

A Dry, Quiet War
by
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I cannot tell you what it meant to me to see the two suns of Ferro set behind the dry mountain east of my home. I had been away twelve billion years. I passed my cabin, to the pump well and, taking a metal cup from where it hung from a set-pin, I worked the handle three times. At first it creaked, and I believed it was rusted tight, but then it loosened, and within fifteen pulls, I had a cup of water. Someone had kept the pump up. Someone had seen to the house and the land while I was away at the war. For me, it had been fifteen years; I wasn't sure how long it had been for Ferro. The water was tinged red and tasted of iron. Good. I drank it down in a long draught, then put the cup back onto its hanger. When the big sun, Hemingway, set, a slight breeze kicked up. Then Fitzgerald went down and a cold, cloudless night spanked down onto the plateau. I shivered a little, adjusted my internals, and stood motionless, waiting for the last of twilight to pass, and the stars -- my stars -- to come out. Steiner, the planet that is Ferro's evening star, was the first to emerge, low in the west, methane blue. Then the constellations. Ngal. Gilgamesh. The Big Snake, half-coiled over the southwestern horizon. There was no moon tonight. There was never a moon on Ferro, and that was right. After a time, I walked to the house, climbed up the porch and the house recognized me and turned on the lights. I went inside. The place was dusty, the furniture covered with sheets, but there were no signs of rats or jinjas, and all seemed in repair. I sighed, blinked, tried to feel something. Too early, probably. I started to take a covering from a chair, then let it be. I went to the kitchen and checked the cupboard. An old malt whisky bottle, some dry cereal, some spices. The spices had been my mother's, and I seldom used them before I left for the end of time. I considered that the whisky might be perfectly aged by now. But, as the saying goes on Ferro, we like a bit of food with our drink, so I left the house and took the road to town, to Heidel. It was a five mile walk, and though I could have enhanced and covered the ground in ten minutes or so, I walked at a regular pace under my homeworld stars. The road was dirt, of course, and my pant legs were dusted red when I stopped under the outside light of Thredmartin's Pub. I took a last breath of cold air, then went inside to the warm. It was a good night at Thredmartin's. There were men and women gathered around the fire hearth, usas and splices in the cold corners. The regulars were at the bar, a couple of whom I recognized -- so old now, wizened like stored apples

in

a barrel. I looked around for a particular face, but she was not there. A jukebox sputtered some core-cloud deak and the air was thick with smoke and conversation. Or was, until I walked in. Nobody turned to face me. Most of them

couldn't have seen me. But a signal passed and conversation fell to quiet murmur. Somebody quickly killed the jukebox.

I blinked up an internals menu into my peripheral vision and adjusted to the room's temperature. Then I went to the edge of the bar. The room got even more quiet.

The bartender, old Thredmartin himself, reluctantly came over to me.

"What can I do for you, sir?" he asked me.

I looked over him, to the selection of bottles, tubes and cans on display behind

him. "I don't see it," I said.

"Eh?" He glanced back over his shoulder, then quickly returned to peering at me.

"Bone's Barley," I said.

"We don't have any more of that," Thredmartin said, with a suspicious tone.

"Why not?"

"The man who made it died."

"How long ago?"

"Twenty years, more or less. I don't see what business of--"

"What about his son?"

Thredmartin backed up a step. Then another. "Henry," he whispered. "Henry Bone."

"Just give me the best that you do have, Peter Thredmartin," I said. "In fact,

I'd like to buy everybody a round on me."

"Henry Bone! Why, you looked to me like a bad 'un indeed when you walked in here. I took you for one of them glims, I did," Thredmartin said. I did not know

what he was talking about. Then he smiled an old devil's crooked smile. "Your money's no good here, Henry Bone. I do happen to have a couple of bottles of your old dad's whisky stowed away in back. Drinks are on the house."

And so I returned to my world, and for most of those I'd left behind it seemed

as if I'd never really gone. My neighbors hadn't changed much in the twenty years local that had passed, and, of course, they had no conception of what had

happened to me. They only knew that I'd been to the war -- the Big War at the End of Time -- and evidently everything turned out okay, for here I was, back in

my own time and my own place. I planted Ferro's desert barley, brought in peat

from the mountain bogs, bred the biomass that would extract the minerals from my

hard ground water, and got ready for making whisky once again. Most of the inhabitants of Ferro were divided between whisky families and beer families. Bones were distillers, never brewers, since the Settlement, ten generations before.

It wasn't until she called upon me that I heard the first hints of the troubles

that had come. Her name was Alinda Bexter, but since we played together under the floorplanks of her father's hotel, I had always called her Bex. When I left

for the war, she was twenty, and I twenty-one. I still recognized her at forty,

five years older than I was now, as she came walking down the road to my house, a week after I returned. She was taller than most women on Ferro, and she might be mistaken for a usa-human splice anywhere else. She was rangy and she wore a khaki dress that whipped in the dry wind as she walked down the road. I stood on the porch, waiting for her, wondering what she would say. "Well, this is a load off of me," she said. She was wearing a brimmed hat. It had ribbon to tie under her chin, but Bex had not done that. She held her hand on it to keep it from blowing from her head. "This damn ranch has been one big thankless task." "So it was you who kept it up," I said. "Just kept it from falling apart as fast as it would have otherwise," she replied. We stood and looked at one another for a moment. Her eyes were green. Now I had seen an ocean, and I could understand the kind of green they were. "Well then," I finally said. "Come on in."

