I'd ever seen accomplished by any other nano-surgery, told me that what I'd just done was the equivalent of taking a step on a treadmill, moving in the opposite direction as fast as I could walk.

The color returned to his face, and he flashed one of the saddest and most unsurprised smiles I had ever seen on any other human face.

God help me, he understood.

He came at me, and with all damage done to him guaranteed to heal at once, there was no point in fighting him, really.

The circumstances meant that I had to.

Everything he had said during our opening conversations was true. I had no chance against him. I might not have had a chance even if he hadn't had that little fleet of gnats watching out for him. He knew too much, knew so much that it was like I'd never been in a fight at all, not even a schoolyard brawl; had never once successfully defended myself against any determined enemy determined to take my life. I was at once reduced to unseasoned civilian.

He put me down, hard.

* * *

What followed was my second rude awakening in less than a day.

Temporary quadriplegia is a common means of retaining control over prisoners. This wasn't even my first time experiencing it. I'd been captured by an enemy once and had spent the entire next year in that state, stored vertically and forced to consume more hours of propaganda for the opposing side than I had, before that point, been willing to believe existed. Of course, quadriplegia is also a terrible sword to hold over someone's neck, because the unspoken promise is that you are perfectly willing to leave your prisoner in that state forever, or at least until he finds himself back in the hands of parties willing to perform the relatively simple nerve repair. A captor of sufficient cruelty can skip the vids and just encourage the prisoner's sanity to crumble under sensory deprivation.

I lay in darkness for what felt like hours, or just enough to worry that this was what Griff had in mind, before Yrana entered with a damp cloth.

"That was stupid."

"Go away."

"You need tending, and we don't have an automated system as elaborate as the one possessed by your late friend Hvask. You're struck with me."

She commenced dabbing my forehead. Against my will, it felt calming, more calming than it should have been. There could have been something psychoactive in the water. Or maybe she was just so measured in her touch that I could not help taking comfort in it.

I said, "What is this really about?"

"For him? Ego, I suppose. The need to be the primal, dominant example of his specific sort of humanity. I never said I understood it myself."

"What *do* you understand, Yrana?"

She thought it over while continuing her work with the compress, and the hesitation was so unlike her, so completely unlike the speech patterns that had always sounded like everything she said was prepared in advance and available in text form for her to read from, that I got the impression that I was here glimpsing her real self for the first time.

"I was not a warrior, in my prior life. I never had to be. But I was part of a family that had built a vast and obscene fortune in the munitions trade . . . and from this I learned a little bit about what war means to some of those who fight it."

"And that is?"

"Some warriors do not take well to peace. It is as alien an environment to them, as a biosphere with sulfuric acid rains would be to us. They seek out war for its own sake, an environment they comprehend and have come to need. They may dress it up in nobility and politics

and idealism, but it's an addiction all the same, and it behaves like other addictions. It torments those who don't feed it."

"But why this? It's not like he has any shortage of wars to choose from!"

"No. There are not. Even now, this soon after the war that almost ended everything for human beings, there remain any number of local human conflicts seeking mercenaries like Griff and yourself. But do you understand that the comparison to drug addiction can be extended still further? Any dedicated addict can develop a resistance to the drug, can come to need a dose greater than any he was once capable of surviving—can come to require an appalling and incredibly massive application in order to feel any effect at all." She dabbed. "Griff has burned out his receptors. He has known the war humanity just survived, the greatest in all history. No smaller conflict would ever be able to satisfy. And until my masters offered him this opportunity, no greater option was available."

"So he's going to fight the Colossus."

"Yes."

"That's insane."

"It does not matter that it is insane. It matters only that it is possible."

"How, then?"

"You will see."

"I don't want to see."

"Of course you do."

She put the wet cloth away and took out a dry one to dab the moisture from my forehead. Her touch was kind and solicitous, but precise, and I could not help wondering if the touch I felt belonged to whatever humanity remained in her, or her masters, dictating every movement of her hand.

I said, "Why did you become what you are?"

"I could not remain what I then was."

"And that was?"

"A princess. If not the actual possessor of a royal title, then at least the daughter of an evil empire. An idealist who thought she could make something beautiful out of something corrupt. A woman who tried to turn her family's martial ways to peace. A fool who lost her world, her wealth, her family, and her sense of herself as, believe it or not, a force for good. A limited creature who went to the Alsource once before, to seek their help in becoming a larger person, who enjoyed the benefits for some time but who upon having that state ripped from her needed their help to avoid falling apart like a bombed-out house."

She had delivered this speech with minimal emotion, as if it had not happened to her, but to a person who no longer existed.

It was still sufficiently close to candor that I took it as another opportunity to get at the full truth. "Did you kill Hvask?"

"Again: you will not believe any answer I give, so a straight denial will be pointless."

"Answer me anyway."

She smiled at me. It was a smile without human warmth, without human feeling, but also without the secret pride of accomplishing bloodshed that I had discerned in the smiles of any number of unrepentant killers.

"No."

"Did *Bob*?"

"Again: would you believe me if I placed all blame on the most logical suspect?"

And then she left, abandoning me to my paralysis, a state where I remained trapped all that day, and all of the day that followed.

I spent it all torturing myself with endless debate over the question: had the no been an answer, or a refusal to answer?

* * *

I slept once more, the long kind of sleep that might have been part of my normal sleep cycle and might have been the sheer exhausted collapse that comes a few hours after release from

bluegel suspension. If I had to guess how long I slept, I would guess ten to twelve hours; but, as with all sleep, it obscures its own answers. It might have been as few as two or three.

She came to me again and performed the same ablutions as before. That time, and two more. And then a few more after that. It was the only means I had of noting the passage of days, and it was effective enough, in that I understood when a week had passed, and when that week had become two.

She said nothing else about her privileged background. She did tell me more about the Silent Colossus. She confirmed that it had no means of propulsion through the space it occupied and that its attempts at finding purchase, either with those gigantic feet or those gigantic hands, were just helpless reflex, the kind of thing a body gets up to when it experiences free fall. At one point she described what its current life must have been like as a constant tumble from a heaven that as far as she could tell did not exist, into a hell it would never impact, and I closed my eyes, thinking about the poor bastard the colossus had once been, whose sins may have been unimaginable but had been, by necessity, only those of a human being, incapable of committing a crime sufficient for this punishment. Yrana talked about how all his convulsions would change his orbit only in the smallest of ways and how the introduction of orbital wobble could someday steer him for an interminable spiral into the sun; the hell that really would destroy him, though by then so many years into his future that the release would be all but meaningless.

