



WAR & MIR

otherwise known as

If the God of Liberation

That being,

a Revisionist Space Opera
of an ordinary Earth man
in that most fabulous and legendary
Order of Chronostics
and his triumphant undertakings
and tragical sufferings
in an epic, interplanetary
Revolution

BY
MINISTER FAUST

WAR & MIR, Volume I: Ascension

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ZERO: AFTER AND BEFORE

Sky above, earth far below.

Shuddering in my seat here behind our pilot. Feel like I'm falling. Think I'd be used to that feeling by now. Can't remember the last time I didn't feel it.

A billion lights down there, and even more darkness. Every night it's still a checkerboard city, even this long after the quake. At least everywhere under *our* control has power.

Mar's mouth is moving, but I can't hear her. And it's not because of the engine.

My clothes. My hair. My hands.... Everything smells of smoke.

If only I hadn't fled in the first place. If only I hadn't worked the soup kitchen that one last time. If only I'd said *Hell, no!* when we were in that whorehouse. If only I'd had the guts to turn my back and keep it turned. But I didn't.

And now... my god, *where is my son?*

If not for the divorce. If not for an empty New Year's night in Chinatown. If not for meeting one man, my best friend and mentor, whose faith in humanity may have doomed us all.

WAR & MIR

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BOOK ONE

THE OPENING OF THE DARK EYE

*“People climbed into the night like space suits...
“Let me climb into the night.”*

**“Climb”
—Mos Def**

*“You will be defenseless, amid savages
At the centre of a city of champions
There will you make a place of balms
And dispense alms.*

*“There you will be led to a shining raptor
By a one-eyed man
Who beholds a new temple upon the horizon.”*

**The Chronosis of the One-Eyed Man and the Horizon
—The Imhot Uthmanes**

ONE: HOW IT ALL BEGAN

So this is what happened. In March, 2001, I was sitting in Thagó's office with my goddamned eye hanging out, then I had the vision about the Princess, the wall melted, we were shot at, we escaped, stole the *Mir* Space Station, went to Mars and then back to the second Earth, changed history, and glimpsed the secrets of the universe.

That's it.

That may gloss over the nuances, the occasional crisis, bout of torture, invasion, love affair, revolution, or act of damnation.

I'll get to it all. I'll take my time. It's all *about* time. And I'd way, way rather look back, no matter how bad it got, than look forward. Because I know what's coming.

I've always known what's coming.

TWO: THE OPENING OF THE EYE

Two seconds ago—understand this is March 20, 2001, I’m talking about—I’m walking up the sidewalk to Thagó’s home/medical clinic, and as of *this* second I’m swearing agony from whatever hit me—goddamned workmen swinging planks and not looking what they’re doing—and then I’m screaming.

My left eye is dangling out of its socket.

Workers, running up to me shouting apologies, begging to call me an ambulance—

“Get away from me!” I’m cupping my eye, flailing with the other hand. “That’s a goddamned doctor’s office right there!”

Thagó’s rushing onto the landing of his place, then guiding me inside onto his turquoise slab of his examining table, saying again and again, “Taharqa, *Taharqa!* No worry! No worry! I *fix* you!” and I’m going into shock because all I can think is *So weird to see Thagó not smiling* and then he’s asking me to stop doing something (screaming?) and then he’s grabbing my shoulder and neck and poking me really hard and I go limp and then he brings over some kind of electro-doodad hyper-gizmo and puts it on my forehead and then there’s a flash of light—

Feeling *good*.... Super-*awesome* good... like Thagó shot me up with something, but I didn’t feel a, a, a *needle*.... Mind feels like it’s on rewind....

Thagó. Built like the Rock, face like Snipes, but with a Fu Manchu moustache and goatee.... never woulda guessed he was a doctor.... And that accent of his—like Somali meets Dinka, like a mash-up of voices from my classroom.... Mr. Mysterious Immigrant Dude never really did explain his whole, y’know, *origin* to me....

Him teaching me how to jog, how to meditate... me teaching him about life in his new country, where he looked at every single thing like it’d just been invented....

Met him shopping on New Year’s Eve, two blocks from his 96th Street home in Chinatown, when everybody but us had a party to go to.... Him picking up chopsticks or tea balls or sushi mats and that look on his face, like he was the first archeologist ever to glimpse the stuff.... Hilarious (not) to think if Linda hadn’t left me, I never woulda met Thag, and then I never woulda, woulda....

Linda, emptying the house one carload at a time....

My students, my classroom, my saving grace, the one place I didn’t feel like I was falling apart....