I offered her some sweetcake I'd fried up, and some beer that my neighbor, Shin, had brought by, both of which she declined. We sat in the living room, on furniture covered with the white sheets I had yet to remove. Bex and I took it slow, getting to know each other again. She ran her father's place now. For years, the only way to get to Heidel was by freighter, but we had finally gotten a node on the Flash, and, even though Ferro was still a backwater planet, there were more strangers passing through than there ever had been -- usually en route to other places. But they sometimes stayed a night or two in the Bexter Hotel. Its reputation was spreading, Bex claimed, and I believed her. Even when she was young, she had been shrewd but honest, a combination you don't often find in an inn-keeper. She was a quiet woman -- that is, until she got to know you well -- and some most likely thought her conceited. I got the feeling that she hadn't let down her reserve for a long time. When I knew her before, Bex did not have many close friends, but for the ones she had, such as me, she poured out her thoughts, and her heart. I found that she hadn't changed much in that way. "Did you marry?" I asked her, after hearing about the hotel and her father's bad health. "No," she said. "No, I very nearly did, but then I did not. Did you?" "No. Who was it?" "Rall Kenton." "Rall Kenton? Rall Kenton whose parents run the hops market?" He was a quarter-splice, a tall man on a world of tall men. Yet, when I knew him, his long shadow had been deceptive. There was no spark or force in him. "I can't see that, Bex."

"Tom Kenton died ten years ago," she said. "Marjorie retired, and Rall owned the business until just last year. Rall did all right; you'd be surprised. Something about his father's passing gave him a backbone. Too much of one, maybe." "What happened?" "He died," she said. "He died, too, just as I thought you had." Now she told me she would like a beer after all, and I went to get her a bottle of Shin's ale. When I returned, I could tell that she'd been crying a little. "The glims killed Rall," said Bex, before I could ask her about him. "That's their name for themselves, anyway. Humans, repons, kaliwaks and I don't know what else. They passed through last year and stayed for a week in Heidel. Very bad. They made my father give over the whole hotel to them, and then they had a ... trial, they called it. Every house was called and made to pay a tithe. The glims decided how much. Rall refused to pay. He brought along a pistol -- Lord knows where he got it -- and tried to shoot one of them. They just laughed and took it from him." Now the tears started again. "And then they hauled him out into the street in front of the hotel." Bex took a moment and got control of herself. "They burnt him up with a p-gun. Burned his legs off first, then his arms, then the rest of him after they'd let him lie there awhile. There wasn't a trace of him after that; we couldn't even bury him." I couldn't take her to me, hold her, not after she'd told me about Rall. Needing something to do, I took some tangled banwood from the tinder box and struggled to get a fire going from the burnt-down coals in my hearth. I blew into the fireplace and only got a nose full of ashes for my trouble. "Didn't anybody fight?" I asked. "Not after that. We just waited them out. Or they got bored. I don't know. It was bad for everybody, not just Rall." Bex shook her head, sighed, then saw the trouble I was having and bent down to help me. She was much better at it than I, and the fire was soon ablaze. We sat back down and watched it flicker. "Sounds like war-ghosts," I said. "The glims?" "Soldiers who don't go home after the war. The fighting gets into them and they don't want to give it up, or can't. Sometimes they have ... modifications that won't let them give it up. They wander the timeways -- and since they don't belong to the time they show up in, they're hard to kill. In the early times, where people don't know about the war, or have only heard rumors of it, they had lots of names. Vampires. Hagamonsters. Zombies." "What can you do?" I put my arm around her. It had been so long. She tensed up, then breathed deeply, serenely. "Hope they don't come back," I said. "They are bad ones. Not the worst, but bad."

We were quiet for a while, and the wind, blowing over the chimney's top, made the flue moan as if it were a big stone flute.

"Did you love him, Bex?" I asked. "Rall?"

She didn't even hesitate in her answer this time. "Of course not, Henry Bone. How could you ever think such a thing? I was waiting to catch up with you.

Now

tell me about the future."

And so I drew away from her for a while, and told her -- part of it at least. About how there is not enough dark matter to pull the cosmos back together again, not enough mass to undulate in eternal cycle. Instead, there is an end,

and all the stars are either dead or dying, and all that there is is nothing but

dim night. I told her about the twilight armies gathered there, culled from all

times, all places. Creatures, presences, machines, weapons fighting galaxy to galaxy, system to system, fighting until the critical point is reached, when entropy flows no more, but pools, pools in endless, stagnant pools of nothing.

No light. No heat. No effect. And the universe is dead, and so those who remain

... inherit the dark field. They win.

"And did you win?" she asked me. "If that's the word for it."

The suns were going down. Instead of answering, I went outside to the woodpile

and brought in enough banwood to fuel the fire for the night. I thought maybe she would forget what she'd asked me -- but not Bex.