She made vague reference to Griff being down on the surface of one of those satellite worlds, in direct communication with his backers in the AIsorce; and about how my own part would come, soon enough, as long as I agreed that I wanted to.

To which I said, "And what if I don't?"

"Don't be silly, Esker. You wanted another war."

"I don't anymore."

"You are lying to yourself as well as to me. You want a war. One that means something."

"This last war meant something. I was fighting to save human civilization."

"And you might again."

"And what if '*want*' doesn't enter into it? What if it's '*should not*' that decides me?"

"It won't," she said before leaving me to isolation and silence.

* * *

This is how I lived, those next few days. Paralyzed in body, isolated in spirit, kept in the dark about what they intended for me, given only assurances that the black project whatever it entailed was still proceeding, and nothing in the way of distraction from my grim studies of the ceiling, but the occasional visits from Yrana, who nursed me in the ways that the ship could not.

I did not come to trust her. We did not have a relationship, either physical or emotional. I did not think she had any real relationship with anybody but the entities who held the other end of her leash. I rather thought that she had surrendered all sense of judgment, all capacity for moral decision, to those entities, and that if they told her to do anything, from slitting my throat to scouring an inhabited planetary surface with nuclear fire, she would have had no choice but to comply. Torture, if necessary, would have been just one of her functions. But I had the idea, without basis or form, that she would not have approved of atrocities without point, that she would have, at the very least, put the responsibility into some other pet's hands.

I don't know why I thought this. Some of the killers I'd known had possessed faces like angels and smiles that would have made you suspect them of being saints. But I thought it, and I clung to it, while clinging to my paralysis.

And then she entered the room where I'd been stored, dressed in another of the ship-generated jumpsuits that left room for her tether and sphere, and offered me an entirely mechanical smile that never came close to touching her eyes.

"It's time for an outing."

"I'm still not part of this."

"Please don't treat me like an idiot, Esker. You are critical to this project. I'm fully capable of

keeping track. I know that you haven't agreed to anything. Just be aware that while you wear this disk on your forehead you will be capable of movement but may be shut down at any sign of interference."

She pressed it to my skin and feeling came flooding on back. It was not entirely welcome. I ached in places that must have still born trauma from the beating Griff had given me. But to sit up, swing my naked legs over the side of the bed, and then upon jumping down to feel my bare feet and the cold floor of the room, was a blessing well out of proportion to the length of time that my limbs had turned off. I flexed, ran in place for a few beats just to get my heart beating again, and ignored the urge to attack her, which I knew would have been a bad decision indeed, and not just because she possessed total control over my capacity to move. I also knew that her reaction time ran on the *Alsource* frame. She would have dropped me the instant she saw my muscles tense.

So I got dressed in one of the ship-printed jumpsuits, and I followed her out of the room and into a section of the *Malsumis* that I had not seen before and from there into a short-range shuttle just large enough for her and myself. It handled the nav, of course, but the thing was just large enough to be all cockpit and nothing else, and so we were permitted the illusion that Yrana enjoyed control; which allowed me to keep the illusion that I was remaining silent so she could work and her, I suppose, to keep the illusion that I was not just remaining stony out of disgust.

On the way, she showed me that we were not alone in this system.

What she showed me was the vessel orbiting the larger of the two satellite worlds. It was a silvery Z-shaped thing of a model that I had never seen before, and it was remarkable in that it possessed absolutely no aesthetic elements at all; not any of the flair that even the most practical races put on their space vessels out of the sheer compulsion to reflect a little of their own personality. It was a big thing, whatever it was; a megastructure, likely a few thousand kilometers at the diagonal stroke. What I decided to call the horizontal ones were of different sizes and the longer of the two was open, just a black hollow that seemed deeper than the space surrounding it.

"Okay," I said. "What is it?"

"Our technical support. A factory, delivery, and tow vessel, courtesy of my operators."

I looked at the size of the damn thing. It's hard to judge distances in space, but it looked to me like the open end could have swallowed all of the late cylinder world, New London, without stopping to chew. I said, "A factory for what? Delivering what?"

"This project requires a great deal in the way of raw materials. I'm sure Griff told you that the machines are mostly outside our Universe. This is the vessel that brings them to where we need them to be. Later on, it will be needed for some towing; the only way to get the larger elements of this project into the same place. Respect that vessel. Without it, none of this is possible."

We veered away and headed down to the smaller of the two moons. It was not a grand vista. One of the few pieces of information that Yrana had gotten around to imparting was that her masters had only congealed the place out of their favorite nanites only a few months ago, without bothering to design enough surface features to provide an arriving vessel with the distraction of a view. There were no mountains and no oceans and no impact craters from local debris; just a planet-sized plain, which as we drew closer, I understood to be a planet-sized battlefield.

The army was already in place.

There were more of them that could be counted. Billions, she told me. Imagine an army with no flags, no tiers of command, no supply lines, no rear-echelon, for that matter no missiles, no weapons, no civilization still behind them, providing a reason to fight. There were just the soldiers, uncounted numbers of them, more numerous than any army of ants, occupying every square meter as far as we can see. None moved, so there was no sign of life. But my own experience with battlefields established that their mere existence functioned as a sign of imminent death.

Yrana found a gap in all that teeming readiness, an empty field about a square kilometer in diameter. There was no other reason to think him anything special until we flew low just over

his head and he looked up to follow our passage; and at that point I saw not just that he was inclined to movement but also that he was the first without a simplified version of Parnajan's face.

Instead—I could tell from a distance—he had Griff's.

Yrana landed. We disembarked. The two of us approached the figure of liquid stone, and damned if he didn't smile, as if he were happy to see us, as if he anything involving an interaction with other people could possibly be enough to trigger warmth.

He held out a hand. "Esker."

Out of reflex I shook it. It was not flesh, and it was not stone. It was like cold water, in that it seemed to possess currents, capable of flowing over and swallowing my hand, before he pulled back and I was left with the lingering sense of having been tasted and found wanting.

He asked, "How do I look?"

"Like a golem. Or an imitation of one."

