

# The Children's War

by Bryce Anderson

*"When the elephants dance, it is the grass that gets trampled."*

Reno, Nevada was silent. The sidewalks were littered with desiccated corpses, each baked dry by months of exposure to the hot desert sun. A small military force weaved through the streets to avoid the occasional smashed and stalled vehicle. Dr. Sam Yang walked behind an armored personnel carrier, horrified by the carnage around him, but not so horrified as to distract his mind from the misery that comes with wearing bulky MOPP-4 gear in 105 degree weather. He looked down at the ground in front of him, regretting the way the vehicle's tracks gouged and dug into the asphalt. But there was nobody left here to take offense.

The expedition stopped at a formerly busy intersection, allowing Dr. Yang to wander out among the vehicles and observe. He tried to take his evidence-gathering duties seriously, tried to take in every minute detail. But you didn't need to be a forensics expert to see the story written at this crossing. Traffic going one direction had gone lurching out of control. Traffic in the other direction sat patiently, as though still waiting for the light. There was no crush of traffic, as would fit a terrified populace trying to flee the city. The cars he found crashed into light poles or rammed into walls didn't even show tire marks. Not a one of the drivers had hit their brakes.

These people had had no warning at all.

No damned plague could hit that fast. People would have fled their cars, or driven onto the sidewalks in their flight. They sure as hell wouldn't be waiting on a red light. It was as though an Olympian god had flown over the city, uttered a single word -- perhaps a word of apology -- and severed the links that bound spirit to body.

Dr. Yang heard a tapping behind him. He turned around to see a corpse through the side window of a dust-covered Mercedes, wearing the faded tatters of what must have once been a very fine business suit. The window slid down with a whine. The corpse's empty sockets turned to meet his gaze. "Hey, buddy?" it asked. "Do you know what's holding up traffic? I'm late for a sales meeting."

The doctor was jostled awake by a bump in the road. Frightened and disoriented, he let out an involuntary yelp. "You were out for quite a while," said a woman in camouflage, sitting on the bench across from him.

"Not long enough," he replied. He yawned, then wiped a hand across his face, shaking off his exhaustion while trying to put the nightmare behind him. The sun was still peeking through the canvas flaps that protected the bed of the truck. Yang expected the convoy would stop before nightfall.

The woman across from him was Master Sergeant Rachel Brooks, the Army's scientific liaison. Or, as she liked to refer to herself, "Civilian Rustler First Class." She was a small, thin woman in her early forties, with an explosive temper and sardonic sense of humor, which she employed with military efficiency against whatever ego or bureaucracy stood between her and whatever her troops needed.

"Need a smoke?" she asked.

"Never have before."

"You should try it sometime," she said, pulling a cigarette from a pack in her left breast pocket and lighting it. "It's really relaxing."

"But I'm a doctor."

She took a long drag. "So you know better than anybody that nobody lives forever."

Brooks had rediscovered an old chain smoking habit soon after the world had collapsed, despite the fact that cigarettes were becoming increasingly difficult to acquire.

Everyone responded to the stresses of the new world in their own way.

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A few hours later, Dr. Yang climbed down from the truck, his body stiff from days of slow travel and nights spent trying to sleep on the ground. Force protection had declared the area safe, but he and his peers in the science contingent still kept a wary eye on the broad expanse of desert. They were an odd assortment of men and women from scientific, not military backgrounds.

Prior to departure, each scientist had received an abbreviated three day boot camp, designed to instill just enough military doctrine to allow them to function within the expedition. But as he watched each tired, ragged civilian climb down from the truck bed, clad in ill-fitting fatigues, he guessed he could distinguish them from the reservists who escorted them at a hundred yards. Yang had no illusions of having a stitch more military bearing than the others.

They'd been dropped into the middle of the Big Green Machine, then they'd been sent out into the middle of the desert, because people back home wanted them to figure out where the hell the rest of the world had gone. More to the point, they wanted to be assured that the calamity they'd seen in Reno wouldn't strike them as well.

The evening's camp site was about a mile off the highway, on the flat top of a small, sagebrush-covered hill. Sergeant Brooks hit the ground running in both the literal and metaphorical sense, leaping from the truck before it had come to a complete stop. "Alright, Delta! I want our side of the perimeter locked up tight!" Brooks yelled at the soldiers jumping from the back of the truck. "We've got an hour before nightfall. I want foxholes every ten paces along this line here. We'll pass out food after dark. Make sure you set up your fields of fire, soldiers! I don't want us shooting each other tonight."

"Yeah, people! Not like last night!" laughed a young soldier as he ran past, hefting an enormous load of gear. This drew a half smile from Sergeant Brooks. In fact, no shots had been fired since their expedition had left Fort Douglas in Salt Lake City. Whatever enemy lurked out there, it seemed to be dormant, or at least trying not to draw attention to itself.

Dr. Yang wondered if it would be any different after they crossed the Sierra Nevadas. Those snow-covered mountains on the horizon disquieted him.