"How does the war end, Henry?"

"You must never ask me that," I spoke the words carefully, making sure I was giving away nothing in my reply. "Every time a returning soldier tells that answer, he changes everything. Then he has two choices. He can either go away,

leave his own time, and go back to fight again. Or he can stay, and it will all

mean nothing, what he did. Not just who won and who lost, but all the things he

did in the war spin off into nothing."

Bex thought about this for a while. "What could it matter? What in God's name could be worth fighting for?" she finally asked. "Time ends. Nothing matters after that. What could it possibly matter who won ... who wins?"

"It means you can go back home," I said. "After it's over."

"I don't understand."

I shook my head and was silent. I had said enough. There was no way to tell her

more, in any case -- not without changing things. And no way to say what it was

that had brought those forces together at the end of everything. And what the hell do I know, even now? All I know is what I was told and what I was trained

to do. If we don't fight at the end, there won't be a beginning. For there to be

people, there has to be a war to fight at the end of things. We live in that kind of universe, and not another, they told me. They told me, and then I told

myself. And I did what I had to do so that it would be over and I could go home,

come back.

"Bex, I never forgot you," I said. She came to sit with me by the fire. We didn't touch at first, but I felt her next to me, breathed the flush of her skin

as the fire warmed her. Then she ran her hand along my arm, felt the bumps from the operational enhancements. "What have they done to you?" she whispered. Unbidden the old words of the skyfallers' scream, the words that were yet to be, surfaced in my mind.

They sucked down my heart
to a little black hole
You cannot stab me.
They wrote down my brain
on a hard knot of space,
You cannot turn me.
Icicle spike
from the eye of a star
I've come to kill you.

I almost spoke them, from sheer habit. But I did not. The war was over. Bex was

here, and I knew it was over. I was going to feel something, once again, something besides guile, hate and rage. I didn't yet, that was true, but I could feel the possibility.

"I don't really breathe any more, Bex; I pretend to so I won't put people off,"

I told her. "It's been so long, I can't even remember what it was like to have to."

Bex kissed me then. At first, I didn't remember how to do that either. And then

I did. I added wood to the fire, then ran my hand along Bex's neck and shoulder.

Her skin had the health of youth still, but years in the sun and wind had made a

supple leather of it, tanned and grained fine. We took the sheet from the couch

and pulled it near to the warmth, and she drew me down to her on it, to her neck and breasts.

"Did they leave enough of you for me?" she whispered.

I had not known until now. "Yes," I answered, "There's enough." I found my way

inside her, and we made love slowly, in a way that might seem sad to any others

but us, for there were memories and years of longing that flowed from us, around

us, like amber just at the melting point, and we were inside and there was nothing but this present with all of what was, and what would be, already passed. No time. Finally, only Bex and no time between us.

We fell asleep on the old couch, and it was dim half-morning when we awoke, with

Fitzgerald yet to rise in the west and the fire a bed of coals as red as the sky.

Two months later, I was in Thredmartin's when Bex came in with an evil look on

her face. We had taken getting back together slow and easy up till then, but the

more time we spent around each other, the more we understood that nothing

basic

had changed. Bex kept coming to the ranch and I took to spending a couple of nights a week in a room her father made up for me at the hotel. Furlly Bexter was

an old style McKinnonite. Men and women were to live separately and only meet for business and copulation. But he liked me well enough, and when I insisted on

paying for my room, he found a loophole somewhere in the Tracts of McKinnon about cohabitation being all right in hotels and hostels.

"The glims are back," Bex said, sitting down at my table. I was in a dark corner

of the pub. I left the fire for those who could not adjust their own internals

to keep them warm. "They've taken over the top floor of the hotel. What should

we do?"

I took a draw of beer -- Thredmartin's own thick porter -- and looked at her. She was visibly shivering, probably more from agitation than fright.

"How many of them are there?" I asked.

"Six. And something else, some splice I've never seen, however many that makes."

I took another sip of beer. "Let it be," I said. "They'll get tired, and they'll

move on."

"What?" Bex's voice was full of astonishment. "What are you saying?"

"You don't want a war here, Bex," I replied. "You have no idea how bad it can get."

"They killed Rall. They took our money."

"Money." My voice sounded many years away, even to me.

"It's muscle and worry and care. You know how hard people work on Ferro. And for

those ... things ... to come in and take it. We cannot let them--"

" -- Bex," I said. "I am not going to do anything."

She said nothing; she put a hand on her forehead as if she had a sickening fever, stared at me for a moment, then looked away.

One of the glims chose that moment to come into Thredmartin's. It was a halandana, a splice -- human and jan -- from up-time and a couple of possible universes over. It was nearly seven feet tall, with a two-foot-long neck, and stooped to enter Thredmartin's entrance. Without stopping it went to the bar and

demanding morphine.

Thredmartin was at the bar. He pulled out a dusty rubber, little used, and before he could get out an injector, the halandana reached over, took the entire

rubber and put it in the pocket of the long gray coat it wore. Thredmartin started to speak, then shook his head and found a spray shooter. He slapped it

on the bar, and started to walk away. The halandana's hand shot out and pushed

the old man. Thredmartin stumbled to his knees.