"Golem's good."

"Is this permanent?"

The clay man smirked. "Not in the sense you mean. I'm hoping for more transformation."

"Is that what this is, Griff? A transformation? Or has your mind just been put into another bottle?"

The smirk grew wider. "Another bottle."

"And is your original body still around here, somewhere?"

"It is not," Griff said. (His voice did not sound like it was produced by breath, more like it was being broadcast from somewhere within him, for our convenience.) "You're looking at a man who agreed to have that destroyed when his consciousness was uploaded to the nanosphere. It was pleasant, if you believe that. And so is this. I didn't retain all those lingering aches left behind by a lifetime of wounds. I don't miss them. I in particular don't miss having vertebrae. What terrible achy things they were! I'm better off just occupying a nanofleet operating my own image."

I said, "If you believe that, you're an idiot."

"Perhaps so. But I won't need any of the petty human things, anymore. Hunger, thirst, sex, the constant inconvenience of drawing breath. This form is better for my purposes, anyway."

"And those purposes? What sense does this really make?"

He shrugged. "I am making a stand against everything terrible. That is all you need to know."

The damnable thing was that part of me envied him. We all want, or think we want, immortality, or at least freedom from the corruption of the flesh. But part of me had the opposite reaction, that what I was looking at was just a swarm of alien machines who only thought that they had once been a man named Griff. That part of me also felt a distant sadness that Griff was now dead, ended in the way a human life can be ended.

That grimace of his faltered, only to be replaced by his prior certainty.

"You need to know," he said. "I have written a confession. It is the story of who I am and why I'm doing this. It confirms what this project is about, what it has always been about. It will be made available to you later in this process. Unfortunately, you will need to know most of it before the AIsorce will release it to you. At that point, you may feel differently about your own involvement."

"I doubt it," I said.

"You'll see," he replied.

It would be our last conversation, ever.

Yrana directed me back to the landing craft, which she took off the ground and parked in a hover ten meters up.

Below, one of the many Parnajans, one that appeared no different from any other, emerged from the legions around him, entered the field, and began to approach Griff. As he drew close, I registered that this Parnajan was, like all the others, a full head taller than the golem of Griff, and not just taller, but broader, more muscular, more massive. He had a liquid sheen about him that made him look like ambulatory stone and a cocky walk that gave me my first sense of what

the human Parnajan must have been like. I understood the difference in scale, of course. He needed to be an appropriately-scaled opponent for Griff, but for him to be an enemy worth fighting he also needed to be something that a Griff would respond to. He needed to be capable of intimidating his lessers, and Griff needed to be the kind of man who would take him on without hesitation.

The two figures bowed to each other.

Then they joined.

* * *

And here was the most grotesque, comic aspect of this situation. The phrase *joined in battle* is most of the time just a somewhat more poetic way of saying *fought*. The combatants remain discrete even if they are both slick with blood, even if they have cut so many pieces off one another that they no longer possess the full character of human forms and are instead just meat hacking away at one another. When I say Griff and this smaller Parnajan *joined* I mean that they did not collide like solid bodies; they merged like liquid ones, Parnajan subsuming part of Griff even as Griff subsumed part of Parnajan. They became one larger thing that ripped at itself as in the belief on the part of each participant that he could tear the invader away from what was now a shared body. Sometimes the merged creature had all eight limbs, and sometimes one arm or one leg or more was swallowed up, rendering impossible the prospect of determining in any individual assault just which one was being assaulted. One thing was for certain. They both cried out in whatever tongue their kind of being may have had where flesh knew pain, and they both raged, in what fury things like them could feel, at each fresh moment of violation.

At times I could pick out Griff's face, and it was the only way I could know that he was still in there. At other times the thing that shambled around that field seemed like the Parnajan statue, intact, with no sign of Griff at all; and I fully believed that Yrana was about to tell me that Griff had died.

The shared being had gained mass when they came together. He was now the size of both golems together, most often humanoid but more frequently a distorted figure struggling to retain its bodily integrity. He rippled. He flickered. He writhed. He fell to his knees and sometimes there were more than two of them to hit the ground, sometimes only one when he managed to stand.

I could not follow which of the two was winning until one figure stood, stable and unchanging, twice the size he had been when he and his opponent had first come together.

"First preliminary won," Griff said. "Next round."

Two of the Parnajans emerged from the legions. They were identical, of course, and they moved as one, attacking Griff with such practiced ease that they might have spent years of training just developing strategies for taking such a giant down. It mostly involved trying to separate him from his legs. In this they succeeded, but when he fell it put them within reach of his arms. He crushed them one at a time, hugged them to his breast, absorbed them, resisted all their frenzied efforts to avoid being subsumed. His substance became a tempest, roiling from within. But it smoothed. He incorporated their essences. He rose to his feet again, twice his previous size.

"Second preliminary won," Griff said. "Next round."

Four Parnajans came after him.

This was a battle like men trying to take down a titan. They had enough of a numerical advantage, enough in the way of four minds being able to strategize against a single one, that they gave him some trouble, one figure clinging from his neck to unbalance him while the three others worried at and tried to exhaust his legs. At one point they had him on all fours, crawling like a man with mortal wounds while they stood atop him trying to separate his head from his neck. He solved this problem by the simple expedient of rolling over and crushing them with his own weight. When he rose they were embedded in his substance and trying to savage the very substance in which they were planted, like sapling trees. They died in defiance, but they died.

"Third preliminary won," Griff said. "Next round."

And so it went, each battle against twice as many opponents, each ending with the doubling

of his prior size. By the time Yrana said that I'd had enough and that she was taking me back to the ship, the sun was low in the sky, and the number of opponents who fought Griff in every fresh battle now numbered more than two thousand, crawling over his false flesh like ants that he had to swat.

It barely made a dent in the numbers that still stood arrayed against him, by the billions, waiting for the opportunity to join the battle against him, and in losing add to his increasing glory.

I did notice that the growing colossus that was once a man named Griff was, like the Parnajan who writhed in space, evidently not subject to the square-cube law. His legs did not break with every step. He did not collapse of his own weight when he became tall enough that, had there been any nearby mountains, he would have made them look like hills. But then, as Yrana said, he was not a solid object, not really; he was just a conglomeration of very small objects, swarming in a formation that resembled that of a human being. He probably contained more empty space than he contained nano-vessels. But to my merely human eyes he looked solid enough, a growing threat to the larger colossus this world orbited, and who was clearly visible in what was about to become its night sky. He was not even close to being the greater Parnajan's size, not yet.

