

PRISONERS OF PEACE

THE SWAN RIDERS

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PRELUDE: ON LOSING THINGS

One of the advantages of a purely mechanical body is that you can literally bang your head into things in frustration.

Which was handy, because Michael Talis was frustrated. He snapped his head against a flat bit of wall and it made a terrifically satisfying clang. “We have already had this discussion, Evangeline,” he said as a shower of piezoelectric feedback danced across his senses, then faded out like firework cinders.

“I’m only saying,” said Evie, “there are too many humans and not enough water. Now, we can’t make more water, so . . .”

Talis felt an urge to pinch the bridge of his nose—twenty-three years without a nose; when was the damn urge going to go away? “Evie, please try to focus. We’re supposed to try and keep them from killing each other.”

“Oh, but that’s the good part: They wouldn’t be killing each other . . .”

Evangeline's voice bubbled with the innocent excitement of the nine-year-old she'd been when she died. Even Talis had to admit it was a little creepy. Evie, for whatever reason—and there were precious few cybernetic psychologists left now, so they might never know—had decided not to use a body appliance. She was, therefore, a room that one went to, walls an inside-out thistle of jointed arms that were tipped with needles and samplers and pincers and manipulative clusters. There was a black, slick facescreen she couldn't be bothered to use. There was a teddy bear. It sat, listing slightly, on a rocking chair in the middle of the otherwise empty floor.

The other members of the United Nations High Commission on Conflict Abatement, humans all, refused to go into the room that was Evie. Rumor had it she'd used one of her needle-arms to inject an undersecretary, but Talis suspected it was really the teddy bear that was the last straw. It was an old teddy bear by this stage, yellowing like an Egyptian mummy. It had black button eyes.

"Talis?" said Evie.

He realized his pause had made her hopeful. "No," he said. "I'm not listening to any plan that involves population reduction, Evangeline. I mean, I guess if you want to sneak birth control agents into the water we can talk, but other than that—wait, no, not even that. This is not the bit where the machines rise up and take over the world, okay?"

"Okay," the room huffed. Then: "So is that coming soon?"

"I'll let you know," he said, softly, because the UN mainframe was breaking into him, pouring an urgent bulletin

directly into his mind. It seemed that things were coming to a head in Shanghai—and by head he meant someone had blown up the downtown. He'd been to Shanghai, once. Liked the food. Hated the smell. Gotten a fine for dangling his feet in the ornamental lake in the Yuyuan Garden—turned out it was sacred or something.

"It's not my fault they can't share," sulked Evie.

Talis shook himself, which wasn't quite as effective as it used to be. There was whirring. "Listen, you're supposed to be working on distributed desalination. Make me something cheap and sustainable, something I can put in every damn beach hut that hasn't been shot to bits. You've got a four-digit IQ and you used to like Lego. Get on with it. Go."

"Fine," said Evie. And if a room could flounce off, off she flounced. Talis was left standing with the needle-arms hanging limp around him and the space echoing and the teddy bear, which was just sitting there, judging him.

He was losing her.

He was losing them all.

He was losing major cities too. Shanghai was—depending on how one defined "major," and "lost"—somewhere between six and twelve now. Evie was right, though he wasn't going to tell her: there did seem to be humans to spare. Losing the cities was hard.

But losing the AIs. That was personal.

It had been twenty-three years since he'd had a human body, twenty-four and a half since he'd been human. It wasn't quite long enough that everyone he knew was dead—but

certainly everyone he'd cared about was. As was the rather shorter list of everyone who had cared about him.

Which left the AIs. His transfer psychologist had told him it was natural to have some preferential attachment to members of his own species, especially as there weren't many. The man had been an idiot, and he had missed the point. The AIs weren't a species—like viruses, they didn't even meet the technical definition of "life-form." What they were was a family.

And one by one, he'd lost them. The ones who died at upload. The ones who died of dissociative crisis in the first months: twenty-eight times, he'd held their hands. And then, over and over, the ones like Evie. He'd thought they were the lucky ones, at first. So few made it that far. So many died.

But Evie, and the others—they were drifting. Drifting away from anything recognizable as themselves. That would be fine, he wasn't who he'd been either—but little Evie wasn't drifting toward anything. She was becoming a computer program with an overlay of preteen petulance. If she lost the petulance, she'd be just a program, just a system for sorting data, like the mainframe that was spinning casualty figures and disaster protocols and peacekeeping options into his head.