I felt the fingers of my hands clawing, clenching. Let them loosen; let them go.

Thredmartin rose slowly to one knee. Bex was up, around the bar, and over to him, steadying his shoulder. The glim watched this for a moment, then took its

drug and shooter to a table, where it got itself ready for an injection.

I looked at it closely now. It was female, but that did not mean much in halandana splices. I could see it phase around the edges with dead, gray flames.

I clicked in wideband overspace and I could see through the halandana to the chair it was sitting in and the unpainted wood of the wall behind it. And I saw more, in the spaces between spaces. The halandana was keyed in to a websquad; it wasn't really an individual anymore. Its fate was tied to that of its unit commander. So the war-ghosts -- the glims -- were a renegade squad, most likely, with a single leader calling the shots. For a moment, the halandana glanced in my direction, maybe feeling my gaze somewhere outside of local time, and I banded down to human normal. It quickly went back to what it was doing. Bex made sure Thredmartin was all right, then came back over to my table. "We're not even in its time line," I said. "It doesn't think of us as really being alive." "Oh God," Bex said. "This is just like before." I got up and walked out. It was the only solution. I could not say anything to Bex. She would not understand. I understood -- not acting was the rational, the only, way -- but not my way. Not until now. I enhanced my legs and loped along the road to my house. But when I got there, I kept running, running off into the red sands of Ferro's outback. The night came down, and, as the planet turned, I ran along the length of the Big Snake, bright and hard to the southwest, and then under blue glow of Steiner, when she rose in the moonless, trackless night. I ran for miles and miles, as fast as a jaguar, but never tiring. How could I tire when parts of me stretched off into dimensions of utter stillness, utter rest? Could Bex see me for what I was, she would not see a man, but a kind of colonial creature, a mash of life pressed into the niches and faultlines of existence like so much grit and lichen. A human is anchored with only his heart and his mind; sever those, and he floats away, floats away. What was I? A medusa fish in an ocean of time. A tight clump of nothing, disguised as a man. Something else? Something damned hard to kill, that was certain. And so were the glims. When I returned to my house in the starbright night, I half-expected to find Bex, but she was not there. And so I rattled about for a while, powered down for an hour at dawn and rested on a living room chair, dreaming in one part of my mind, completely alert in another. The next day, Bex still did not come, and I began to fear something had happened to her. I walked part-way into Heidel, then cut off the road and stole around the outskirts, to a mound of shattered, volcanic rocks -- the tailings of some early prospector's pit -- not far from the town's edge. There I stepped up my vision and hearing, and made a long sweep of main street. Nothing. Far, far too quiet, even for Heidel. I worked out the parabolic to the Bexter Hotel, and after a small adjustment,

heard Bex's voice, then her father's. I was too far away to make out the words, but my quantitatives gave it a positive i.d. So Bex was all right, at least for the moment. I made my way back home, and put in a good day's work making whisky.

The next morning -- it was the quarteryear's double dawn, with both suns rising in the east nearly together -- Bex came to me. I brought her inside and, in the moted sunlight of my family's living room, where I now took my rest, when I rested, Bex told me that the glims had taken her father.

"He held back some old Midnight Livet down in the cellar, and didn't deliver it when they called for room service." Bex rubbed her left fist with her right fingers, expertly, almost mechanically, as she'd kneaded a thousand balls of bread dough. "How do they know these things? How do they know, Henry?"

"They can see around things," I said. "Some of them can, anyway."

"So they read our thoughts? What do we have left?"

"No, no. They can't see in there, at least I'm sure they can't see in your old man's McKinnonite nut lump of a brain. But they probably saw the whisky down there in the cellar, all right. A door isn't a very solid thing for a warghost out of its own time and place."

Bex gave her hand a final squeeze, spread it out upon her lap. She stared down at the lines of her palm, then looked up at me. "If you won't fight, then you have to tell me how to fight them," she said. "I won't let them kill my father."

"Maybe they won't."

"I can't take that chance."

Her eyes were blazing green, as the suns came full through the window. Her face was bright-lit and shadowed, as if by the steady coals of a fire. You have loved this woman a long time, I thought. You have to tell her something that will be of use. But what could possibly be of use against a creature that had survived -- will survive that great and final war -- and so must survive now? You can't kill the future. That's how the old sergeants would explain battle fate to the recruits. If you are meant to be there, they'd say, then nothing can hurt you. And if you're not, then you'll just fade, so you might as well go out fighting.

"You can only irritate them," I finally said to Bex. "There's a way to do it with the Flash. Talk to that technician, what's his name--"

"Jurven Dvorak."

"Tell Dvorak to strobe the local interrupt, fifty, sixty tetracycles. It'll cut off all traffic, but it will be like a wasp nest to them, and they won't want to get close enough to turn it off. Maybe they'll leave. Dvorak better stay near the node after that, too."

"All right," Bex said. "Is that all?"

"Yes," I said. I rubbed my temples, felt the vague pain of a headache, which quickly receded as my internals rushed more blood to my scalp. "Yes, that's

it."