Linda¹, filling the house one carload at a time....

Dad, lecturing me about something....

Sunlight, streaming through the curtains next to my mum’s bed, cherry-red flowers in a vase next to the window....

Awake. Head sore. Guts like clogged toilet.

Smells like... like lime deodoriser in here.

Linda...?

Honey, I’ve got a killer headache... can you...?

...Linda?

Oh. Yeah.

Where am I?

Right. Thagó’s office. He’s a doctor.

Dark inside, and getting dark outside. Past dinnertime? How long was I out? Wanna check my watch but turning my head hurts like a motherfucker.

¹ Linda and I were together from the second year of our teaching careers. We actually met in the Faculty of Education but didn’t start dating (secretly) until we started working together. Then she moved in three months later (yes, it was stupid), and we got married a year later. She moved out her last stuff by the end of 2000. So we were together for four years.

Blinking—can't. Winking right. My left eye—is it bandaged over? Or have I lost my eye completely?²
Then Thagó's stooping over me, removing some kind of medical tiara from my skull.
"Thag, my *eye*—is it—will I—"
"Your eye," he whispers, "she is being fine."
Then why's he looking at me like I'm dying?
"But when you were making the medicine-sleeping, Harq-friend, you have saying something. You remember? Very important, Harqy. Try for remembering."
"What?" What in the hell could I've said? Surely nothing... sexual, I hope. Or wallowing about Linda. And why's he interrogating me about my doped-up mutterings when he should be checking me for permanent, neurological, career-ending damage?
"When can I... take off these... bandages, Thag?"
"Harq! Listen! Important very." He's still hunched over me, those boulder-shoulders of his blocking my way out. "Please remembering your remarks. What they are meaning."
"What does it matter? Is it medically significant?"
"Important! Remembering, try, please!"
"Can you at least... give me a clue?"
"You saying," he whispers, glancing over his shoulder and then leaning even closer, "*Must make rescuing of the Princess.*"
"What?" I laugh, and laughing feels like I'm taking a pair of scissors to my left temple.
"Yes, and *Them imprisoning her below aqua ducks. And she die soon.*"
"Thag, I've just been through an accident that whacked my goddamned eye out and probably half my brain with it! Does it really matter that I was sleep-talking?"
"But Harq, then you say, *They be here soon to killing us.*"

² Having an eye knocked out of one's head is a surprisingly common phenomenon, as I later learned (although it never happened to me again, thankfully. Makes my skin crawl just thinking about it). In some cases even violent sneezing and vomiting have been known to induce "dangling eye." But I can think of at least two casualties during the Revolution who had an eye pop out, including one from the Women's Brigades, and she lost hers for good.

THREE: VISION OF THE BADLANDS

I'm still in so much pain I can't even shake my head.

"Thag, come on! I was all doped up from whatever you gave me. Plus I feel like I could puke any second."

He does a "nose swirl" (it's a thing he does, maybe cultural—seems to mean "yes"), dashes for water, returns, says, "Drinking."

While I'm sipping he pokes me again, but only on my scalp and all along my collar bones.

And just like that, I feel wide awake.

"Hey, how the hell'd you—"

He scrambles over to his shelves with the three oval monitors (where he got those, he's never told me). "Harq, quickly!" He pulls me up under my shoulder, and I'm not looking forward to trying to get up—

But my whole body's ready to move again. Even my head feels fine—no skull-pounding, and my eye doesn't even feel tender under the bandage.

"Harq, where are *aqua ducks*?"

"You're still going on about that? Listen, Thag—"

"Humour me," he demands. It's an expression I taught him that still sounds wrong coming out of his mouth. He's way too earnest for it to fit him.

"You don't understand, Thag. Ducks, they're just water birds. With bills?" I do the beak with my hand at my lips. "Quack quack, y'know?" This is why I never taught ESL.

He says it again, more slowly. That doesn't help. He repeats it several times, and each time his irritation grows, he speeds up the words until I finally understand what in the hell he meant.

I laugh. "Aqueducts?"

"A-qua-duck-tus?"

"-Ducts."

Where's this going? "They're in Italy, Thag."

He takes a golf ball-sized green crystal sphere out of his pocket, rolls it around in his hand. Some sort of giant worry-bead? Seems awfully fragile for that purpose.

"What is 'Ee-t'lee?"

He bobs his head up and back, which he does whenever he means "I don't have a clue." How could the man not have heard of Italy? Maybe they call it something else in his language. No English-only speaker would guess that Deutschland is Germany.