"Doctor Yang!" Brooks shouted, snapping him out of his geological contemplations. "Senior staff meeting at 2000. Before then, I need your platoon to get the detection kits set up, get a latrine dug, then have a couple of your people go to mess to collect rations. Also, spread the word that I know one of your people has a tequila stash, and if I see any sign of intoxication, the shit will fly."

"Sure thing, sarge. Are we pushing over the mountains tomorrow?"

"Probably. The commander has really been taking it slow since we found that first corpse pile in Winnemucca, but HQ is pressuring him to get to the west coast fast. That's why we're not unloading much of the heavy gear tonight."

"Can I ask you something, Sergeant?"

"Sure."

"What do you suppose a foxhole every ten paces will do for us?"

"Maybe keep us alive. Maybe nothing. But try not to be logical around the grunts. It would be bad for morale."

"But how do we defend ourselves against..." He didn't finish the sentence. Once again, his thoughts had returned to Reno.

"Look, you brainiacs like to ask questions. I get that. But some questions you don't want answered." She closed her eyes as she took a long drag off her cigarette. "If you can think of something else we should be doing to stay locked and loaded, I'm all ears. If you can't, then let the kids dig. I've seen idle soldiers go from zero to mope in six seconds flat."

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Unfortunately for Sergeant Brooks, there was only so much busywork to be done; the moment she stopped moving, stopped focusing, the horrors came sneaking back in. They had spent a full three days in Reno, gathering evidence, combing the city for survivors who never appeared, scaring off packs of wild dogs. It would have taken years for their small company to do a thorough sweep of the city; all they could get was what Yang had called "a pseudo-statistical sampling" of homes, businesses, and schools.

There were two particular memories that she kept coming back to. The first was an elementary school in the suburbs. In dozens of classrooms, her team found small corpses sitting in their seats, usually with an adult corpse collapsed at the teacher's desk or at the blackboard. One of them had been in the middle of writing "The Greek philoso". Towards the end of the 'o', the line of chalk jagged down hard, then disappeared. Dead in the blink of an eye, all of them.

Later that same day, they broke into a house in the suburbs. They found no human remains there, but the remains of a dog lay at the front door. All evidence indicated that, unlike the humans, she had survived the apocalypse, only to starve to death. There were claw marks at the door, testifying to the dog's desperate attempts to escape. But in the end, she had simply died where she lay in front of the door, awaiting her master's return.

Rachel had never been married; a pair of dogs were the closest things she had to children of her own. To imagine them dying like that, unable to understand their fates, was unbearable.

"Stop it," she whispered to herself. She knew she should be trying to sleep. She was exhausted. But sleep wouldn't come; her mind spun with the visions of Reno. Every time she banished one, another would sneak in to reclaim the void. After an hour spent tossing and turning, she stood up, threw on her equipment and stumbled out of her tent. She went to check the perimeter for the third time that night.

Everybody was running on a few hours of sleep, so it never surprised her when she found one of her soldiers curled up in their foxhole, having succumbed to exhaustion. But she couldn't be seen condoning it, she thought as she looked over an unconscious Private Williams. She was lying on her back, arms wrapped around her M-16 as though it were a teddy bear.

Sergeant Brooks tickled the girl's nose, then slipped the rifle out of her arms when she moved to scratch. Brooks checked the safety. It was off. She shook her head. Poor, stupid, ate-up soldier. She rapped on the soldier's kevlar helmet. "Wakey wakey, sunshine." The girl groaned in annoyance, then stifled a yelp.

"I see *three* Article Fifteens waiting to happen here," Brooks told her. "Can you name them?"

Private Williams shook her head. "I was asleep," she mumbled, then quickly added "Sarge."

"That's one." The Sergeant held up the girl's rifle. "This is the other two."

"Two, sarge?"

"Failure to guard your weapon," Sergeant Brooks answered. "And you left your safety off. Are you *trying* to get somebody killed, private?"

"Bullshit," the girl countered. "You're lying. You've been out to get me since the day we met."

Sergeant Brooks had never gotten along with Private Bonita Williams. The girl was lazy and insubordinate, quick to pick fights and demand special treatment. And because she was pretty, she got away with it more often than she ought to. But she'd been getting worse as the mission progressed, as though something was eating away at her.

Brooks gave herself a three-count before responding. "Chill, soldier. It's bad tactics to insult someone who's carrying five more stripes and two more rifles than you."

The girl stifled a snort. "You don't frighten me."

"If you value your career at all, you should be frightened."

"My *career*? We're all dead! You, me, that washed up lab monkey you're always hanging around." Rachel could hear the young woman's voice choking up. "No one will even come to bury us."

Sergeant Brooks tossed the soldier's rifle back to her. "I catch you asleep again, that thing that slaughtered Reno will be the least of your problems." She turned and walked away, trying not to look as defeated as she felt.

Her company commander's voice came over the radio. "Hellbitch, this is Black Six. You copy?"