Later that day, I heard the crackle of random quantum tunnel spray, as split, unseived particles decided their spin, charm and color without guidance from the

world of gravity and cause. It was an angry buzz, like the hum of an insect caught between screen and windowpane, tremendously irritating to listen to for

hours on end, if you were unlucky enough to be sensitive to the effect. I put up

with it, hoping against hope that it would be enough to drive off the glims.

Bex arrived in the early evening, leading her father, who was ragged and half-crazed from two days without light or water. The glims had locked him in a

cleaning closet, in the hotel, where he'd sat cramped and doubled over. After the buzz started, Bex opened the lock and dragged the old man from the closet where they were holding him. It was almost as if the glims had forgotten the whole affair.

"Maybe," I said. "We can hope."

She wanted me to put the old man up at my house, in case the glims suddenly remembered. Old Furly Bexter didn't like the idea. He rattled on about something

in McKinnon's "Letter to the Canadians," but I said yes, he could stay. Bex left

me with her father in the shrouds of my living room.

Some time that night, the quantum buzz stopped. And in the early morning, I saw

them -- five of them -- stalking along the road, kicking before them the cowering, stumbling form of Jurven Dvorak. I waited for them on the porch.

Furly

Bexter was asleep in my parents' bedroom. He was exhausted from his ordeal, and

I expected him to stay that way for a while.

When they came into the yard, Dvorak ran to the pump and held to the handle, as

if it were a branch suspending him over a bottomless chasm. And for him it was.

They'd broken his mind and given him a dream of dying. Soon to be replaced by reality, I suspected, and no pumphandle hope of salvation.

Their leader -- or the one who did the talking -- was human-looking. I'd have to

band out to make a full i.d., and I didn't want to give anything away for the moment. He saved me the trouble by telling me himself.

"My name's Marek," he said. "Come from a D-line, not far down-time from here."

I nodded, squinting into the red brightness reflected off my hardpan yard.

"We're just here for a good time," the human continued. "What you want to spoil

that for?"

I didn't say anything for a moment. One of Marek's gang spat into the dryness of

my dirt.

"Go ahead and have it," I said.

"All right," Marek said. He turned to Dvorak, then pulled out a weapon -- not really a weapon though, for it is the tool of behind-the-lines enforcers, prison

interrogators, confession extractors. It's called an algorithmic truncheon, a trunch, in the parlance. A trunch, used at full load, will strip the myelin sheath from axons and dendrites; it will burn up a man's nerves as if they were

fuses. It is a way to kill with horrible pain. Marek walked over and touched the

trunch to the leg of Dvorak, as if he were lighting a bonfire. The Flash technician began to shiver, and then to seethe, like a teapot coming to boil. The motion traveled up his legs, into his chest, out his arms. His neck began to writhe, as if the corded muscles were so many snakes. Then Dvorak's brain burned, as a teapot will when all the water has run out and there is nothing but flame against hot metal. And then Dvorak screamed. He screamed for a long, long time. And then he died, crumpled and spent, on the ground in front of my house.

"I don't know you," Marek said, standing over Dvorak's body and looking up at me. "I know what you are, but I can't get a read on who you are, and that worries me," he said. He kicked at one of the Flash tech's twisted arms. "But now you know me."

"Get off my land," I said. I looked at him without heat. Maybe I felt nothing inside, either. That uncertainty had been my companion for a long time, my grim

companion. Marek studied me for a moment. If I kept his attention, he might not

look around me, look inside the house, to find his other fun, Furdy Bexter, half-dead from Marek's amusements. Marek turned to the others.

"We're going," he said to them. "We've done what we came for." They turned around and left by the road on which they'd come, the only road there was.

After

a while, I took Dvorak's body to a low hill and dug him a grave there. I set up

a sandstone marker, and since I knew Dvorak came from Catholic people, I scratched into the stone the sign of the cross. Jesus, from the Milky Way.

Another glim. Hard to kill.

It took old man Bexter only a week or so to fully recover; I should have known

by knowing Bex that he was made of a tougher grit. He began to putter around the

house, helping me out where he could, although I ran a tidy one-man operation,

and he was more in the way than anything. Bex risked a trip out once that week.

Her father again insisted he was going back into town, but Bex told him the glims were looking for him. So far, she'd managed to convince them that she had

no idea where he'd gotten to.

I was running low on food and supplies, and had to go into town the following Firstday. I picked up a good backpack load at the mercantile and some chemicals

for treating the peat at the druggist, then risked a quick look-in on Bex. A sign on the desk told all that they could find her at Thredmartin's, taking her

lunch, should they want her. I walked across the street, set my load down just

inside Thredmartin's door, in the cloakroom, then passed through the entrance into the afternoon dank of the pub.

I immediately sensed glims all around, and hunched myself in, both mentally and

physically. I saw Bex in her usual corner, and walked toward her across the room. As I stepped beside a table in the pub's middle, a glim -- it was the halandana -- stuck out a long, hairy leg. Almost, I tripped -- and in that instant, I almost did the natural thing and cast about for some hold that was not present in the three-dimensional world -- but I did not. I caught myself,

came to a dead stop, then carefully walked around the glim's outstretched leg.