"In Europe, shaped like a boot, you know? With Rome? Soccer? Pizza? The Pope?"

He tongue-*pops*, fiddles with his green crystal sphere, and the middle oval monitor snaps to life, then mumbles something in his own language and suddenly I'm looking at a spinning ball on-screen. But it takes me a minute to recognise it as the Earth because it's upside down.

"Showing me Aqua-duck-tus," he insists.

How the hell's he controlling the screen? I can't see his computer. Is that crystal he's got some sort of wireless track ball or something?

"There," I say, pointing when the upside-down boot comes into view.

He freezes the screen. "Is Aqua-duck-tus a city?"

I explain the concept, and he squeezes the crystal, mumbles again, and now all three screens blossom with various Roman aqueducts. "Wow! Hey, Thag—is that the new Mac? The G-whatever it's called?"

"After-after, Harq. Now finding picture!"

But after fifteen minutes I tell him that none of the images looks familiar—not even a little.

Finally Thagó guides me back to the turquoise slab and refits my skull with the same medical tiara he took off me when I woke up. He's adjusting its controls and glancing behind him and even up at the ceiling as if he's performing some banned procedure and expects Immigration or the College of Physicians³ to be taking down his door any second.

³ I'd only learned recently Thag wasn't licensed to practice medicine in Canada. At that time I was left wondering how he'd gotten so much equipment. He'd managed to do steady business in the neighbourhood, though.)

“Harq, asking you am I to trusting me,” he says, squeezing his green crystal.
WHOLE BODY SPASMS—I’M AN ARC—
...and then I’m down....
“Telling me, brother,” demands Thagó, “what does *aqua-duck-tus* look like?”
Feel like I’m falling overboard, sinking under the ocean....
Hearing... whales? Whales... throat-singing? Loud enough to make my ears explode?

*:looking up,
the belly-bottom of
a giant steel serpent*

*:high-up stilts
over me, the third tier of spindly
concrete and girder
gantry supporting,
not organic, not curvaceous...
metal, industrial*

*..and beyond it,
ashen clouds as ceiling
to a white desert—*

What the hell is Thagó’s skull-machine doing to me? And how?

“Thagó!”

And then *she’s* in my brain, flashing like lightning inside total blackness, and the thunder forces itself from my mouth:

“The Princess!”

“You see her! What she looking like?”

Why can’t I see Thag? How’s he doing this to me? All I see is her...

“She’s gorgeous... and, and glowing!”

I’m in awe of this, the intensity of my own hallucination—tingling, shaking like it’s actually true, not just electricity or drugs casting phantoms through my brain.

“*Literally glowing*, Thag, like a sunrise! But... it’s like the glow’s fading. And she’s lying down? But not like she’s tired— more like she’s sick... or, or dying!”

“Else anything you remembering?”

I describe the aqueducts to him. Then he tells me to take off my bandage, which I now realise was covering both eyes. He must’ve done that when he shocked me with that neuro-gear.

And then, thank baby Jesus/Buddha/Darwin, my eye works!

“Thank you, brother!” I hug him like I haven’t seen him in years. (He’s the one who taught me to hug like that. But this time it came naturally to me.)

“Is fine, brother. Now you please looking with all the eyes.”

Images flicker across Thagó’s monitors, some similar to what I remember seeing, some not as much... and then—

“That’s it! That’s the one!”

Thagó freezes the image. Another monitor shows the upside-down Earth, but with political borders, and bull’s-eyes overtop what are probably aqueducts.

Even more frenzied now than before, Thagó jabs at the screen. “Where this, Harq?”

Adjusting for the upside-down view, I realise how close this target is. “But that can’t be right....”

“Why is not?”

“Because that’s right here in Alberta. There’re no aqueducts here. They’re just Old World structures, in Europe!”

He shows me the first picture, expands the newspaper caption. It clearly reads “Brooks Aqueduct, Alberta.” Looks old. Must’ve been built to irrigate the scrublands down there.

“Is difficult to getting to?”

“No, it’s just east of Calgary. In dinosaur country, the badlands.”

Thagó’s expression turns to horror.

“Don’t worry!” I chuckle. “That’s just an expression—they’re not really bad. And all the dinosaurs are dead—”

—a train-screech—

—turn around, and the goddamned *wall* explodes.