Shanghai. The wars that circled the world like hurricanes, heated by the disease and flooding and population shifts, coming ashore and then going out to sea, but never stopping, never burning out. War Storms. What were they going to do?

"Talis?" said the room.

“Still here, kiddo.”

“So,” she said. “I’ve got these codes.”

She sounded excited, as if she had a great trick up her sleeve, a plan for spiking the punch at the junior prom. For just a moment he was glad to hear the lilt, and then he thought twice. “What codes?”

“For the orbital weapons platforms.”

Oh dear.

“They were just lying around,” she lied, and put them into his head.

He took them, because what was he going to do, leave them with her? At least they were unique: quantum information, which could be transferred but couldn’t be copied. He’d have sole access.

“Evie?”

“Yeah?” said the room.

“Your bear is starting to get a little . . . you know, stiff. Do you want a new one?”

Ninety-three different needles twitched at once. “Tiddler’s special.”

“Okay,” he said. A good sign, for what it was worth. A clean-off-the-hinges-crazy-but-you-take-what-you-can-get good sign: there was still a kid in there somewhere.

A kid with orbital weapons codes and a really quite reasonable scheme for reducing the human population.

“Evie?” he said again.

“Yeah?”

But suddenly he could think of nothing to say. Shanghai.

He was stuck; he was stumped. He'd wanted to save the world, but the world was—

A hand brushed his shoulder—well, he said a hand. It was more a spider: a cluster of jointed feelers, pressure sensors, the ridged ceramic of the grip pads. The spindly ten-foot arm unfolded further, wrapping behind him, and the manipulative cluster crawled up the side of his facescreen and went pat, pat, pat.

Evie, comforting him.

It didn't really help. It didn't feel like anything. But he shut off his eyes and leaned into it anyway, just to lean.

He shut off his eyes.

He shut off his eyes but he couldn't shut off his mind, even though sometimes he longed for a fuse, a circuit breaker, or just something as simple as sleep. The mainframe didn't and couldn't sleep; didn't and couldn't stop. It poured information through him like current and in the darkness without his visual sensors he watched as Shanghai fell. It had become what they called a bowl city: lower than the new sea level, ringed in a great wall. The explosion had breached it. With his orbital eyes, with ten thousand cameras, Talis watched the struggle: five minutes with the secondary baffles, the pumps, the emergency workers swarming like ants. It was right inside his head and it was eight thousand kilometers away and it was already too late.

"Talis?" His name, a tone of panic. A familiar enough combination. But it sounded wrong, dubbed over the drowning

city like a radio broadcast, flat as if someone had shut off half the speakers, disconnected. “Talis!”

And someone—not Evie—someone human touched him.

He woke up with a gasp that turned into a snarl, woke up and rolled to his feet like an acrobat with an AK-47, woke up and shoved the human who had dared to touch him away—into the wall, as it turned out.

“Whoa,” said the human. “Hey.”

It was Elián Palnik.

Right. Elián Palnik. Greta Stuart. Li Da-Xia. 2563 AD. Precepture Four; Ambrose’s Precepture. Ambrose was dead. And there was a new AI.

Talis blinked three times and reset his internal now, trying to line up with the present moment. It wasn’t quite as easy as he made it look. There was always an instant when he woke when he was Michael, when the dream clung and the disorientation of waking in a different body, a different country, a different century was as complete as if he’d awakened lying on the ceiling.

Elián waking him was not a good sign. Not that he cared about Elián, per se. The boy was a smart-mouthed kid with his heart on his sleeve and Talis supposed vaguely that he had rather liked him, even though Elián had done his little human darnedest to be a problem—but no, he didn’t care, one way or the other. It was only that Elián had been sitting with Greta.

And right now Elián was shoved against the wall and doing his best to look angry instead of afraid. There was

really no point in lying to AIs with infrared vision and half a millennium of experience, but few people seemed to grasp that. And perhaps the person Elián was really trying to deceive was himself.

“Talis—” the boy began, and choked on the name: the name of a monster, a murderer; the name of the thing that had killed his grandmother, not five days earlier, and with a certain dramatic flair. But Elián had come anyway; he’d said the name anyway, like an atheist pleading with God. “Talis, it’s Greta.”

By the sound of his own name, Talis knew something had gone wrong.

He’d found Greta tipping into a category three dissociative crisis.