"Mind if I sit down?" I said as I reached Bex's table. She nodded toward a free

chair. She was finishing a beer, and an empty glass stood beside it.

Thredmartin

usually had the tables clear as soon as the last drop left a mug. Bex was drinking fast. Why? Working up her courage, perhaps.

I lowered myself into the chair, and for a long time, neither of us said anything to the other. Bex finished her beer. Thredmartin appeared, looked curiously at the two empty mugs. Bex signaled for another, and I ordered my own

whisky.

"How's the ranch," she finally asked me. Her face was flush and her lips trembled slightly. She was angry, I decided. At me, at the situation. It was understandable. Completely understandable.

"Fine," I said. "The ranch is fine."

"Good."

Again a long silence. Thredmartin returned with our drinks. Bex sighed and, for

a moment, I thought she would speak, but she did not. Instead, she reached under

the table and touched my hand. I opened my palm, and she put her hand into mine.

I felt the tension in her, the bonework of her hand as she squeezed tightly.

I

felt her fear and worry. I felt her love.

And then Marek came into the pub looking for her. He stalked across the room and

stood in front of our table. He looked hard at me, then at Bex, and then he swept an arm across the table and sent Bex's beer and my whisky flying toward the wall. The beer mug broke, but I quickly reached out and caught my tumbler of

scotch in midair without spilling a drop. Of course no ordinary human could have

done it.

Bex noticed Marek looking at me strangely and spoke with a loud voice that got

his attention. "What do you want? You looking for me at the hotel."

"Your sign says you're open," Marek said in a reasonable, ugly voice. "I rang for room service. Repeatedly."

"Sorry," Bex said. "Just let me settle up and I'll be right there."

"Be right there now," Marek said, pushing the table from in front of her.

Again,

I caught my drink, held it on a knee while I remained sitting. Bex started up from her chair and stood facing Marek. She looked him in the eyes. "I'll be there directly," she said.

Without warning, Marek reached out and grabbed her by the chin. He didn't seem

to be pressing hard, but I knew he must have her in painful grip. He pulled Bex

toward him. Still, she stared him in the eyes. Slowly, I rose from my chair, setting my tumbler of whisky down on the warm seat where I had been.

Marek glanced over at me. Our eyes met, and at that close distance, he could plainly see the enhancements under my corneas. I could see his.

"Let go of her," I said.

He did not let go of Bex.

"Who the hell are you?" he asked. "That you tell me what to do?"

"I'm just a grunt, same as you," I said. "Let go of her."

The halandana had risen from its chair and was soon standing behind Marek.

It-she growled mean and low. A combat schematic of how to handle the situation iconed up into the corner of my vision. The halandana was a green figure, Marek was red, Bex was a faded rose. I blinked once to enlarge it. Studied it in a fractional second. Blinked again to close it down. Marek let go of Bex. She stumbled back, hurt and mad, rubbing her chin. "I don't think we've got a grunt here," Marek said, perhaps to the halandana, to himself, but looking at me. "I think we've got us a genuine skyfalling space marine." The halandana's growl grew deeper and louder, filling ultra and subsonic frequencies. "How many systems'd you take out, skyfaller?" Marek asked. "A couple of galaxies worth?" The halandana made to advance on me, but Marek put out his hand to stop it. "Where do you get off? This ain't nothing but small potatoes next to what you've done." In that moment, I spread out, stretched a bit in ways that Bex could not see, but that Marek could -- to some extent at least. I encompassed him, all of him, and did a thorough i.d. on both him and the halandana. I ran the data through some trans-d personnel files tucked into a swirl in n-space I'd never expected to access again. Marek Lambrois. Corporal of a back line military police platoon assigned to the local cluster in a couple of possible worlds, deserters all in a couple of others. He was aggression enhanced by trans-weblink anti-alg coding. The squad's fighting profile was notched to the top level at all times. They were bastards who were now pre-programmed bastards. Marek was right about being small potatoes. He and his gang were nothing but mean-ass grunts, small-time goons for some of the non-aligned contingency troops. "What the hell?" Marek said. He noticed my analytics, but it was too fast for him to get a good glimpse of me. But he did understand something in that moment, something it didn't take enhancement to figure out. And in that moment, everything was changed, had I but seen. Had I but seen. "You're some bigwig, ain't you, skyfaller? Somebody that matters to the outcome," Marek said. "This is your actual and you don't want to fuck yourself up-time so you won't fight." He smiled crookedly. A diagonal of teeth, straight and narrow, showed whitely. "Don't count on it," I said. "You won't," he said, this time with more confidence. "I don't know what I was worrying about. I can do anything I want here." "Well," I said. "Well." And then I said nothing. "Get on over there and round me up some grub," Marek said to Bex. "I'll be waiting for it in room forty-five, little lady." "I'd rather--" "Do it," I said. The words were harsh and did not sound like my voice. But they were my words, and, after a moment, I remembered the voice. It was mine. From far, far in the future. Bex gasped at their hardness, but took a step forward,

moved to obey.