I said, "How long does this nonsense continue?"

"If all the battles were brief, he could swallow up all his opponents overnight. But his mind is still shackled to his old human limitations and to all his old premises of exhaustion. He will soon collapse into the equivalent of sleep. It is an addiction he will break, and we do not need to be here to see it, while it still affects him. We can leave now, if you prefer."

"I prefer."

The truth was that I wanted to vomit.

She headed for orbit. I peered over the side as we ascended and saw the many many billions still waiting to battle Griff and to die for his increasing power and glory. I wondered if these smaller Parnajans had any consciousness of their own or if they were just automatons, constructed only for the purpose of building Griff into the being he would have to be, and ultimately, decided that this did not matter. What mattered was only that they were not human and neither was he.

We had only one more brief exchange before we got to the main transport.

I said, "Yrana?"

She said, "Yes?"

"Does it hurt?"

"You mean, when he fights those others? When they wound him? When they rip pieces out of him or try to rip him apart from the inside?"

"Yes."

"He did tell you how grateful he was to be spared the ravages of the flesh."

"Yes."

"My operators tell me that when they first offered this experience to Griff, they assured him that he could perform it without the installation of pain receptors. He could have all these battles, and the big one to come, as a stranger to this new flesh. He refused. He said that it would be meaningless without the pain. He said that fighting past pain was the very nature of war."

"So all these fights, these preliminaries . . . they must be agony."

"He said that to deny it was to deny the nature of war. And he also said that it might discourage he who comes after him."

I remembered one day when half my body had been burned away in an explosion. It would of course eventually be replaced, but on that day I had somehow remained consciousness, further carnage still raging all about me, and for a time I remained where I had fallen, still clutching my hand weapon and pledging to burn any member of the enemy who ventured near me. It had meant something to me to be enduring the endurable and still remain dead; and I must have been mad indeed, but I found that I understood even this demented algebra, from the equations of a man whose twisted soul was so much like mine. Yes. Without the agony it would have been meaningless.

I said, “Go on.”

“And he will continue building his nanofleet, and gaining volume, until he has defeated all of them and made them all part of himself. And then he will absorb the planet. And then he will be taken to absorb the other satellite, to convert its mass. And then he will take to the other worlds in this system, to convert their mass. And he will continue doing this until he is Parnajan’s equal, in scale if not power. At which point he will be towed to Parnajan’s side, and the two of them will fight to the death.”

“What will that be like?”

Was she smiling? “For Griff and Parnajan, it will be like coming home.”

“I mean, as seen from a distance.”

“It will be about what you imagine. I have been shown simulations, vivid simulations. At that size, in that proximity, each will be affected by the tidal forces of the other. No attempt will be made, on the part of my operators, to mitigate this. It will be considered part of the experience. The body-shapes of the two participants will have trouble maintaining cohesion. Vast swaths of their respective substances will be pulled from their surfaces, to rain against the other like comets. On impact they will burn. They will survive burning because they are designed to reconfigure after going molten. They will reform, some retaining their prior fealty to the body they came from, others now identifying with the body they have joined. The battles will rage throughout their respective bodies, at both the molecular level and the level of the bodies the fleets have been formed to resemble—and on that level there will be all the things that any barehanded battle between two human beings has historically looked like: a collection of blows, kicks, attempts to rip and tear and bite and gouge, only this time wreaking wounds the size of continents. Most of this time they will spend intermingled, deformed by one another’s gravity, each trying not just to murder the other but also to escape a pull that neither will be able to resist, in order to regain some distance so that they might do what will never be possible, fighting this great battle like two normal-sized people exchanging blows on solid ground. To us, it will look like two only occasionally identifiable humanoid forms devouring each other with a ferocity that renders them molten. Ultimately, one of the combatants will be subsumed, in a manner you saw modeled today. And it will then be either Griff, or Parnajan, who floats alone in the void.” She shrugged, a gesture I had never seen from her. “It will be larger, but not especially more horrifying, than any other battlefield.”

My mouth had gone dry. “I suppose Griff was shown this simulation.”

“He spent many months replaying it at multiple speeds before he was deemed sufficiently informed to demand the experience for himself.”

“He knew what it would be like.”

“Yes.”

“Down to an eternity of drifting in vacuum, afterward.”

“He did say that he was looking for hell. But for him it would not be that long.”

“And you think I will want it too. That I will undergo the same transformation and fight the victor.”

“You have said that you crave another war. You have not specified that it must be a cause you can believe in. You do not specify that you want it to be just. You do not even specify that it must not be evil. You want the war. You want the terror, the fire, the looming thrill of imminent death, the fleeting joy of the kill. And it will be mercy, too. If Griff survives his battle, you are the only person who can show him mercy, by taking his place. If it is Griff who dies, you will have the satisfaction of avenging a friend. Yes, I think you will not be able to say no to this. I think you will come to see it as the special hell you’ve been seeking all your life.”

“And if I don’t? Will you force me?”

She said, “It is the position of my operators that you will force yourself.”

* * *

We made multiple revisits to the battlefield, over the course of the next week. The battles were spectacular in the short term, mind-numbingly repetitive in the short term. They took longer to resolve; the entire fifth day was an interminable grapple between two beings whose

shoulders penetrated the very clouds and whose stumbling about as they each struggled to find advantage over the other involved much trampling of the human-sized Parnajans gathered in helpless multitudes. The two behemoths, who were now sufficiently heavy that they left deep depressions in the earth wherever they strode, inevitably trampled many thousands among the legions who stood in formation waiting for their own chance to fight, and the substance of those legions was inevitably added to the whole, complicating the battle for control of that whole. None of the little ones made any effort to flee, either because they had no real consciousness at this point in their life cycle or because they understood that to be trampled or absorbed was the entirety of their destiny and not worth fighting.

I have never been a man of great learning. I know only about ancient myths as much as the average person does. But as a child I had once heard of a giant known as Antaeus, who derived his power from the Earth and who therefore grew larger and stronger every time some enemy succeeded in throwing him to the ground. Something about the warrior I wanted to be envied Antaeus, and something about the man I'd become understood why Yrana and the others were so certain that a man like me would follow Griff into this battle of transformation. But the more I saw the depths of torment that Griff was going through, the more I knew that I would die to escape them.