Her monkish little cell was grey with fear; she was tangled in quilts of UN blue as if she were dissolving into the sky. Greta’s roommate and (he thought, probably) lover, Li Da-Xia, was backed up against the opposite bed. That was presumably the problem. Or at least the problem’s most immediate source. New AIs had a great deal of trouble with emotionally charged memories, and having your (probably) lover in your bedroom had to count.

“What’s happening?” Elián asked.

He had absolutely no inclination to explain.

Greta was coming apart at the mere sight of Xie, but she had no history with him; it should be safe for him to touch her. He knelt beside her and took her hands. He rubbed his thumbs

over the ridges of her knuckles as if she were prayer beads. Her fingertip sensors meshed with his; he could feel the currents slamming around her body. He let his active sensors sweep out, delicate as butterflies. The bounceback fluttered in: a story of rising potentials, of catastrophe, of pain.

“What’s happening?” said Elián again.

He spoke aloud, not to answer Elián, but merely in an effort to be honest with himself. “She’s skinning. Oh, I didn’t think she would . . .”

Greta Stuart had had the best mind he’d met in an age. He had not known it at first (in fairness, the first time he’d met her she was in the middle of being tortured, which does not display the best side of anyone’s mind) but he’d slowly come to see it. She was smart. She was stubborn. She was logical. She was incredibly brave. It should have been enough.

Tears were leaking from her eyes.

Elián, who on reflection he didn’t like after all, snapped uselessly: “Well, help her!”

How many times had he done this? Two dozen? More? (The number was thirty-two, and he was only pretending to be unsure of it.) There was very little he could do to help. A smaller event, a category one or category two crisis, sure. He could intercept it with ultrasound, cut off the memories from their emotional content.

But this was category three. This was skinning.

He’d seen it over and over: how a single memory rose from the organic mind, and then from the datastore, and then (reinforced, and stronger) from the organics, and then

(reinforced, and stronger) . . . it was two mirrors reflecting each other. It was feedback squealing through a microphone. A single moment building to an intensity beyond what any psyche could endure.

How could there be no circuit breaker? How could there be no grace?

“Greta,” he whispered, his voice sounding rough in his own ears. “Greta, listen to me. The two memories are the same, yes? It’s only the thinker that’s different—but what does that matter, if the thoughts are the same?”

“What does it matter!” Her voice was shrill, but she still had words: good. Words were good. Words were data. AIs could work with data. “It’s only the whole construction of self, Talis!” And then: “They died, Michael: they all died!”

She didn’t say who, but he knew. Thirty-two times, he’d held their hands.

And before that—he’d fallen retching to the floor of the grey room at his first glimpse of Lu-Lien’s face. His best friend and lover, standing (as Xie was standing) right there. Opening for him her slow-blooming smile. He’d seen it, and remembered it, and remembered it, and—what is pain but overload? What is overload but pain?

Lu had taken his hands and it had been like taking hold of a live wire. His mind convulsed. The memory bounced between the mirrors until she had whispered to him, “Michael,” and he (in the greatest act of grace in his ungraceful, frenetic life) had opened his eyes.

Greta’s hand was shut like a vise on his, making his

borrowed bones ache. "What did you remember?" he coaxed her. "What's the last clear thing?"

"Xie," she gasped. Her eyes were so tight-shut that they made cracks across her face. "Xie, cutting my hair."

"Well, then," he said. "Look at her."

Greta opened her eyes. She looked at Xie.

And then, a miracle.

Very slowly, Greta reached out and took Xie's hand. He saw them move together like two halves of a broken whole. Saw the present moment break the short circuit that was devouring Greta's mind. What had worked for him, and never worked again, not once in thirty-two times . . . it worked.

A miracle.

A somewhat provisional miracle. What Talis knew very well, and Greta did not, was that the dissociative crisis they all called skinning was not a single chasm to be leapt. It was a long, steep slope of scree. At any moment, one wrong step could send you sliding. Avalanches of memory could be triggered by the slightest thing. Getting down that slope, finding stable ground on which to build a new construction of the self—that was going to take more than one sweet little touch. Five hundred years in, and there were still moments when he shook uselessly and could not remember who he was.

He missed Lu.

One sweet little touch.

He watched them, Greta and Xie and Elián, over the next few hours, until the Swan Riders came. Watched the tenderness with which they treated each other, and tried to

*remember tenderness. Watched the way they believed that love
would save them.*

As if it could.

As if it could be nearly enough.