"Bex," I said, more softly. "Just get the man some food." I turned to Marek.

"If

you hurt her, I don't care about anything. Do you understand? Nothing will matter to me."

Marek's smile widened into a grin. He reached over, slowly, so that I could think about it, and patted my cheek. Then he deliberately slapped me, hard.

Hard

enough to turn my head. Hard enough to draw a trickle of blood from my lip.

It

didn't hurt very much, of course. Of course it didn't hurt.

"Don't you worry, skyfaller," he said. "I know exactly where I stand now." He turned and left, and the halandana, its drugs unfinished on the table where it

had sat, trailed out after him.

Bex looked at me. I tried to meet her gaze, but did not. I did not look down, but stared off into Thredmartin's darkness. She reached over and wiped the blood

from my chin with her little finger.

"I guess I'd better go," she said.

I did not reply. She shook her head sadly, and walked in front of me. I kept my

eyes fixed, far away from this place, this time, and her passing was a swirl of

air, a red-brown swish of hair, and Bex was gone. Gone.

They sucked down my heart

to a little black hole

You cannot stab me.

"Colonel Bone, we've done the prelims on sector 1168 and there are fifty-six class one civilizations along with two-hundred seventy rationals in stage one or

two development."

"Fifty six. Two hundred seventy. Ah. Me."

"Colonel, sir, we can evac over half of them within thirty-six hours local."

"And have to defend them in the transcendent. Chaos neutral. Guaranteed forty percent casualties for us."

"Yes, sir. But what about the civs at least. We can save a few."

They wrote down my brain

on a hard knot of space.

You cannot turn me.

"Unacceptable, soldier."

"Sir?"

"Unacceptable."

"Yes, sir."

All dead. All those millions of dead people. But it was the end of time, and they had to die, so that they -- so that we all, all in time -- could live.

But

they didn't know, those civilizations. Those people. It was the end of time, but

you loved life all the same, and you died the same hard way as always. For nothing. It would be for nothing. Outside, the wind had kicked up. The sky was

red with Ferro's dust, and a storm was brewing for the evening. I coated my sclera with a hard and glassy membrane, and, unblinking, I stalked home with

my
supplies through a fierce and growing wind.
That night, on the curtains of dust and thin rain, on the heave of the storm,
Bex came to my house. Her clothes were torn and her face was bruised. She
said
nothing, as I closed the door behind her, led her into the kitchen, and began
to
treat her wounds. She said nothing as her worried father sat at my kitchen
table
and watched, and wrung his hands, and watched because there wasn't anything
he
could do.
"Did that man..." Her father said. the old man's voice broke. "Did he?"
"I tried to take the thing, the trunch, from him. He'd left it lying on the
table by the door." Bex spoke in a hollow voice. "I thought that nobody was
going to do anything, not even Henry, so I had to. I had to." Her facial
bruises
were superficial. But she held her legs stiffly together, and clasped her
hands
to her stomach. There was vomit on her dress. "The trunch had some kind of
alarm
set on it," Bex said. "So he caught me."
"Bex, are you hurting?," I said to her. She looked down, then carefully
spread
her legs. "He caught me and then he used the trunch on me. Not full strength.
Said he didn't want to do permanent damage. Said he wanted to save me for
later." Her voice sounded far away. She covered her face with her hands. "He
put
it in me," she said.
Then she breathed deeply, raggedly, and made herself look at me. "Well," she
said. "So."
I put her into my bed, and he sat in the chair beside it, standing watch for
who
knew what? He could not defend his daughter, but he must try, as surely as
the
suns rose, now growing farther apart, over the hard pack of my homeworld
desert.
Everything was changed.
"Bex," I said to her, and touched her forehead. Touched her fine, brown skin.
"Bex, in the future, we won. I won, my command won it. Really, really big.
That's why we're here. That's why we're all here."
Bex's eyes were closed. I could not tell if she'd already fallen asleep. I
hoped
she had.
"I have to take care of some business, and then I'll do it again," I said in
a
whisper. "I'll just have to go back up-time and do it again."
Between the first and second rising, I'd reached Heidel, and as Hemingway
burned
red through the storm's dusty leavings, I stood in the shadows of the
entrance
foyer of the Bexter Hotel. There I waited.
The halandana was the first up -- like me, they never really slept -- and it
came down from its room looking, no doubt, to go out and get another rubber
of
its drug. Instead, it found me. I didn't waste time with the creature. With a
quick twist in n-space, I pulled it down to the present, down to a local
concentration of hate and lust and stupidity that I could kill with a quick
thrust into its throat. But I let it live; I showed it myself, all of me
spread

out and huge, and I let it fear.

"Go and get Marek Lambrois," I told it. "Tell him Colonel Bone wants to see him.

Colonel Henry Bone of the 8th Sky and Light."

"Bone," said the halandana. "I thought--"

I reached out and grabbed the creature's long neck. This was the halandana weak

point, and this halandana had a ceramic implant as protection. I clicked up the

power in my forearm a level and crushed the collar as I might a tea cup. The halandana's neck carapace shattered to platelets and shards, outlined in fine cracks under its skin.