FOUR: TWO-HUNDRED-SEVENTY DEGREES OF SEPARATION

Grit sandpapers my face (my eye, damnit!)—glance again, and the wall-hole's on fire, the top dripping and melting—

Two men in masks and armour like metallic scuba-gear crawl-clank through the hole like giant crabs, and then two more smash through the front window—

—and then Thagó leaps, I mean *LEAPS* over me, crashes into the first scubaman and hits the floor—

—I'm scrambling for cover behind the turquoise slab, there's shouting in languages I can't understand, and then a scubaman hammers head-first into the floor right in front of me, and he doesn't move.

Thagó's back next to me and crouching, grabbing something off the man's belt, pouncing up and throwing—

—*another* explosion—room reeks like burning hotdogs—I glance—

—the scubaman Thagó just hit, his knees're buckling and his balance has gone to shit now that there's no fucking head on his neck anymore—blood's fountaining out of what's left of his shoulders—

—scubaman next to him is on the ground screaming, his face on fire, and then Thagó snatches the hand of the last standing attacker and cranks his arm 270-degrees into the wall of medical equipment and monitors—

—the first scubaman Thagó knocked down staggers up, and before I can get out of his way, he barely tosses a fistful of something like iron filings at us—

—burning pin-pricks all over my exposed flesh, and then even under my shirt and pants—

—Thagó grabs my arm, yanks me with him towards the flaming crater in the former wall of his home and office—

“Harq,” he howls, “running for life!”

FIVE: END OF ONE SKYWALK, BEGINNING OF ANOTHER

—we're running, and the wrong way, because my car's a block away east and we're heading south-west and we're bolting in through front doors of Chinatown stores and out through the backs, snaking through junked-up alleyways and dashing through gaps in traffic and all the while that we're looking back for those whoever-the-hell-they-ares, I'm screaming at Thagó to tell me what in god's name is going on.

"Killers," he hisses. We're hiding next to a parking lot kiosk behind the Pacific Rim Mall. "Very bad killers."

The English teacher/jackass part of me is *almost* stupid enough to demand he explain what other types of killers there are than "very bad." But I stop myself. "Why are they trying to kill you?"

"They want stopping me from the rescuing of the Princess," he says, scanning the alley frantically. "And getting information from me."

"About what?"

"Everything."

I grab his wrist. "Tell me something goddamned meaningful, Thag! I almost got killed back there!"

He counter-grabs me, pulls me up. "Running!"

We dash into the Pacific Rim Mall, out onto 97th Street and the darkening streets, dodging crowds, racing beside the girders underneath the rainbow rail-bridge...

"Thag, I, I can't—can't keep up—"

Twenty paces ahead, he runs back to me just as I double-over underneath the cover of the bridge.

"Harqy, okay?"

"Can... hardly... breathe. Gotta catch my, my—"

The image: that scubaman's head blasted off and blood geysering out of his neck. "Who... *huh*... the hell... *huh*... are those men!"

"I think your word is being 'terrorists,' yes?"

These nutjobs looked more like techno-survivalists than any terrorists I've ever seen (in the movies). "Why're you... rescuing anybody? Thought you were... a doctor—"

"Am a doctor."

"C'mon, Thag! F'real! What're you, in the military or something? Or d'you work for... secret police in... Sudan or Qatar or something? Or're you some sorta... nationalist... or revolutionary?"

His face, his eyes, suddenly freeze.

He tilts his head to one shoulder: Thaggish for *no*. "Not like that at all. I doctor, teacher, ministrant—"

"Then why're you sposta be finding a princess? Or is that just a code-word or something?"

"No, she real. You see yourself, in your dream!"

I'm not here. This's just the anaesthesia Thag gave me. Or a concussion. I'm just tripping out on his examining table...

Then my skin is burning all over—everywhere I was hit by those iron filings that scubaman threw.

"Running!"

He yanks me along, up the incline, over the post office parking lot across from the inverted ziggurat of the Law Courts Building.

And then a jet-engine scream from behind us makes Thagó turn back with horror—

Two of the scubamen are almost caught up to us.

But they're not running—they're goddamned *jumping*.

Jumping in huge block-long arcs, over twenty cars at a time, three storeys in the air, vaulting up and coming down with that jet-engine scream—

"In there!" I yell, pointing. We dash inside City Hall.

That jet-scream is directly overhead now, and the roof thud-echoes like the scubakillers've come down right on top of it.

City Hall's ceiling is a glass pyramid. So they can see us. Idiot!

“The parkade! Then the skywalk to Edmonton Centre!” Thag looks at me like I actually know what the hell I’m saying, and we break through the west doors across 100th Street—

—*JET WHINE*—

And just as we duck inside the store on the other side of the street, we hear a massive *GONG*, and then people outside are dropping like birds that just hit airplanes.