1

THE MOST IMMEDIATE PROBLEM

S^o. It is perhaps not everyone who asks to be murdered, gets their wish, and then, three days later, finds that their most immediate problem is that they cannot ride a horse. I was trying at least to be wryly amused by the novelty of the situation.

The horse, on the other hand, seemed rather put out. It kept slowing to a stop, or wandering off at some strange angle. “Please don’t go that way,” I said to it. “Go with the other horses.”

It didn’t. It was peeling off to the left. My datastore provided me with the procedure here, and I pushed it up into my brain so that it would come to me more easily, as if I had really learned it. (Only I hadn’t, of course. I had never been on a horse in my life.) The procedure went

1. Get the horse's attention.
2. Pull rein to right.
3. Hope for best.

I touched the horse's neck, and made a chirrup noise like a lovesick squirrel. The horse swiveled an ear toward me, a good sign for step one.

I pulled the right rein, gripping with my knees in case the horse obeyed me suddenly.

The horse turned its head right—hurrah! But before I could get too excited, it slowed. It stopped. It looked at me over its shoulder as if to say: *Are you serious?*

Ahead of me Talis reined his horse around and called back: "Greta: All right?"

From a distance, you could have taken Talis for a human, and not a remarkable one: a slightly built, strong-jawed young white woman with a haphazard haircut and positively startling eyebrows. You could have taken him for Rachel.

He was not Rachel, for all that he had borrowed her body like a cup of sugar. The way he stood up in his stirrups made him look mad and compelling as Joan of Arc. "Need help?" he called.

"I'm all right!" I shouted back, then dropped my voice. "You're a herd animal," I told the horse, which was still just standing there looking over its shoulder at me, a more-in-sorrow-than-in-anger expression on its face. "You're supposed to want to stick with the other horses. Look: they went that way."

I made the squirrel noise again, did some preemptive

knee-clinging, and tapped the horse with reins and heels. The horse tried to push its nose between my knee and its own ribs. I pushed its head away and did the reins-heels-knees thing again. The horse (I swear it) said *If you say so*, then bolted. Before I knew it, we were heading for the horizon at a flat-out run.

There are some things only bodies can know, and one of them is how to stay on top of a running horse. My datastore saw fit to provide me with a list of people killed falling from horses. Genghis Khan, for example. Geronimo, of all people. The list was long and filled with people who were better riders than me. Of course there were brain-blanked five-year-olds who were better riders than me. The ground was streaking and pounding by, the horse surged and bounced under me, I'd lost track of the reins, the saddle was hitting my more delicate parts with a hammer's force, and this was a stupid way to die.

Just as I thought so, something swooped like a raven into view: Talis's black horse. He was running it, hard, fast. It pulled in alongside me.

Talis leaned clear out to one side—impossibly far, as if gravity were one of the things that obeyed him—and scooped up the reins I'd dropped. For a moment we were running side by side, blurred with speed, pounded with noise. He slowed his horse and mine slowed too, until we moved at a tolerable bounce.

I panted and gasped. I might be an AI now, but I still had a body, and it had still put all its effort, just then, into the

physical work of not dying. I was short of breath—I could feel the upper lobe of the right lung pushing awkwardly against the datastore—and my heart rate was significantly elevated. Talis, on the other hand, was merely flushed a bit, and grinning. “And you call yourself a Stuart,” he said. “Bonnie Prince Charlie is spinning in his grave.”

“I also cannot wield a claymore,” I said. “In case you were wondering.”

The AI laughed like a bell ringing. The horses had slowed to an amble now, and one of the Swan Riders maneuvered his horse along my other flank. Now my animal had nowhere to go but straight ahead. It calmed somewhat.

I could empathize. It is fairly easy to be calm when one’s path is set and one has few choices. Having been both an heir to a crown and a blood hostage to the Preceptures, I should know.

Talis and his riders were (in their way) kind to me: we rode only a few hours.

A few hours was plenty.

I had frankly no idea horses were so big. They don’t look so big from the ground. Getting onto a horse is like becoming a different kind of creature: a tall one, with an uncertain connection to the earth. A newborn giraffe, say. Or perhaps that implies too much delicacy. Once mounted (a process which took several iterations and cost me much dignity), I was acutely aware of how strong the animal was: its whole back was sheets and cords of muscle. There was no

question who would win in any physical contest.