"Don't think," I said. "Tell Marek Lambrois to come into the street and I will

let him live."

This was untrue, of course, but hope never dies, I'd discovered, even in the hardest of soldiers. But perhaps I'd underestimated Marek. Sometimes I still wonder.

He stumbled out, still partly asleep, onto the street. Last night had evidently

been a hard and long one. His eyes were a red no detox nano could fully clean up. His skin was the color of paste.

"You have something on me," I said. "I cannot abide that."

"Colonel Bone," he began. "If I'd knowed it was you--"

"Too late for that."

"It's never too late, that's what you taught us all when you turned that offensive around out on the Husk and gave the Chaos the what-for. I'll just be

going. I'll take the gang with me. It's to no purpose, our staying now."

"You knew enough yesterday -- enough to leave." I felt the rage, the old rage that was to be, once again. "Why did you do that to her?" I asked. "Why did you

-- "

And then I looked into his eyes and saw it there. The quiet desire -- beaten down by synthesized emotions, but now triumphant, sadly triumphant. The desire

to finally, finally die. Marek was not the unthinking brute I'd taken him for after all. Too bad for him.

I took a step toward Marek. His instincts made him reach down, go for the trunch. But it was a useless weapon on me. I don't have myelin sheaths on my nerves. I don't have nerves anymore; I have wiring. Marek realized this was so

almost instantly. He dropped the trunch, then turned and ran. I caught him.

He

tried to fight, but there was never any question of him beating me. That would

be absurd. I'm Colonel Bone of the Skyfalling 8th. I kill so that there might be

life. Nobody beats me. It is my fate, and yours, too.

I caught him by the shoulder, and I looped my other arm around his neck and reined him to me -- not enough to snap anything. Just enough to calm him down.

He was strong, but had no finesse.

Like I said, glims are hard to kill. They're the same as snails in shells in a

way, and the trick is to draw them out -- way out. Which is what I did with Marek. As I held him physically, I caught hold of him, all of him, over there,

in the place I can't tell you about, can't describe. The way you do this is by

holding a glim still and causing him great suffering, so that they can't withdraw into the deep places. That's what vampire stakes and Roman crosses are all about.

And like I told Bex, glims are bad ones, all right. Bad, but not the worse. I am the worse.

Icicle spike
from the eye of a star
I've come to kill you.

I sharpened my nails. Then I plunged them into Marek's stomach, through the skin, into the twist of his guts. I reached around there and caught hold of something, a piece of intestine. I pulled it out. This I tied to the porch of the Bexter Hotel.

Marek tried to untie himself and pull away. He was staring at his insides, rolled out, raw and exposed, and thinking -- I don't know what. I haven't died.

I don't know what is like to die. He moaned sickly. His hands fumbled uselessly in the grease and phlegm that coated his very own self. There was no undoing the knots I'd tied, no pushing himself back in.

I picked him up, and, as he whimpered, I walked down the street with him. His guts trailed out behind us, like a pink ribbon. After I'd gotten about twenty feet, I figure this was all he had in him. I dropped him into the street. Hemingway was in the northeast and Fitzgerald directly east. They both shone at

different angles on Marek's crumple, and cast crazy, mazy shadows down the length of the street.

"Colonel Bone," he said. I was tired of his talking. "Colonel--" I reached into his mouth, past his gnashing teeth, and pulled out his tongue. He

reached for it as I extracted it, so I handed it to him. Blood and drool flowed from his mouth and colored the red ground even redder about him. Then, one by one, I broke his arms and legs, then I broke each of the vertebrae in his backbone, moving up his spinal column with quick pinches. It didn't take long.

This is what I did in the world that people can see. In the twists of other times and spaces, I did similar things, horrible, irrevocable things, to the man. I killed him. I killed him in such a way that he would never come to life

again, not in any possible place, not in any possible time. I wiped Marek Lambrois from existence. Thoroughly. And with his death, the other glims died, like lights going out, lights ceasing to exist, bulb, filament and all. Or like

the quick loss of all sensation after a brain is snuffed out. Irrevocably gone from this time line, and that was what mattered. Keeping this

possible future uncertain, balanced on the fulcrum of chaos and necessity. Keeping it free, so that I could go back and do my work.

I left Marek lying there, in the main street of Heidel. Others could do the mopping up; that wasn't my job. As I left town, on the way back to my house and

my life there, I saw that I wasn't alone in the dawn-lit town. Some had business out at this hour, and they had watched. Others had heard the commotion and come

to windows and porches see what it was. Now they knew. They knew what I was,

what I was to be. I walked alone down the road, and found Bex and her father both sound asleep in my room. I stroked her fine hair. She groaned, turned in her sleep. I pulled my covers up to her chin. Forty years old, and as beautiful as a child. Safe in my bed. Bex. Bex, I will miss you. Always, always, Bex. I went to the living room, to the shroud-covered furniture. I sat down in what had been my father's chair. I sipped a cup of my father's best barley malt whisky. I sat, and as the suns of Ferro rose in the hard iron sky, I faded into the distant, dying future.

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