"This is Hellbitch," she responded. Her call sign had amused her for the first few days, but now it was starting to grate on her. "Report."

"Double time it over to four o'clock. StarFox is reporting something moving out there. I'll meet you there, over."

"Can you confirm that it's not a deer this time, sir? Over."

"Roger that, sarge," the commander said, laughing a bit. He sounded punchy. Like everyone else, he was running on almost no sleep.

"I'll be there in a minute. Out." Brooks double-timed around the perimeter, warning everyone to stay sharp. When she reached the four o'clock position, she found a small group lying prone around the foxhole.

"Get down," said her company commander, Lt. Colonel Lawrence Metcalfe. She dropped down next to him and took the night vision goggles that he offered her. It took a few seconds to find the cause of the commotion: a human figure, shining pale green against the dark ground at the bottom of the hill. It was hard to judge its height from this distance, but it might be a child. She watched it for minutes; it never moved, never even flinched.

"Has it been there all night?" Brooks asked.

"No," Metcalfe replied. "Nobody saw it until ten minutes ago."

She looked at it again, trying to convince herself that it was only a tree stump. No chance. "Time to wake the camp, sir?" she asked.

"I think so. Take a small squad, MOPP-4 gear. Once you've secured the target, turn it over to the lab jockeys."

"Yes sir."

"I know I don't need to say this," Metcalfe added. "But be careful out there."

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Dr. Yang was having a crisis of faith regarding the protective gear he had been ordered to carry everywhere. The NBC in NBC gear stood for "nuclear, biological, chemical," the primary agents that the cumbersome suits were designed to protect against. But none of the thousands of deaths he had seen seemed to be linked to any such agent.

He had begun to think of the gear the same way he thought of Sergeant Brooks' foxholes: talismans that gave people an illusion of control over their environment.

Still, when he was roused from where he slept under the truck that night and told to don his gear, he didn't question the order. His trainers back at Camp Williams had conditioned him to keep his NBC mask strapped to his left hip, and drilled all the civilians until they could don the masks in under ten seconds with their eyes closed.

Out of habit, he kept a count in his head. This time he fumbled a couple of times, and took thirteen seconds to get it sealed tight to his face.

Out of habit, he kept a foot on the accelerator while he fastened a couple of links, and took another second to get his eyesight to his feet. He rolled out from under the truck, then went about donning the rest of the suit.

"Sarge wants you out at four o'clock, sir," said the muffled voice. The voice was young and male, but between the darkness and the gear that made him look like an alien, he didn't expect to be able to identify the person conveying the order.

"Four o'clock," Yang muttered, still groggy. "Got it. What time is it now?"

"About zero-five-hundred."

Sam gave a growl of discontent. "Shit, I'm already an hour late. Where is she?"

"Four o'clock," the soldier repeated.

"And tell me again who's on first?" Sam asked.

"Sir?"

"Never mind. Maybe you should just take me to her."

The soldier led him out to -- and then past -- the perimeter, toward an ill-defined grouping of lights at the bottom of the hill. As he got closer, Yang saw a small, half-naked figure standing in a pool of bright light, surrounded by bulky masked figures holding rifles. The girl was small and thin, about twelve years old. Her long hair was tangled and dirty, her clothes little more than rags. Her eyes squinted against the bright light, suspicion and anger written on her face. As Dr. Yang approached, he noticed that her sunburnt skin was criss-crossed with dark spiderweb patterns.

Yang thought he recognized Sergeant Brooks, though it was nearly impossible to tell underneath the mask and layers of protective equipment. "Has anyone been talking to her?" he asked.

"Nah," said a young, male voice. "Colonel said to leave her be until the shrink can talk to her." Definitely not Sergeant Brooks.

"To hell with that. The girl must be scared out of her wits." He took a step closer, but the soldier stepped between him and the girl.

"Sorry. Commander's orders. The shrink is on her way, so cool it."

Yang was about to protest, but changed his mind. A shouting match wouldn't put the girl at ease.

The psychologist finally arrived and, after a brief exchange with a couple of officers, approached the girl. Sam watched as she crouched down to the child's eye level. They conversed for a few minutes, though he wasn't able to catch the occasional word. Eventually, the woman stood up and consulted with the officers again. One of the officers waved Sam over.

"Problem?" he asked.

"She's saying some things that we can't quite make sense of," said Colonel Metcalfe.

"Like what?"

"She keeps talking about her mother, but it doesn't sound like any mother I've ever heard of. She says that her mother can tell us more about Reno, and that we don't need our masks."

Yang looked at the psychologist. "We haven't been properly introduced."

"Private Williams," she replied. "We've met."

"Sorry, can't tell anyone from my great-aunt under all this gear. What are your psych credentials?"

"Why?"

The question sounded a bit hostile, but it was a fair one to ask. "I'm guessing you've already dismissed the idea that the girl is -- and pardon me if I get the technical parlance wrong -- off her rocker. I need to know if I can trust that assessment."