So, horses: big. Also, horses: wide. To straddle a horse for a few hours: well . . . A lifetime of farm labor has given me quite serviceable muscles—I am not a weakling. I am also not inexperienced with pain. But those muscles had never been called on to do anything remotely like riding a horse, and the pain (at least in its location) was novel too. By the end of three hours' riding I was sure I was going to die of overstretched thigh muscles and bruised sitting bones.

The Swan Riders swung down from their mounts while I sat on mine, unable to move my rigid legs and contemplating colorful ways in which I could murder Talis for doing this to me.

Though of course horses were the very least of what he had done to me.

The AI turned up as if my thoughts had conjured him. He took hold of my horse's bridle and offered me a fist as a brace for dismounting. I looked at it. Then I leaned on it, and on the saddle horn (while my datastore told me about William the Conqueror, who had bruised his abdomen on a pommel so badly that he had later died). I tried to swing my leg over.

But my stiff thighs seized up, and the next moment I was sliding. I slipped around the horse like a bead on a hoop, clutching at the saddle horn to slow myself while the horse snorted and sidled. Finally I just fell. Talis grabbed my waist and managed to swing me clear of the horse before I crashed on top of him and we both went down. He twisted as we fell and landed on top of me, laughing.

My horse swung his nose round and looked at us. It is good that horses have no eyebrows to raise. I felt that I might maim the next person who raised their eyebrows at me, and the horse was a (relative) innocent.

Talis rolled off me, and we both lay in the autumn grass of a little prairie hollow, with the sky just beginning to turn the color of jewels: chalcedony and lapis.

“That lacked dignity,” I said.

“Dignity is overrated,” he said.

Talis said this: Talis, the master of the Preceptures, with their codes of honor, order, and restraint. His dark hair was sweaty and sticking out everywhere. I was glad that mine—newly shorn for the grey room—was too short to muss. To give up dignity?

As he often did, Talis answered my unspoken thought. “It’s a human yardstick,” he said. “You don’t need to hold yourself to it.”

“Then what shall I hold myself to?”

Talis popped the air out of his cheeks, as if the question of ideals mattered not a whit. “You’ll find something.” He swung his arms up, stretching like a cat. “What do you think, are you going to live?”

Given the situation, the history of the AIs, it hardly seemed likely. But before I had to decide, a shadow fell across us, dark against the soft glow of the sky. A human figure with wings: one of the Riders.

I jerked as the shadow touched me, and my throat tightened.

That's what the Riders meant to me. They were dread given human form.

Talis, though, sprang to his feet with a bounce that was nearly spaniel.

Both Swan Riders were there now, at the rim of the hollow, and they swept him a formal bow, touching their left palms to their right shoulders, then holding their upturned hands out, a gesture that looked Roman to my classically trained eyes.

This I had already seen them do. At the Precepture, they'd bowed so, saluted so, and said not a word. *The Utterances*—the book of Talis's quotations kept and studied as holy writ in north-central Asia, and a political text elsewhere—prescribed it so: *The Swan Riders should mostly be silent*, it said. *They are way creepier that way.*

It was true, and it had a point: ideally the Swan Riders are not viewed as people, but as messengers, angels, mere extensions of the will of Talis. In my time at the Precepture, I'd seen many Riders. I'd never heard them utter a word outside of their rituals, outside of the names of the Children they'd come to kill.

(Children of Peace. Come with me.)

These two were on that model: during the embarrassing fifteen minutes when my horse wandered away from the stool I was using for a mounting block every time I got halfway on him, they'd said nothing: they'd sat like figures from myth.

Now they stood together, a man and a woman, undoing

for each other the buckles that held on their wing harnesses. He was big and she was narrow. He, African (or from Africa's diaspora), she Indian or Sri Lankan (at a guess). He was missing one arm somewhere above his wrist—he had the leads of both horses gathered in a prosthetic hand of scuffed-up but translucent silicon, metal bones and actuators visible within. I couldn't tell how far up it went, because it vanished into his sleeve.

"Hey, Talis," said the woman, shrugging out of the wing straps. Her voice was like scorched sugar—sweet and rich and bitter, all at once. "Heard it was you."

"How nice!" he piped. "My reputation precedes me."

(It did, too. In the way aerial bombardment precedes an army.)

The man said nothing but looked down his elegant nose at me.

"And who's this?" said the woman.

"Oh, sorry," said Talis. "Greta, this is Francis Xavier. And that's Sri."

It was awkward being presented to standing people while lying flat on my back, but I drew on my royal training and endured it. I couldn't have risen without help in any case. "Hello," I said. Dried grasses poked at my shaved scalp.