Did this make me a coward? I don't know. Another mercenary had once told me that a perfectly acceptable synonym for "cowardly" is "sensible," and rejection of this fate seemed sensible indeed. But between being imprisoned by quadriplegia at night, and being all possibility of rebellion blocked by the disk during the day, I began to dread that surrender to this future was inevitable.

By day ten the forces rocking the planet were too violent for Yrana and I to witness them from within the atmosphere, so we sat around the *Malsumis* and watched from there. Griff faced an opponent composed of a billion Parnajans, facing him from across a battlefield defined by a cloudscape at what for them looked like a body of frothy water, pooling at their respective waists. With every step they took, they disturbed the clouds, which could not rise above that altitude, but which churned around their midsections as if they dearly wanted to. The two colossi stumbled more than they had in prior days, and it took me time to realize that their immense weight had finally reached the point where just to step, any point of the brittle planetary crust was to sink some distance beneath the surface, whether that meant up to their knees or thighs or deeper, and the fight they fought became as much against gravity as each other. Still both Griff and the colossus formed to defeat him continued to rip at one another as if this still made any sense at all, their struggles forming atmospheric shock waves that rippled across distances the size of continents, and that at one point when they fell resulted in they entire world, all of it, momentarily glowing like a miniature sun, the first manifestation of the molten effect that Yrana had described to me. She would later show me a holographic recreation of the effect upon everything at ground level and what the ripple effect of the combined impact of Griff and Parnajan had caused was a tsunami of disturbed earth, a couple of thousand meters high, racing around what was left of the planet at many times the speed of sound. It was convenient that the world was not occupied by a civilization, because no civilization would have survived it. The giants had become planet-killers.

We reached a natural break, had a shared meal where I ate something synthesized to be tasty, Yrana ate a powder her operators permitted her to eat, and Bob ate a green goo that he had brought aboard as part of his weight allowance. "It's a Riirgaan delicacy," he explained. "I would be happy to give you some, if you're curious about its taste."

"Don't," Yrana told me. "It's poisonous to humans."

"I knew that," Bob said. "I was looking forward to seeing him in convulsions."

I thought of his war crimes and asked him, "What else are you looking forward to?"

"In the immediate future: the sight of the two colossi, wrapped in mortal combat and experiencing agony on a planetary scale."

I had grown used to his malevolence, which I mostly tolerated for the same reason I'd tolerated most hateful loudmouths, whether in bars or among my comrades in this army, or that

army: because I'd known that all they had was mouth and that killing them would have been so easy that the satisfaction derived from the act would not have lasted the duration of a hiccup. I asked my next question out of idle curiosity and no other reason. "Yes, but what are you getting out of it, aside from entertainment? It can't be that you're needed. I haven't seen you contribute a damned thing to this project."

"Like most of your kind," *Bob* said, "you are without imagination. I contributed everything."

I glanced at Yrana. "Do you know what he's talking about?"

"Of course," Yrana said.

I almost told her that it seemed like life as an automaton, but then it struck me that what she had described was a dynamic I knew well: that of the soldier who did not need to know the reason for any given order, only her own duty to follow it. And for the first time I felt a tremor of misgiving that went beyond my loathing for Griff's great enterprise, or her certainty that I would follow him down this same road to self-destruction; that spoke to the sense I had that something far worse than the promised scenario waited at the end of all this.

Again: I understood why Griff was here.

But why was I here?

* * *

It is one thing if you are shown a world-shattering miracle, another if that miracle is repeated and built upon and ultimately replayed at multiple times, hour after hour, day after day. You can stand on a planetary system and feel awe at the sight of the stars. You can devote your life to studying them. But the awe becomes less visceral. It becomes mere process.

Over the next week, the satellite world that had hosted all of Griff's preliminary battles dissolved beneath all the punishment it had been subjected to, and became part of him. So did Parnajan's other satellite. He subsumed both worlds, writhed under what was must have been sheer agony turning their nanite substance to his, and in what seemed the most human body language I'd seen from his, turned his already great sculpted head toward the figure of Parnajan, whose size compared to his was now that of a full-grown adult versus that of a toddler. He was outside his parent's reach, still, and that was a good thing if anything about this could be judged as good, because if the physics that had governed the preliminary battles still applied to this one, the larger colossus would have had little trouble smothering and devouring the littler one. But the prospect of him growing large enough to threaten that looming figure no longer seemed as laughable as it once had: that is, if any of those deserved any adjective other than laughable. The destiny Griff had fought for no longer seemed so remote that even to contemplate it seemed mad. The madness was on the horizon now, and growing nearer.

The Alsorce factory vessel that I had come to think of as the Z towed him to the system's other planets, as effortlessly as a child tows a balloon at the end of a tether. Each journey took a matter of hours and each journey consisted of him being released, to flail like an angry toddler while the Z set about chopping up those planets in order to convert the debris to more substance. The debris went in; more nanite clouds came out. They spiraled toward Griff, impacted, and became more Griff. The difficulty judging scale in space made it hard to apply what we seeing to hard knowledge of the onetime human being's size, but that was what we had instruments for, and rather what we had Yrana for: her operators provided her with constant real-time updates, and she relayed them to *Bob* and I with the coldest accuracy and precious little in the way of poetry. One day she told us, "He is now half Parnajan's size," and I imagined the two standing together, no longer like a parent and toddler but like a parent and child, already presaging the moment when they would stand together as equals.

"He must be proud," *Bob* said at another point. And I did not know, then, whether he said it in mockery, or with actual perverse admiration. I now know that there was certainly something else, something that might yet defeat him: fear.

Had he been human, I might have seen it.

But he was Riirgaan, a species that had been our friends and that had come without warning to destroy us, a species with facial features that gave away nothing. It was next to impossible to read Riirgaans based on how they looked. They could only be judged by the things they did and

the things they said. And that comment was in line with everything else he'd been saying, throughout this horrific process; that which was not vicious and angry, anyway.

It was only afterward that Bob said something that finally nudged me in the direction of understanding.

"But what an idiot. Insisting on the pain."