Thag pulls me out the store’s back doors. I can hear the windowpanes shattering into billions of razors. If we’d been there we’d’ve been sliced into ground chuck. “They’re killing people out there, Thagó!”

But Thagó doesn’t slow down—up staircases, down hallways, over the parkade platform, toward the skywalk, me vainly trying to keep up, and then my skin’s burning again and the thick skywalk windows buckle and implode just as we clear the doors into Edmonton Centre mall, running west down the thoroughfare—

Thag pulls me into a store, whips something out of his pocket, grabs the sides of my head like his hands were earmuffs, then does the same to himself, and pulls me back to run for the skywalk to the Eaton’s Centre—

And when the *über-gong* sounds again, I see it in the mall’s mirrors:

—shopping bags dropping, people hitting the ground like cows electro-stunned in slaughterhouses—but we’re still running—why aren’t we going down?

—and that jet-whine—can those assholes actually jump in here?

And then I see it in the mirrors—one of the scubamen is—I don’t know—*jet-skating* or something over fallen bodies right at us—

When I hear a shrieking *ping* I’m thinking *What the hell is it now?* as we burst through the doors of the next skywalk and we’re halfway across when there’s a massive *THUD* on top of the pedway and then a scubaman’s crawling down the outside of the glass like a massive grey-metal crab, upside-down and gazing at us—

And I’m tripping and falling and it’s all in slow-motion for me....

He touches the window....

His hand glows blue....

He removes his hand....

His armoured fist punctures thick reinforced glass....

And the whole plate smashes inside and to the street like a row of icicles broken off an eaves trough....

...I finally hit the platform just as the killer swings down inside....

My heart’s punching my rib cage with brass knuckles, and the world is still in slow-mo....

The doors we just cleared hiss open hydraulically....

The other scubaman slips in, and there’s that *ping* again, and he’s waving something in his hand—

—I’m looking back at Thag who’s just leapt and grappled the upside-down scubaman who burst the window, and he’s got him by the neck and orders me to *RUNNI-I-I-I-NG* and I’m scrambling up and back-pedaling as fast I can and Thagó’s ripping the gear off of the guy’s back and the other scubaman is just about to throw his *pinging* thing right at me when Thagó swings the guy like a goddamn bat and smacks the *pinging* thing out the broken window—

But two seconds later it’s back banging on the windows on the other side of the skywalk. It can hover?

I’m past the steel-glass doors. I see it all through the window:

The free scubaman jet-skates forward.

Thagó rams him with the man in his hands, and the attacker’s jetskates shoot him into the ceiling and bounce him down. Thag heaves his captive into the north windows, opening a crater and trapping him by the torso.

Thagó bolts through the west doors, shoulders them shut behind him and yanks me hard sideways.

PING—

The metal doors rip off their hinges, surfing across the floor and knocking down everything in their way.

And then there’s the sound of metal and concrete dying.

I jump up, and looking out of the hole where the doors used to be, I see the skywalk crashing and crushing half a bus and a bunch of SUVs, which car horn into heart attacks.

And everywhere, inside the mall and on the street, screaming.

Fire alarms. Then the overhead sprinklers are on and we’re running underneath artificial rain towards the escalators, trying to survive the stampede while the mall devolves into a terrified herd.

“Thag,” I yell, “where’re we going?”

“Must getting to big black bridge, Harq!”

“The High Level?”

“Yes! Where safest way, most hiding?”

No point even demanding explanations. I just want to live. I point to yet another skywalk, the one to Manulife Place. We zigzag through crowds, down onto the first floor and out into the street, glancing overhead the whole time, then a block west into the subway station.

And then, insanely, after all that chaos and death back there, we stand, waiting for the subway.

SIX: THE GHOSTS OF THE MURDERED

"I want some goddamned answers, Thagó!"

I'm finally sagging into my seat on the empty subway car, panting, smearing sweat out of my eyes with my sleeve.

How many security cameras caught us? The cops'll think *I* had something to do with all this! And media? My career's finished. They'll be calling this is the first act of urban terrorism in prairie history.

And maybe it is. But who's terrorising whom, and why?

"What you wanting to know?" he says. His face: nothing coy—only fear.

"Who were those men? Why the hell would they kill all those people just to get you? How come we didn't die when that gong-thing struck all those people out in the street? Since when're you some sorta super-ninja? Need I go on?"

"The mens, yes. Killers, like I say—"

"I could see that! Why?"