"New Rider?" said the woman, Sri, as if the notion amused her vastly.

Talis's smile went sharp-edged. "New AI."

For just a flash, Sri looked nakedly horrified.

Talis put up an eyebrow—dangerous—and Sri whipped

a blank expression across her face as if snapping a sheet into the wind. She touched her shoulder again, this time to me. “My apologies.” She reached down for me. “Need a hand?”

“Please.” Actually, lying flat sounded good, but the smarter thing was to walk off the stiffness. Even with help, getting up was difficult. My legs cramped and wobbled, my torso (staying upright on a horse is harder than you think) felt like old rubber.

“It gets easier,” said Sri.

“It gets harder first,” put in Talis cheerfully. He and the male Swan Rider, Francis Xavier, were pulling the saddles off the horses. “Tomorrow you’re going to feel *really* rotten.”

“Oh, that’s wonderful news,” I said—and suddenly sounded, in my own ears, like Elián Palnik. He was the only person I’d ever heard smart off to Talis. Elián. Talis had exiled him with little more than a horse and a stern warning. He was out here on the prairie somewhere. Lost. I had lost him. I had left so much behind.

I tried to be more myself: “Thank you, Talis.”

Thank you, Talis, for telling me I’m going to hurt. For taking away my childhood. For making me a prisoner.

For wrenching me from the people I loved.

For turning me into a machine.

The Swan Riders set to work.

It is not in my nature, nor in my training, to watch others work and do nothing. But horses, as has been established, are foreign to me, and camping not much less so. (The king

my father would sail out sometimes, and we would lay up on an island and—but no good to think human thoughts.) So for the better part of an hour, I sat on a rock and watched while Talis and Francis Xavier and Sri took the tack off the horses and cared for them, and built a fire and unpacked their gear.

Past that first bow, and past everyone's care for Talis's glittery temper, they did not defer to each other. If you did not know better you would assume the three of them were equals. If you did not know better, and if you hadn't seen that strange gesture: palm to shoulder, palm out in offering.

The pair of Swan Riders could have been picked for contrast. Francis Xavier was big, broad across the shoulders and narrow at the waist, with a face as round as the moon. Sri was as narrow as if she'd shut herself in a door, her face almost comically tapered: all intense eyes and needle-sharp nose. He was thoughtfully slow; she was wildly quick.

They were both murderers, of course.

Of Francis Xavier, I knew this for a fact: he'd killed my classmate Bihn. He stood out from the various other people who had murdered my various other schoolfellows, because of the hand, and also simply because he was so big. He—I would say he was beautiful, but that did not quite catch it. His dark skin was glossy smooth and his features were perfectly symmetrical, as if someone had buffed out all his details. His face was so carefully blank that you could believe he'd taken a recent blow to the head. The Swan Riders are not meant to have a will of their own, and

I had never seen one of whom that was easier to believe.

Sri, on the other hand, seemed self-willed as an alley cat. She had a scrawniness that looked tough. But balancing that she had a quick voice, rough and lovely, that made me wonder if she could sing. I had no idea how many people she'd been called on to kill.

Soon the horses were grazing (their teeth were big, close up, and their jaws were built for leverage) and a fire was burning and Sri had flipped up a crossbow and shot a rabbit that just happened to be passing.

Well. That was what we were going to eat, I guess, and solved the puzzle of how four people could travel in abandoned country yet carry so little food. The puzzle of water I had yet to come to grips with.

And the puzzle of me. What was I, now? How was I to live?

When I finally sat down at the fire, Francis Xavier nodded to me solemnly and said: "Greta."

A Swan Rider, speaking my name.

So tall his wings brushed the lintel as he ducked into the room. Nghiêm Th Bihn, he'd said. Come with me.

So clearly, clear as glass, I remembered that. I could actually feel the shape of the memory, the crystalline structure of it deep in the ravaged ruin of my organic brain. A broken crystal: it cut at me as my datastore provided the equivalent memory, and a dossier about the war whose beginning had made her life forfeit. Bihn. A laughing little slip of a girl, she'd liked to braid my hair, and when the Swan

Rider said her name she'd started screaming. The central issue of the war was —

“Greta?” said Francis Xavier, which didn't help.

I could feel the two versions of the memory well up, amplifying each other, slowly, slowly, but looping nevertheless, rising, feeding back—Francis Xavier ducking in the doorway, then looking up, his eyes utterly blank.

I closed my eyes.