And I stiffened and turned my eyes away from the image that of the colossus that had been Griff. "It *was* optional, wasn't it?"

"Yes," said Yrana. "I have told you this before."

"And I always thought that it was only because he needed to feel the pain, to feel engaged in his war. But it wasn't about that, was it? It's about expiation. It's about finally doing something important with his life." I faced Yrana, the blood pounding in my ears. "You said it was pathetic."

"It is pathetic," she replied. "But that is not inconsistent with expiation."

I had it, then: not all of it, but enough to see its general shape. And it was one of those moments I had come to know in all of my own smaller wars, when the terrible things that hell can teach us have trouble entering a space as small as the human skull.

A human mind can only stretch to admit so much, and sometimes it chokes on those inputs.

I choked. But I suddenly realized that I understood.

I'd been cooperative. I had internalized my helplessness in the face of multiple demonstrations that she could paralyze me in an instant's notice. It had been some time since I'd even tried to rebel. But at this moment, with what all this was actually about suddenly clear to me, I put everything I had into an attack sudden enough to stand a chance of accomplishing what I needed done, in the fleeting interval it would take her to stop me.

I went for her neck.

It was a waste of time, of course. No one human could have out-thought AI-source-aided reflexes. What I got from her was a sudden wideness about the eyes, an expression that though over in an instant was enough to establish that I had surprised her.

By the time I got to where she had been, she was elsewhere. She had calculated the limits of my peripheral version and deftly stepped outside them. I could have turned my head to encompass her new position, but by then, if she chose, she would have moved again, staying within my blind spot. There were ways to compensate for the elusiveness of such a combatant, but I already knew that to her perceptions I was moving in slow motion and that if I continued to pursue her, I would be sacrificing what chance I still had to end this before it became as terrible as I had realized it was going to be.

She did not paralyze me. Instead, she said, "You know."

And I understood what she was really telling me.

Some rubicon had been crossed, some critical threshold passed, that the precautions that had been taken with my body had only been in place until I knew what I now knew.

And so I swiveled away from her and went for *Bob*.

Riirgaans are tough. It is not that they are better than human. It is that they are different. They have different pressure points, different places protected by internal infrastructure, different placement or organs that can be damaged by sufficient powerful blows, leading to disability. Fight a Riirgaan like you're fighting a human being, and you will likely lose, especially if it—unlike you—remembers what it's fighting and remains focused on your areas of vulnerability.

The war just passed had included Riirgaans among the enemy forces.

I had fought them close-up only in training and so was not ready for a long fight.

But I knew that *Bob's* primary attack would be a kick from one of those powerful, triply-segmented legs, and I knew that the best strategy would be to allow him to press that attack and to take advantage of his imbalance. I knew that his forearms would be weak. I knew that it would be the height of stupidity to direct any attacks against his face, a solid fixed mask with no easily-bled places like the human nose. I knew that the underside of his jaw would be weak, and I knew that a sufficiently hard blow there would disrupt his breathing just like a blow to the human windpipe. I knew a nerve cluster on his chest that, if impacted at just

the right angle, could potentially paralyze him.

He, of course, possessed equivalent data about the vulnerabilities of human beings.

We joined, but not like Griff and Parnajan.

We did not merge like two creatures of nanite-simulated flesh.

We came apart, me with a slash drawing a scarlet line across my chest; him with his breath a ragged gasp, his fixed dolphin's-smile reeking with blood.

I said, "You killed Hvask."

He said, "This is something you've known all along. You just allowed your uncertainty to hold you at bay."

And then he came at me again, that Riirgaan kick sailing past my face with a force that could have taken my head off. The chief strength of those legs was their triple segmentation. The force had more than one chance to be heightened, along the way.

I did not fully succeed in staying out of range. I was able to avoid being struck by his heel, but the exposed rear claw ripped across my brow, opening it; and I felt a red curtain descend over my vision, aware that this meant he'd effectively blinded me.

That was all right. I'd memorized his location.

And as I drew close, I braced my second and middle fingers and with one jab took out one of his eyes.

He screamed. And this must be said about the Riirgaan scream: it is very close to the human equivalent. It is a return to infancy, the release through sound of the pain that is too much to the organism to keep inside. I'd been some places where the number of concurrent screams had numbered in the thousands, and where they were only the bleeding of the excess; where that meant that the amount still contained in the bodies arrayed on the ground must have been, effectively, infinite. Honestly, compared to some I'd heard, what came out of *Bob* now was just a little. Scarcely worth mentioning.

I concentrated on adding to his store.

We closed again, and again that leg of his drew a slashing crescent across the space between us, and this time, for the first time, I managed to stay out of range, landing a blow and taking his other eye before pulling away and watching what he can do. The being who had taken pride in weaponizing starvation staggered about, helpless, and I knew that while he was still dangerous I had succeeded in taking most of what made him a physical threat.

I circled him. I kept my distance, looking for my best chance to go in and finish him.

And that's when Yrana said, "Excuse me."

I did not turn to face her. I would not allow myself to be distracted by her, giving him a chance to charge and inflict whatever damage he could do blind. But I did say, "What?"

"You need to consider how unproductive this is."

I did not turn. "It's productive, Yrana. He killed my friend."

"Oh, true," she said. "He killed Hvask when there was absolutely no reason to kill her, when he knew that we were all going on this journey on the next day and that there was nothing Hvask could do to stop us once we left. He did it because he already had you under surveillance, and because it gave him satisfaction to toy with you in that way. He is just that kind of killer of humans. But has it occurred to you that blinding him, even maiming him, does not stop him from doing what he came here to do? Or that killing him outright does not stop the events he put in motion? Because there will be another after him; even after Griff, if it comes to that. Do you not understand, now, why Griff brought you here? What purpose he meant you to serve?"

I did turn my head to face her then, and I searched for any sign of cruelty in her beautiful but wholly controlled features. Of course, there was none.

She said, "You have figured it out, haven't you?"

I glanced back at the Riirgaan, who though blinded and bleeding did somehow communicate the posture of a being who knew who had won, who had understood from the beginning that his cause was the one that would always win.

I understood, all right.

I understood what I should have understood all along.

From the beginning, I had thought Griff the leader of this mad enterprise and *Bob* a mere associate, performing some undefined service as underling. But I had been wrong all along. I had failed to reckon with what kind of animal *Bob* was, an architect of genocide; and what kind of creature Griff was, a man whose instincts counseled murder but who had done everything he could to resist it.