"I nearly had my Master's in clinical psychology when the world went dark. I'm not licensed, but I'm the best this company has got. And no, we haven't dismissed the possibility that she's nuts, though I think it's unlikely. Now let's go talk to the creepy child so I can get back to my nap -- I mean my foxhole."

This didn't inspire much confidence in Sam. They made their way back to the girl. "Uriah," said the Colonel, "this is Sam. Would you mind telling him what you told us?"

The girl rolled her eyes, which Sam found promising. "Mother wants to talk to you about all the things that happened."

"Where would we meet her?" Dr. Yang asked.

"There's a conduit in Sacramento. We can talk to her from there."

"What's a conduit?"

"It's how we communicate with Mother," she said. The girl seemed to find him a little slow.

Yang sighed. "But how does it work?"

"You can ask Mother when we reach the conduit. Why are we still waiting here?"

Yang heard Sergeant Brooks' voice from beneath one of the MOPP suits. "Moving the camp isn't easy. Just packing up will take hours."

"I told you, we don't *need* the whole camp. Mother only needs to see a few people. She is getting impatient."

"We have a lot of equipment to move," Yang objected. "The scientific equipment is very fragile, and it will help us understand what's going on."

"Mother will explain everything at the conduit." The girl was great at sticking to the provided talking points.

"Does she know what happened to Reno, and to all the other cities we've seen?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Did she cause it?"

"You should ask her yourself. You see, there's this conduit. In Sacramento." Urial could be as sarcastic as any teenager.

"We can't all just hop in a truck and go," Yang explained. "We have all this fragile scientific equipment that we need to bring with us. It helps us answer questions, and lets us know if we're safe. It tells us if there's bad stuff in the air that we need to be protected from."

Urial growled her frustration. "I told them already. There are no neurotoxins, no blister agents, no airborne retroviruses, nothing for your suits to protect against. Mother would like to see you." That, Yang thought, was not the sort of sentence that he'd expect out of the mouth of a twelve year old.

"With all due respect to your mother," Lieutenant Colonel Metcalfe said, "We're going to wait until our tests verify your claims before we take the gear off."

"Then hurry up and start testing me."

The company commander looked at Dr. Yang. "How long will the tests take?"

Yang said, "We'll need to run some tests, and the really definitive ones will take at least 48 hours to incubate. Also, we'll need to treat the equipment as contaminated until the results come back. I'd suggest just moving everyone who hasn't come in contact with the girl up the road a couple of clocks."

"Klicks," Sergeant Brooks corrected him.

"Do it," the commander said.

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It took a couple of frustrating hours on the radio, trying to decide which medical equipment to allow into the contaminated zone. Around 10 o'clock, the main body simply left it behind and headed up the road a ways. Sam went back to the lab and got a blood draw kit, then returned to the girl.

"You got babysitting duty?" he asked PFC Williams as he set up the kit.

"Oh, Urial and I are becoming fast friends," she replied. "We talk about boys, braid each other's hair..."

"Really?"

"No. There's a reason I didn't specialize in child psychology. Not that sarge listens. She thinks the girl needs round-the-clock psychological evaluation. Just getting her to wear that stupid uniform was... never mind. Don't want to talk about it." Yang glanced over at the girl, who wore a comically oversized uniform with a nametag that said "STECKMAN" above the breast pocket.

"I didn't know they made uniforms that small," she added.

"Any word on whether she has family, friends? Who was she before the world ended?"

Williams shook her head. "It would take the CIA years to crack this girl."

Yang motioned the girl over. "I'm going to draw some blood from your arm. Is that okay?"

"Yes," Urial said. "But I still think this is all a waste of time."

Yang had some trouble performing the draw; it was impossible to find a vein through the bulky MOPP gloves. The girl accepted the pain without complaint. Once he had a few tubes of blood, Dr. Yang took them back to the lab and set up every test he had.

The gram stain of the girl's blood gave the first indication that something was wrong. The test was most commonly used to look for malaria -- not something the doctor thought was at all likely -- but it might also indicate other infections in the bloodstream, and give a hint about what sort of bacteria might be there.

Something was there, but these things weren't bacteria. No bacteria should have survived the initial heating of the slide, but these were still twitching, writhing under the microscope as though they were in pain. They were unusually large for bacteria, and looked like intricate black crystals, almost like snowflakes. Snowflakes from the blackest pits of hell, perhaps, but snowflakes nonetheless.

Yang's mind raced back to everything he'd done since coming into contact with the girl. Every time he'd hooked his canteen up to his drinking tube, the time he'd gone off to take a piss, every time he'd handled a sample. He wondered if he might have inadvertently come into contact with these things.

He immediately got on the radio. "Commander, we've got a problem." He waited for a few seconds.

"Er, over!" he added.

"Dammit, Doc, use the callsigns!"

"Sorry, Black Six. Over."

"Someone will be there in a second. Out."