Reducing stimuli will always help. Remember that. Talis's advice on being overwhelmed by an AI's too-sharp memories. Even he—sometimes I saw him close his eyes.

Except that the heat of the fire and the smell of the rabbit cooking made me think vividly of cremating a body. Another trapdoor, and a deeper one.

“Talis,” I whispered, to the darkness in front of my eyes.

He hadn't been near, but when I said his name he was there. A hand on my hand. Capable, rein-callused, Rachel's stolen hand: Talis. “Greta.” His voice was soft. I could feel the brush of his sensors, like a moth's antennae. “What is it?”

“Him,” I said. “Him, he killed Bihn.”

“Francis Xavier,” said Talis. “Go draw us a couple of buckets of water, would you?”

I heard the Rider get up. I let my ultrasound ping at him—he could probably sense it, and such tracking must surely be rude—but I let my ultrasound ping him and I tracked him with my eyes closed until he was hidden by the curve of the hollow.

“Open up,” said Talis softly.

I opened my eyes.

Talis was crouched in front of me, balanced on the balls of his feet, his hands curled over my fists. The fire's reflection danced in his pale eyes. "Open up," he said, softer still, a lover's murmur, a request. He raised his hands to my face.

His sensors, which had been feathering me, were suddenly sharper: palpating, breaking through even the rising overload of the doubled memory.

"What are you doing?" I heard my voice crack.

His eyes were crinkled with concentration. "Exorcism. Just—hold still."

Stronger still, the sensors. It was like having a finger poking me right in the brain. "Michael," I gasped. "Stop."

He didn't. Nausea made my skin prickle into sweat as he reached into me. More like an iron nail than a finger now. A nail going deep.

And then, all at once, I remembered Bihn. Every image of Bihn that my mind had ever struck into a coin of memory, and how strange that we cannot choose what is struck in memory, every image of her I had ever had, everything—it came rushing into my head all at once.

And like a circuit breaker tripping, I stopped remembering.

My images of Bihn fluttered to the ground inside me, like dropped cards.

Tarot cast. Pages coming out of a book. *Alice in Wonderland*: only a pack of . . . slowly the metaphors too stopped coming.

My mind fell quiet.

Talis lifted his hands away. “Sorry,” he said. “But it does work. If the memory is small enough.”

Bihn. Small enough.

“Thank you,” I said. For lack of anything better.

Sri, across the fire, was watching me like a cat. Francis Xavier was stopped at the top of the rise with leather buckets dripping onto his boots.

Talis rocked back on his heels and gathered in his riders with a whirl of his hand. “So,” he said. “Greta here is three days past her upload. Our mission is to get her to the Red Mountains before her brain utterly destroys itself and she winds up seizing in the grass until her heart gives out.”

He turned and spoke aside to me, so neat I could almost hear the parentheses, though in truth I was somewhat preoccupied by the image of *seizing in the grass*. “I have friends there,” he said. “And, you know, what’s left of friends. We can teach you some tricks and tips.”

He turned back to his riders. “Let me be clear: she is worth more to me, and to the future of the planet, than either one of you, or, for that matter, any one medium-to-large city. Possibly two or three cities, though obviously we all hope it doesn’t come to that.” He smiled at them. “The takeaway is that I *do* want this to work. HmMMM?”

“HmMMM,” affirmed Sri. Francis Xavier said nothing. He poured the water into the fold-up troughs we used for the horses, and then stood there, with his back to us. He had short hair, sectioned and arranged in little knots that lay

close to his scalp, like certain images of the Buddha. He was standing still enough to be such a statue.

“FX,” Talis prompted.

Francis Xavier turned around and locked on to my eyes. “I will protect her.”

I was stunned by the slow certainty. It sounded as if he were saying wedding vows.

And then.

A flash. A blow to the eyes. Solid black shadows rushed out from everything, from Talis, from Francis Xavier, from the horses and the hillside, from every blade of grass. For an instant the sky was white and the world was flat and blackened.

Francis Xavier was moving. Before I even got a hand up to shield my eyes he was running forward, spreading his arms. He slammed into us, wrapping one arm around Talis and one around me, pushing us to the ground, sheltering us with his body.

For a moment I just huddled under Francis Xavier, stunned by the flash, by the blow. My eyes watered. The dry grass scratched my face. Like a chick under a wing, I was glad enough to be covered.

Not Talis, though. “Get *off* . . .” He pushed his way free. “It’s miles away, honestly . . .”