He had let that Tchi thief go.

He had let me go.

He had said that he wanted no more killing.

Griff was not in charge of this. Griff had just wanted to stop it.

Griff had wanted to stand between minds like *Bob* and control of the nanofleet.

He had just not trusted Parnajan to that job.

He had thought that if a battle needed to be fought, then it needed to be fought by the last warrior standing.

He had reasoned that if he could defeat Parnajan and become an even greater Colossus, then he should.

I told Yrana, "I *could* just kill the bastard. That would solve the problem for a while."

"It would," Yrana said. "But I learned much, in my time as the daughter of a family that made the tools of war. That all wars are preludes to the next one. No war to end all wars ever actually does."

"And so?"

"And if you kill this one mad Riirgaan and thus prevent him from challenging the winner of this contest between Griff and Parnajan, then how long do you think it will be before my operators deliver another actual lover of killing to this place? How long do you think it will be before my operators do what they consider *interesting*, and what a mind like this Riirgaan wants, and tow the reigning Colossus to some place like Aevii, where people live and where a slaughterer the size of a planet will just be a horror incomprehensible to them? It will happen, Esker. It will happen the first time that there is someone controlling the fleet for some reason other than standing in the way of its destructive potential."

Bob delivered a soft, bubbling trill. I knew the trill. I knew the trill. It was his kind's equivalent of laughter. I knew why it sounded bubbling. He was gagging on his own blood. And he was still defiant. Of course, it made no difference that I had blinded him, just like it would make no difference if I killed him. Griff's body had died, and his mind had moved on to his own nano-swarm. *Bob* could die, and his mind would do the same. The malice would remain.

I said, "Griff didn't just want a battle. He wanted a battle that *meant* something."

Yrana said, "Yes. And what about you?"

I knew the answer. I was just not ready to give it.

And so I turned my back and walked away.

* * *

That night the media library in my quarters finally delivered Griff's last testament.

It was a holo of Griff, looking less grim than I'd ever known him. He was in the mountains, somewhere. I recognized Aevii just from the shade of the sky. He sat on some rock overlooking hills a startling shade of green, and I could tell just from the unstressed look on his face that the air must have been magnificent, the freedom he felt at that moment profound.

He said, "Hello, Esker."

"If you're watching this, you've figured it all out. How this was Bob's plan all along; how I was not its architect but the one chance that someone could have stood between him and his dream of being the Colossus who would fall on worlds like this and be the creature out of nightmare who would make of them the only landscape that a creature like him is capable of loving."

"It is only an accident of history that this specific madman is a Riirgaan. There are, trust me, any number of human beings who would take the steps this madman wants to take: Hitlers, or Magrisons. We have seen them in this lifetime. I have never met the woman who

lent her name to Cort's War, and some say she's very much of the same ilk herself; some say she is not. But even if she is not, you and I know the sorry truth. That there are uncounted millions, at any time, who are.

"In their path stand any number of people like you and me, who know nothing but fighting and feel a fierce hunger for it but also never want to see it again.

"I cannot speak for you. Even now, I barely know you. But I can guess some things. I can suppose that a normal life is beyond you. I do see that you don't know what to do with yourself. And I think it possible that you might be like what I'm hoping to be, the guardian who will always stand between the slaughterer and whatever plans he might have.

"The Alsource won't help. Not this branch, anyway. This particular collective only wants to see what's going to happen. They consider it interesting. I think their interest is obscene, but then I thought that of several masters I fought for. The reasoning is always obscene, anyway. It falls to beings like you and me to either carry out their reasoning, or to stand before it and say, no, this is where it ends, this is as far as it goes and no farther. For what it's worth, it seems to have been the princess who, tasked with being the human face of what her operators wanted, introduced to me the premise that if this Bob were to take on the Colossus, the Colossus needed to be a force as powerful as possible, one capable of defeating him before he took over.

"I think it already is, to tell the truth. I have researched Parnajan. The man was a tough old bastard; a piece of shit, really, but not one likely to fall to a mere genocidal bureaucrat.

"But that is where I fell to the kind of creature I am.

"I could not trust in another; no matter how formidable, to fight such a battle for me.

"So I will allow myself to occupy a nanofleet and I will fight Parnajan, and I will either defeat him in a battle larger than any ever fought by any human being; or in losing will give up my substance to his and make him a larger and tougher opponent for this piece of garbage, this non-warrior; to assault.

"And even then, this insane situation will not be resolved, because once I am done, win or lose, the Riirgaan will make his attempt; and he might win. And then there will need to be someone after me, a new challenger to stand between him and the innocents I would protect. And the same will be true even if he is subsumed, because once he falls, Yrana's master will only find another. There will always be another."

He paused, and said,

"By this time Yrana has probably told you, any number of times, that she does not think you will be able to say no. You have probably taken this as doubt cast on your sanity.

"I think you should take it as a testament to your perceived nobility.

"I see in you someone who will not let this responsibility fall to another.

"On the last day I fought in the last war, I found myself sitting on a rock very much like this one, wounded and heartsick and looking down at the corpse of a child who had died as collateral damage in the last burst of local fighting. I do not know whether it was a boy or a girl or anything in between; I just know that it was a child. It wore the remains of a school uniform, and that was all that rendered it identifiable. It was extending one arm, like this."

He demonstrated. "I don't know what the poor thing was reaching for. Safety, maybe? A few extra breaths of life? An explanation for this terrible thing that happened? I don't know. I only knew that I was a soldier and a killer and that I had contributed to the horror around it, and I knew that if I found another war I would again, and I could imagine no way of escaping that. If only, I thought, I could fight the last war, the one that however bloody prevented anyone from knowing that child's fate; the war that would at least be about saving her and those like her.

"Placing me on that post, forever, would be a fine way to end it.

"It would at least be a battle with purpose.

"But there needs to be someone after me.

"And if there's one thing I know you understand, it is that there needs to be one after you."

"Goodbye, Esker. I am proud of knowing you."

And so, one week later, I watched Griff and Parnajan fight.

Griff had not acquired all the nanite mass he needed, to match Parnajan's size. He could have, if he wanted. Our backers would have been willing to provide it. But one thing a warrior knows is that the critical factors affecting any battle include not just where, but also when. It is better to fight when you're ready than to wait endlessly, to be even readier.