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The commander allowed Dr. Yang to bring the girl into the lab, even though everything in it would have to be treated as contaminated from then on. If Urial knew anything, it might save weeks of testing.

Dr. Yang asked her to take a look into the microscope, then had to teach her to adjust the focus. She peered into the eyepiece for a few seconds, then giggled in delight. "Pixies!"

"You know what they are?"

"Of course I do!" She didn't follow up with "dummy," but it was certainly implied.

"What are they?"

"Pixies live inside of us and keep us healthy. Well, maybe not you. But all of Mother's children have them."

Yang was floored. The world seemed suddenly surreal. "Nanites?"

"What's that, doctor?" the company commander asked.

"Really tiny robots. Nanites are straight out of science fiction: cell-sized machines that could live in a human body, repairing cellular damage, manufacturing and delivering drugs and nutrients, killing invading organisms, maybe even communicating with the outside world. 'Keeping us healthy', like she said."

The commander looked confused. He looked at the girl, expression unreadable behind the mask. "Who has that sort of technology?"

"That's the thing. Nobody does."

"So you're saying..."

"It's... it's not from around here." Yang ripped off his mask.

Master Sergeant Brooks exploded. "Yang! What the hell are you doing?"

The doctor shook his head. "If they wanted to infect us with nanites, MOPP gear wouldn't do us any good. Plus I'm starting to stink."

As he continued stripping off his protective gear, Urial crinkled up her nose and nodded in agreement.

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It was a difficult decision, and it took a lot of coaxing on Dr. Yang's part, but they decided that a small detachment would go to meet with Mother in Sacramento. Another truck would take a sample of the nanites back to Salt Lake for study. After a night's rest, the Sacramento contingent -- which included Yang, Metcalfe, Brooks, Williams, and Urial -- continued the long drive down I-80 in a pair of humvees. There were crashed cars, usually with a corpse in the driver's seat, which had mostly veered off the road. It took some attentive driving on Williams' part to avoid the cars that had come to rest on the highway itself, but for the most part they were cruising along at 30 to 40 miles

an hour.

As they emerged from the Sierra Nevadas, the air took on a smoky, acrid smell that got stronger as they moved west. There was an unexplained blackness darkening the horizon. Urial told them to stop. "We'll wait here for an escort. It shouldn't be long."

About an hour later, they sighted about twenty people coming up the road. Everyone held their weapons at the ready, though the approaching party didn't seem visibly armed. In fact, they didn't seem to have any equipment at all. They were little more than children; the youngest looked about seven, the oldest well into her twenties.

One of them, a boy of about fifteen, broke off from the group and approached Urial. "You brought them to speak to Mother?"

Urial nodded.

"You did well."

"Thank you, Callas." The girl blushed furiously, not meeting his eyes. Even Dr. Yang, who considered himself no expert in love, could see that the girl had a crush on the slightly older boy.

"Which of you speaks for your people?" Callas asked.

Commander Metcalfe stepped forward. "I'm in charge of the sixth battalion."

Callas looked annoyed. "But you do not speak for the humans of the west?"

"I wasn't granted authority to make treaties."

Callas seemed amused by this. "Authority isn't necessary. There are no terms to negotiate. You will bring your five witnesses, and come with us to see Mother. She will explain to you what has happened to your planet, and she will explain to you the terms of your surrender."

"Now hold on!" There was shouting, outrage, confusion. Out of the corner of his eye, Dr. Yang saw PFC Williams raise her weapon and fire before a couple of soldiers tackled her.

Callas looked down at where three bullets had perforated his chest. He sank to his knees, breath labored. Dr. Yang rushed to his side, but Urial shoved him out of the way without apparent effort. "You'll be all right," she said softly as she knelt over him.

The doctor got up, his teeth still rattling. The girl's strength was superhuman. He approached again. "I can help him," he said.

The girl didn't acknowledge him. She held a finger an inch away from the first wound. A small, black tendril emerged from the tip of her finger and entered his body. He winced in pain, clutching her shoulder like a vise. The tendril seemed to be drawing back into her fingertip. Suddenly, like an inquisitive mole poking its head out of its burrow, the bullet appeared. It fell to the ground with an anticlimactic 'plink'.

She repeated the operation twice more. When she was done, the wounds began to close themselves.

Callas stood, looking his attacker in the eye. "There is no glory in trying to resist us," he said, with a touch of sympathy. To the commander, he said, "Choose your witnesses, and come with us. Bring the one who shot me. She needs to hear this most of all."

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Even at a distance, without even knowing what the city had looked like five months ago, it was striking how things had changed. Everything was dark and discolored, and the black smoke was especially thick here. Every few minutes, a loud rumble filled the air. Dr. Yang sat in the passenger seat of Brooks' hummer, peppering Callas and Urial with questions. To Brooks, the questions seemed inappropriate, as though their intellectual detachment made a mockery of the disaster that had fallen upon the valley.