Francis Xavier stood up.

There were spots in front of my eyes, and the night sky glowed a strange, sulfurous yellow.

“Plasma in the ionosphere,” said Talis. “An orbital weapon.”

He squinted toward what seemed to be the source of it—behind the horizon to the south and west. It looked as if the sun had mutated and was swelling back where it had set.

“I’ve never seen one,” said Sri.

“I have,” I said. Talis had once stopped Elián from escaping with a bolt from the blue, scooped a small crater out almost at his feet. “But—”

“But not like that,” said Talis. “That was a city killer.”

“Where . . . ?” breathed Sri.

Francis Xavier was counting under his breath. For a moment I thought he was trying to keep his temper, but then there was a distant crackle, not quite thunder. The sky made a sound like glass creaking. From the delay between light and sound, one could calculate—“Four hundred miles,” said Francis Xavier. “Calgary?”

“We don’t have to guess,” said Sri.

Right. At least one of us could talk to the orbital weapons platforms.

“Calgary,” said Talis, like a one-word eulogy. He stood a moment, looking at the sick, false sunset. Then he clapped his hands together and twirled round to face us. “Well, kiddos. Something is obviously up, but no worries. I’m sure I’m on it.”

There was still, in the Red Mountains, a master copy of Talis. Someone—something?— who could access every networked sensor in the world, examine any database, command any satellite. Someone who was, apparently, “on it.” Our Talis might be able to talk to the weapons platform and

confirm its firing strength and its target, but without the real-time access to information, he couldn't know the why of it.

"So," said Sri. "You were saying, about the medium-sized cities?"

"It might have nothing to do with Greta," said Francis Xavier.

"Yeah," said Talis. "But how likely is that, really?"

"We should go," said Francis Xavier. "If there is a threat to you. Or to her. We should go. Our refuge is less than fifty miles."

"No," said Talis.

"We could use it as an extraction point. Or at least update the sitrep."

"No," said Talis. "Greta is a novice. She can't ride fifty miles at a stretch. Not to mention I just pushed an ultrasound pulse through her prefrontal cortex. And it's dark."

"You want us to stay here," said Francis Xavier, obedient, soft-voiced, walking the knife edge between statement and question.

"What I want," said Talis, "is for you to take first watch." He was framed against the false sunset. Structures were developing in the charged sky as it equalized. Muscly, twisted ropes of shining and stretched membranes of dimming air. Radiating out from the ruin of Calgary, filling a quarter of the sky, they spread out behind Talis like huge wings. "Relax, FX. What's safer than the middle of nowhere?"

The middle of nowhere. The middle of Saskatchewan. The middle of my country.

This was my country.

I had been the heir to the crown of the Pan Polar Confederacy. Calgary was—had been—a PanPol city, an edge-of-the-empire garrison, and an important inland port with a small spaceport and a large zeppelin depot. There were even royal apartments near there, in the ancient, wild luxury of Banff. I had been to those apartments, slept there. Walked those streets. The people in Calgary were my people.

There were fifty thousand of them.

And they were gone.

My face was numb and strange where Talis had touched it. At the edges of my electronic mind I could feel the brush of the weapons platforms, the surveillance satellites, speaking to me in a language I could not yet understand. In my fingertips I could feel the charged particles raining down from the ruined sky. It was—I was—

I was crying.

Talis frowned at me and made a little flourish with his hand, like a magician conjuring flowers. Very like that, because when he opened his hand there was something cupped in his palm: three little pills. A small enough thing to practice sleight of hand with, but it was impeccably done—certainly I hadn't seen him do anything so mundane as reach into a pocket.

“How did you do that?”

“I'm a trickster god.” He nudged the pills toward me across his palm, naming them one by one. “Muscle relaxant.

Neurosheath repair agent. And a sleep aid. Take them. Tomorrow we need to ride.”

“Thank you,” I said. “But I think my mind is altered enough.”

Sri made a noise that was not quite a snort—not with a dead city glowing on the horizon.

“It’s not a request.” Talis flashed his teeth. “And it’s not in your interest to slow us down.”

There was too much in me, too much whirl in my mind, and yet there was a numb spot, somewhere in the middle of it. But Talis was right. If cities were being destroyed, we needed—Francis Xavier had said “refuge.”

I needed refuge. So I flashed my teeth in my turn, and I took the drugs.

The Swan Riders were both murderers. But that was nothing to what Talis was.

=+=

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