And so Griff indicated that he was ready and allowed the Z to tow him to a point where his mass could be captured by Parnajan's, and allowed himself to be pulled in. They joined, in the way that smaller versions of themselves had been joined. They threw punches. They employed their great hands as scoops and dug trenches in one another. They screamed unknowable and inaudible curses at one another, and what I can tell you is that while I did not know the specifics, I did understand the general tenor of these oaths they swore to each, the truths they each spoke that must have echoed any number of final words that warriors scream, as they and their opponents grapple in soil gone soft with spilled blood. I had screamed words like that, in more than one fight; and I had had them screamed at me, from warriors who might have already known that they would end their day with the blind eyes staring upward, at slate-gray sky. The meaning was already easy. The meaning was intimate.

And the fight between them? The fight that was often difficult to parse, because their substances became shared, as the tidal forces at work pulled each fleet into the other?

I hated myself for finding it magnificent.

I did not always know whether any figure emerging for an instant from that maelstrom was Parnajan or whether it was Griff, but I always knew that just to keep fighting was, at any moment, an act of will larger than most that could ever be expected from a human being; and I knew that any moment that what Griff was fighting for was a greater advantage, against the battle that he would have, with *Bob* or whatever opponent Yrana's backers found to challenge him.

And here is the part I won't tell you.

I won't tell you whether he won or lost.

I will tell you that the victor was obvious within a week, and that it took two more weeks for the other to finish it; weeks that the mind behind the failing nanofleet spent fighting the inevitable.

I will tell you that it was during the time that followed that I finally codified what I had known for most of my life as a taker of lives, for one cause or another: that all wars are the same. Even if they are fought on a scale unimaginable; even if they are fought between two strangers trying to take one another's lives in a bloody ditch. It is all about grasping for the throat of another. All else is nuance, nuance that barely means anything, and for Griff, grappling between worlds with a being beyond comprehension, as another being beyond comprehension, it could not have been much different, in practice, than protecting his own throat while looking for the opening that would allow him to cut Parnajan's. It is always too large for comprehension. And it is always too intimate for the details to matter.

I will tell you that when it was over the one left standing—or, again, floating if you prefer—was either the new colossus, Griff, or the old colossus, Parnajan, stronger than before.

And that when there when there was again only one vast figure in the void before us, the three of us fell into a deep and exhausted silence, driven at least in part by the knowledge that the next round, because there would always be a next round, would only be larger.

And at that point I turned to the creature I had known as *Bob*, a creature whose real name I now knew and was quite capable of pronouncing, thank you, and said, "Well?"

He had lowered his head to regard his empty hands. "Well, what?"

"You're next, you piece of garbage. You have sworn to take on the winner. Well, there he is. He is waiting for you. He is magnificent. And I tell you, I have been watching you from the beginning, and I can promise that your mind won't even hold up long enough to make it through the preparations. He'll eat you up like a pre-chewed meal. And if he doesn't, I'll be the one who comes next, and I guarantee that you won't defeat me. I guarantee that I will make your death

a hard one, harder even than living as the thing you want to become. There is no point of continuing, except for suicide. But that may be what you want. Is it?"

He rose from his chair, and stood there for a moment, studying me. I knew that he wanted to be dead and that he ached to be the architect of my death; and so I had spent the time since our confrontation waiting for the sneak assault that was the only kind he could have win. But that had never come, and that was how I also knew that he'd never become the Colossus.

"Damn you," he said. And then he turned to Yrana. "You can lay in the trip home."

* * *

That was ten years ago.

We are back on Aevii, living in a home in the city of Aeskir.

I need to define that pronoun, *we*. It means, "Yrana and myself." *Bob* is dead. He survived the trip back to human space, but not his arrival back in what was now the ruling seat of human civilization. Times had changed, and politics had shifted, and the AIsorce, aware now that he would never occupy the Colossus, had quietly let the current powers that be know that they were no longer offering him protection. He was arrested the moment we came out of Bluegel. He managed to avoid the indignity of a trial, but I can promise that the form of suicide he chose was not a painless one. There must have been a minor conspiracy in order to ensure that he received the necessary weapon, an ancient device called a Claw of God, in his cell. But I hold no grudge against that conspiracy, no longing for the long trial that would have commemorated what he had done.

To me it is enough that he was out of the Universe, a factor that I no longer needed to consider except as a precedent that would inform events that would continue to spin like a wheel and return us to the same place.

What matters more is that we are back in a house on Aeskir.

The city is much the same. It is still an environment of distant music and enticing scents. It is a place that, as predicted, has become central to the politics that replaced what we had before Cort's War, where, if you wanted, you could drive yourself crazy with the debates over what human beings consider controversial on any given day. I pay little attention to any of it. I wander the streets, and I meet people, some of whom become my lovers, and a few of whom I have to fight, and from time to time, I return home to Yrana, who is neither my enemy or my lover but who, for convenience's sake, I call my friend. Our relationship is not warm, but it is functional. And from time to time she tells me about what the Colossus is doing and if there are any people her operators will offer a chance to inhabit it.

I continue my wanderings. I get drunk, the various different versions of drunk. I have what you can call relationships, and some of them are warm, and none of them are deep.

It is not the life Hvasik wanted for me.

I wish I could have that life. I have discovered that I have banal domestic ambitions, none of which I will ever realize. I want a little house. The blessed absence of martial thoughts. Even children to raise to the idea that someday it will be possible to go without fighting.

It matters, I think, that I can still have the little life I'm capable of, that I can remind myself what life should be, in the time before I have to choose whether I will stand against whoever challenges the Colossus next.

It matters because this is the kind of existence I am protecting.

And from time to time I make my way to one park bench or another and watch the people stroll by, making my little mental calculations over what they must be like, what things they might have done.

I know that someday I will be approached by one who wears the aura of war, one who looks like he or she has not left it behind, one who secretly aches for it while despising it. That person will look on me and see where I have been, what kind of sights I must have seen, what kind of terrible things I must have done. And that person will make a clumsy but needful approach, wanting only to talk about the sights and sounds that overshadow all else, about the pull they wish they could eject.

At that point I might tell that person about the greatest battle any human being has ever

fought. And about the battle that might come after it.

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