Within the valley, the roads were entirely free of debris. Prior to their entrance, most cars had veered off the highway, allowing them to make decent time. Here, though, there were no vehicles on the road, or even glass, as though a road crew had swept it clean.

Once inside the city, the undifferentiated dimness resolved into tangled masses of a black, vinelike growth that covered buildings and fields alike. Some of the buildings seemed to be prematurely decayed, as though the vines were sucking them dry.

"What is that black stuff?" he asked.

"The Tangle harvests the energy and materials we need," Urial said. "It can harvest energy from the light and wind, and breaks down things into their raw materials, and transport them to where they're needed."

"You're eating the buildings?"

"We prefer to call it 'recycling,'" Callas said. He sounded displeased.

"We try to spare buildings that have great cultural significance," Urial added. If she was trying to smooth things over, it wasn't working. Sergeant Brooks muttered a curse under her breath.

After driving a couple of miles south on I-5, Callas pointed out a large black ziggurat across the river. "There. That's where we're going."

Doctor Yang was intrigued. "Did you build it?"

"No. It's one of yours. The sign out front says 'Department of General Services.' Mother liked the architecture. Take this next exit."

The sun was going down as they drove through the parking lot, which was covered with the same black vines as the buildings. Some of the vines crunched like glass underfoot, and the broken ones gave off a hissing sound. Dr. Yang bent down for a closer look, to discover that the damage was already repairing itself. The commander's humvee rolled up behind them.

"So, this is the belly of the beast?" the commander asked, stepping out of his vehicle.

"I don't think the beast has a belly," Dr. Yang said. "I haven't seen much evidence of large-scale structures. Everything seems small scale and decentralized."

The commander shot him a glare. "It was just an expression."

Callas smiled. "No, your doctor is very observant. Most of our activity happens at a microscopic level. It's usually more efficient that way."

"What about that rumbling sound I hear every few minutes?" the doctor asked.

"That's the sound of matter being launched into orbit. You are correct; the launcher is a very big piece of equipment."

"Will you be building a space elevator?"

"We're working on it."

"Doctor," Lt. Colonel Metcalfe snapped. "You're enjoying this a little too much. The sooner we can talk to this conduit, the sooner we can get the hell away from this place."

"Callas will take you to the roof of the building," Urial said. "I'll meet you there."

The vines had grown throughout the inside of the building as well. In here, though, they gave off illumination rather than absorbing light. It was a pure, white light, almost beautiful.

They walked up several flights of stairs, then Callas opened the door to the top of the ziggurat. They looked out over the darkened city, at the river that flowed serenely past them.

Urial disappeared back down the stairs. Soon she rejoined them, carrying a toddler in her arms. "Bebob? These are the people that Mother wanted to talk to. Can she talk to them?"

Bebob struggled, then slid out of his arms. The tiny boy grasped onto Urial's leg, looking at the strangers warily. Urial stroked his hair. "Give him a second."

Finally, the boy spoke, his voice high-pitched and unearthly. "Welcome. I am Mother, the will of The Many. Are you of the Western Remainder?"

"What is the Western Remainder?" Sergeant Brooks asked.

"It is a portion the Rocky Mountains, a place where I have allowed your kind to carry on."

"Thanks for that," she muttered.

"I neither expect nor desire gratitude," the child spoke. "But you undoubtedly have many questions, and I will not answer them unless you remain calm and civil." The child crawled into Urial's lap, nuzzling up against her. He stuck his thumb in his mouth, but Urial snatched it away so his mouth was free to speak.

"Are you this child?" Dr. Yang asked.

"No. His mind was still young and flexible enough that he could fully connect to another mind without damage. Children of his age are connected to me, which allows me to speak through them. That is, when they're not too fussy."

"Our actions must seem incomprehensible and cruel to you. Indeed, they were cruel, but I hope I can explain why they were necessary. The Many have existed for approximately five hundred million years. We rose to power after the First Sentient Plague nearly destroyed all that was not Plague."

"Plague?" Sergeant Brooks asked.

"From time to time, a sentient species gathers strength, with minds bent on killing or enslaving all rivals. The First Sentient Plague was the first time this galaxy had seen such a thing. By the time we recognized the threat, the species called the Ochioni had full control of a billion systems, turning the energies of a billion suns towards the extinction of all others. The many, who had long lived in fragile, imperfect balance, rose up together. We faced them. we fought. we very nearly lost."

summit, close up together, the stars shining, the oxygen, the very nearby stars.

"It took half a million years, but we finally extinguished their foul race. Afterward, The Many created safeguards, a sort of immune system for the galaxy. Eleven species have tried to repeat the deeds of the Ochioni, but none have ever gained control over more than a few million systems. Until now."

"We were ill equipped for an attack from outside this galaxy. Indeed, we didn't believe such an attack was possible. This new species, whom we know only as The Eaters, arrived from the galaxy you call Andromeda. We do not believe that it is the first galaxy they've corrupted, and we do not know how many galaxies may be under their control. What we do know is that they now have control of two billion suns in this galaxy, that they are being replenished by an influx of material and weaponry from Andromeda, and only a unified effort will keep them from overrunning this galaxy entirely."

