

## DEEP TIME

### Northern Hemisphere, two days before the Summer Solstice, in a lost season nearly 67 million years ago

The small white-spotted rodent had doomed itself as soon as it strayed too far from its haven in the broken cliff face, although it had no conception of the danger keenly observing it from the dark bushes encircling the isolated mountain glade it had claimed for its own.

Blithely unaware, it skittered between scattered clumps of grass across pale sandy ground covered with shifting patterns of leaf-shadow, cast by moss-clad deciduous trees towering overhead. The day was windy, and the restless sigh of flexing branches concealed the stealthy footfalls of the watching presence who had stalked slowly but relentlessly nearer to his oblivious prey.

*[[[Deguchi tried to feel his own heartbeat, but couldn't: only the bird-rapid pulse of whatever he was riding... a dinosaur? It had to be! Excitement overwhelmed his fear — trapped in such strange flesh, he marvelled at how the hunting saurian body felt around him: the muscle-flex in the hind legs, the proud curve of the neck, the long stiff tail acting as a counterbalance...]]]*

Two full Greatest-lengths from its burrow, the mouse sat up on its hindquarters to nibble at a cluster of grass-seeds — when something, perhaps a fugitive shimmer of sunlight across brilliant blue feathers just beyond the nearest bush, finally caught its attention. It froze, its tiny black eyes bulging — an instant later it was scampering back towards the sunny cliff face at full speed, a plump grey blur —

— but not fast enough to outpace its pursuer. The male raptor exploded from cover, sprinting two-legged into the clearing and lunging to flare his forearm-mounted feathers around the racing mouse, kicking up tiny spurts of dust where their tips brushed the ground. The panicked rodent instantly reversed course, trying to skitter between the raptor's digitigrade hind feet —

— and quicker than thought, he darted his head forward to snap it up with the sharp teeth at the tip of his long lean muzzle. An agonized squeak — one flick of his head, a swift swallow — and the mouse was gone. Had the prey been larger he would have performed a dashing leap-and-pinion-with-his-hind-foot maneuver, but it was scarcely worth wasting so much effort on a meal as small as a mouse.

*[[[The iron-salt of blood exploded on his tongue — Deguchi's tongue, incorporeal — sending a pulse of satisfaction through his whole lithe frame, binding alien mind and native flesh ever more tightly in harmony—]]]*

*[[[— then, a stutter-flash of disconnection: He saw Sarah's face, looking up at him with love on a winter day long past with snowflakes caught in her hair, and the pang of longing for her was physically painful —]]]*

*[[[— last week, her beauty turned to ugly screaming —"**It's over, Raoul — I want a divorce** —"]]]*

*[[[— he reeled, expecting to feel surprise mirrored back from the creature whose body he shared, but the dinosaur did not react to his distress in any way —]]]]*

The edge of his hunger sated, the male paused to fastidiously lick the blood from his foreteeth with an agile tongue, then proceeded to meticulously preen the tips of his wing-feathers where they'd been disarrayed by contact with the ground. It was a fine day on the cusp of Midsummer and even here, high on the mountain slopes in enemy territory, he wasn't inclined to disregard his physical appearance — after all, wasn't he widely acknowledged to be a particularly handsome specimen of the Greatest, with more than a passing resemblance to Pah'tak~Nerr himself, Shogun of the Culture of the Word?

*[[[Another stutter-flash: Deguchi was facing Mariah Kemp across his desk, watching the student almost jitter out of her chair: "**Drugs? I don't — I don't know what you're talking about, Professor...**" ]]]*

*[[[— stutter-flash: Deguchi at six years old, hugging and being hugged by his whiskered father, both of them laughing with some long-forgotten delight —]]]*

*[[[— then back to the dinosaur's self-absorbed thoughts:]]]*

Pah'tak~Nerr, however, bore darker blue plumage and was heavier set, his venerable black muzzle starting to grizzle with age: this male, the catcher of mice in mountain meadows, was smaller and more lithely built, a graceful agile youth whose blue plumage, so fetchingly adorned with black and white accents, was always immaculate. What of it if the rougher soldiers hissed behind his back, calling him 'arrogant' and 'a dandy'? His superiors noted his attention to detail, and thus at the young age of five-fours-and-two he had attained the rank of ~Esk,

*[[[a quick snap of the jaws, "clack!", before the hissed term of rank]]]*

a courier/scribe entrusted with one of the rare Codex artifacts of memory-imbued Sky-Metal.

*[[[Memory-imbued! An alien artifact! Horror took root in Deguchi and rapidly grew in the fertile ground of growing realization...]]]]*

His grooming complete, the male raised his left forearm to admire the play of yellow sunlight on the silver vambrace that was wrapped around it, a pleasing contrast to his black hide finely striped with scarlet. The long knotwork strip was more than a lovely piece of jewelry, engraved as it was with characters of the Word by the Sky Emperor's Source-Forge itself: this vambrace, the only cladding the male wore, had been granted by the science of the Codex the power to absorb thought and retain physical memories of the environments surrounding its bearer.

*[[[From Deguchi's own memories, a stuttering hiss-whine and a flicker of an ancient computer protocol: **Negotiating with Host...**]]]]*

*[[[**Oh God, Deguchi shuddered: The armband! It's handshaking with me! Trying to establish a solid mental connection —**]]]]*