Everyone gathered stared at the tiny child in astonishment and disbelief. Dr. Yang was the first to recover. Or maybe, as the only ardent science fiction fan, he was having trouble grasping the story without a critical piece of information. "Is it possible to travel faster than the speed of light?" he asked.

"No, at least, we're not aware of any means. We can't even communicate that quickly, except over very short distances."

"So, how did you get here so fast? I haven't heard of any evidence of you in nearby systems."

"At the end of the First Plague, we sent probes to each solar system in the galaxy, all three hundred billion of them. Each contains the dormant seeds of machinery that can take over a system in a matter of decades. Once complete, the mass and energy of your sun -- and three hundred billion others -- will be diverted to the purpose of forging weapons for our war against the Eaters."

"So, for the last five hundred million years, you've been waiting to do this?"

"If necessary. The decision was made eighty thousand years before you were born, but the news only reached me twenty years ago. Before that, I simply watched to determine if your species might pose a threat to the galaxy."

"Was it?" Yang asked.

"It was too soon to tell."

"How many of us are left?" asked Private Williams.

"Humans? About a quarter billion of you remain in your pristine state. Another half billion are like the servants you see here, contributing to our cause."

"The rest?" she asked.

"They did not suffer."

"You son of a bitch!" Commander Metcalfe roared, taking a step forward. The baby screamed, and Callas stepped between him and Urial, giving the much larger man a very dangerous look. Black tendrils writhed at the tips of his fingers, like snakes waiting to strike.

"Commander, I'm warning you. Control yourself, or your life is forfeit." Their eyes locked for a few interminable seconds, and more than once, Dr. Yang thought the commander would attack.

"Callas, please." Urial whispered. "He lost someone."

The room fell quiet for a few uncomfortable minutes. Finally, the commander broke the silence. "Cheryl suffered. When the economy collapsed, she ran out of the medicine she needed within weeks, and I watched her linger for another month. All because your sweet Mother ripped the world out from under us." He slugged Callas in the jaw, then seemed to dare him to retaliate. When he didn't, the commander walked away from the group, standing on the other end of the roof.

Urial stroked Bebob's head as she held him, letting him suck his thumb until he calmed down. Mother began to speak again. "I knew that this would inflict suffering. I do not feel mercy or regret as you do, nor do I fear your hatred. No entity tasked with my purpose could function amidst such emotions. It may not console you that we've preserved some remnant of your people. But to know what we're capable of, you need only look to the sky."

Where he knew Venus ought to be, Dr. Yang instead saw a small, straight sliver of light burning cold in the night sky, almost as bright as the moon. It hadn't been there an hour ago. "What is it?"

"It used to be Venus," Urial said in a quiet, almost worshipful voice. "Mother is pulverizing it, stretching its matter over millions of miles, to better access its resources and capture the sun's energy. This would have been Earth's fate as well, were there no life here."

"I think I need to sit down," Yang said.

The baby was calm again, and mother spoke. "You are small, simple creatures. We don't expect you to understand. Few of you have the perspective needed to take up arms in a war that probably won't reach your world in the lifetimes of your own great-grandchildren. We would offer the nixies to anyone willing to fight by our side."

...and she's going to give me a hand in getting my own back.

"You mean take Mother as my own personal Lord and Savior?" Yang asked. "Already got one, thanks."

"I'm not sure I understand," Urial interjected. "We aren't asking to be your gods."

"But Mother is offering immortality in exchange for unquestioning devotion, she's demonstrating godlike powers, and now her followers are trying to convert me. Sounds like a nasty sort of religion."

He was surprised when Urial laughed. "I suppose it does, at that."

Mother spoke again. "I have been around for a billion years, in one form or another, and I've seen no evidence of this higher being you worship. But I don't care who you believe pulls the strings. So long as you accept that this war is real and needs to be fought, we would welcome your help."

"How do we know that the Eaters are real, or as bad as you say?" Brooks asked.

"You can't know," Mother said matter-of-factly. "Nor can I. Perhaps I am lying, or perhaps I am being lied to. But I believe the evidence that has been sent to me, and you will come to see that we have acted in accordance with our claims. I am free to show you."

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Three days later, Lt. Colonel Lawrence Metcalfe sat alone in a Hum-vee overlooking the Great Salt Lake. The sun had set, setting the cloudy sky alight with evening fire. Overhead, stars were coming out. A long, bright line now traced the same orbit which Venus had once traversed. It was beautiful and monstrous; he wanted to rip it out of the sky and bring it crashing down on those who had perpetrated it.

But that would never be. Metcalfe wasn't certain that Mother could feel pain or desire or love, but he was certain that mankind had no hope of standing against her. He was a warrior, he stood between the innocent of his country and the dangers that hunted them. And he had failed, and in fact had been doomed to fail before he was even born.

He'd seen the map of the galaxy, the one that showed where the Eaters were entering the galaxy. They occupied two spherical regions of space, each about several thousand light years across, which they were rushing to expand before Mother's kind could mount a strong defense. Earth was trapped almost precisely between the two.

Mother claimed she was going to defend them, and many people believed her. A smaller number were even signing up to fight in her war, a war which might rage across the galaxy for millions of years. Metcalfe couldn't comprehend it, couldn't imagine a battlefield so vast that the demise of his entire species could be construed as acceptable losses.

The world he had known and the woman he had loved would never return to him.

He stared down at his pistol, which glowed a metallic blue in the chill light. All his life, he'd taken comfort, knowing that he could always pray to God, and receive assurance that He was still in control. Several times over the last few days, he'd asked for that reassurance, but it no longer came. It left him with terrible, blasphemous thoughts. Maybe God had never really existed, or maybe Mother had the power to topple even Him. Whatever the reason, God was no longer in control. It was left to him to snatch what little control remained.

He cocked the pistol. When he got to the other side, he would ask his wife for forgiveness, and his God for answers.

But what if there was nothing on the other side?

That, he supposed, would also be an answer.

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"So you're really set on doing this?" Rachel asked Sam. "I mean, after everything Mother did, you want to go off and fight for her?"

It had been about six months since they had returned from California. In the intervening time, life in Salt Lake had become strangely normal. Mother ensured that her prisoners received the necessities of life, but everything outside the Salt Lake Valley was declared off limits to those who had not rallied to her banner.

Rachel Brooks and Sam Yang had moved in together for a while, but it had soon become clear that what they had together wasn't what either of them were looking for. A few weeks later, they had an amiable breakup over breakfast one Sunday morning, then discussed whose turn it was to fetch the day's water rations.

A few weeks after that, Sam Yang had dropped by her apartment to say goodbye, probably for the last time.

"I'm not forgetting what she did. But if there is really something out there like the Eaters, something that makes Mother look like the lesser evil, then maybe that's a cause that needs to be fought for."

Rachel looked at the small backpack lying on the couch. "Is that really all you're taking with you?" She found it strangely sad.

"Callas is in the city to run recruiting. He says I don't need a whole lot of stuff. I put a few sentimental items in storage, but most of my stuff was easier to just get rid of. That past, it's just gone."

"You don't even seem to miss it," Rachel shot back. "You seem to be taking to the new normal too easily."

"I've always been a bit of an early adopter."

"Don't joke."

"I'm not. I try to look at the direction the world is headed, and position myself advantageously. Yeah, it was more fun when it just meant splurging on electronics. But I think it's the mindset that will get me through this. You should try it." Rachel glared at him. "I don't mean forgiving Mother, or forgetting the past. But try to find something that makes life here and now worthwhile." She made no response, and Sam shrugged and picked up his backpack. He scratched Wolfenstein's neck, and said, "I'd better get going. Transport leaves in an hour."

As he opened the door to exit the apartment, Rachel blurted out, "I've never been a mother."

Sam turned and looked at her in bewilderment. "I'd love to help you out with your problem, but my vasectomy isn't going to untie itself."

"Not what I meant, and could you not be an ass for a minute?" she asked. "I was thinking about Callas and Urial. About all the kids, really. I mean, what are Mother's qualifications as a parent? She's bound to screw them all up." Then she rushed to add, "Worse than I would, I mean."

Sam nodded. "You could always come with me. Maybe they have positions open for a barracks mom."

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On a rooftop overlooking Temple Square in Salt Lake, Bonita Williams knelt over Callas, who lay writhing on the ground. Her hand rested on his forehead. "Can your Mother hear me?" she asked him. Shaking with fear, he nodded yes. "Good. Then hear this, *Mother*. What you did to us will not be forgiven. It will not be forgotten. It will be avenged. The revolution begins now."

Callas' mouth moved perceptibly, and Bonita leaned in, trying to make out the words. "You... you think you can... beat... Her?" he asked, in a voice that was half whisper, half gurgle.

"You don't get it, do you, Mother?" she asked, then leaned in and whispered in his ear. "You took everything from us. You murdered our world, you murdered our dreams. We win, we lose, who the fuck cares? We will fight you because this fight is all we've got left." She gripped Callas' forehead tight, and he gave a final, muffled groan. Bonita pulled her hand away; dark tendrils clung to her fingers, writhing like snakes that coiled and uncoiled. She picked Callas up with one hand and dropped him headfirst into a garbage bin below. She leapt off the roof, her knees barely bending when she hit the ground, then walked out of the alley, where two compatriots waited.

"We gotta move," one of them said, leading her to a car. When they were all safely in the car and speeding down the road, the other asked, "So how'd the hacked nanites work out?"

Bonita gave a smile, admiring the writhing blackness on the ends of her fingers as though inspecting a manicure. "This could be the beginning of a beautiful friendship."

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