"—no, wrong. Let me explain. The people in street not die, I think. A sleeper weapon, yes? Make them sleep only. So they can capture."

"So why didn't it knock us out, too?"

"I am giving you special blocking-device in ears. In mine, too."

My fingers are on my ears before I can stop them. "I can't feel anything!"

"Tiny. You awake, right? You not being captured—"

"*Me?* I'm a goddamned junior high school Language Arts teacher—"

"Letting me talk, Harq!" he snaps. From him it feels like a punch to the teeth. I've never heard him angry at anyone before, let alone at me.

Then again, he did just kill a bunch of techno-terrorists.

"Hard... to knowing where start..."

"You said those people in the street weren't all dead?"

"Not the ones who just collapse. But anybody in way when on between-balcony" (he means the skywalk) "collapse, yes, them dead. Innocent not deserve this. Horrible bad."

He slumps forward, popping his tongue softly and repeatedly. His clenched hands are shaking. Then he unfurls them, as if they're letting go of the ghosts of all those people murdered downtown.

"If they weren't trying to kill you—or us—why bomb the skywalk?"

"Finding out what we knowing. But if can't, then stopping us from rescue Princess, definitely. The throwing-weapon, she follow me, you see that? Is a small bomb, hunting like beast."

"A 'smart grenade'?"

He snarls like wolf. "Good term."

"But it was actually floating!"

"They doing that."

The overhead speaker announces the next subway stop. Three left before we exit for the High Level Bridge, for reasons Thag hasn't even told me yet.

"Who is this princess, Thagó?"

"Name Azir Utto. When she government fall, she escaping. Whole region in turmoil, threaten peace. Maybe civil war, maybe invasion, maybe attacking. Great danger, chaos. I, others, sent to finding her. Only me who come here, to your—"

His eyes flick on me, stop, flick elsewhere. "To your city, told to waiting for next clue."

"And you found it?"

"*You* are that clue."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Your dream, Harq. You thinking this only dreaming, but you wrong. Throughout life, you knowing what is happening in advance, yes?"

"No more than the next guy, Thagó! Déjà vu or coincidence or lucky guesses. My *dream*, that was probably from getting hit in the head or the results of whatever you doped me with."

“No, Harq! You not understanding. You bird who assuming fish have wings, too.” He breathes. “ You have Dark Eye.”

He shuts up, like he’s waiting for smoke to clear. Then:

“Was waiting until I found you, but I not knowing *you* is *you* until today. Think you just good friend. Now realising you having great power. When you using it, killers maybe know? Maybe they just closing in on me anyway, but this what making them find us then? You like... supreme strategic weapon, Harq. Highest price. They must either taking you, or killing you.”

Two subway stops left. My mind’s on tilt. I don’t know what to ask next. I’ve known Thag for three months, and yeah, he’s never been anything less than weird, but he’s never seemed delusional.

But what I saw we just went through was no delusion.

Still, doesn’t mean he’s right about this. Just hafta keep asking questions until his delusion runs out of answers.

“So this princess—princess of what? And where was this coup? What region’s unstable? Who sent you? Why—”

“I sent by man like you. He also having Dark Eye.”

Okay. Now I get it. When Linda left me, I swallowed a bunch of pills and now I’m in the Psych ward on a bad batch of happy-juice. It’s not Thag who’s delusional, because he doesn’t exist. *I’m* delusional. So all I need to do is keep asking *myself* questions until my *own* delusion cracks.

“Then why didn’t he just tell you where to find the Princess?”

“Killed.” Thagó’s wolf-teeth flash again. “Before can locate Princess. Dying words bring me to your city.”

“Thagó, who and what are you, really?”

Overhead voice: “*Grandin Station. Grandin.*”

Thag looks out the window into the rushing blackness of the subway tunnel.

“I Sayntomush Binipythagó Barabdura. I am a religion-man, scientist-man, builder-man, war-man. I am job: making peace, keeping peace, teaching peace. Where I coming from, thousands others like me. Work often secret. But results real.”

Keep pushing—burst the bubble. “And please give me a straight answer: where in god’s name do you come from?”

“This, cannot telling. If tell, you never believing anyway.”

The train’s slowing down. Station lights brighten our path ahead.

“But I knowing one thing sure-true, Harq. We not rescuing Princess Azir Utto, millions die.”

SEVEN: THE BLACK INDUSTRIAL SKELETON

We emerge from the Grandin LRT station onto icy streets, steaming grates, and darkness, walking into who knows what.

My shoes are squeaking on snowy sidewalks. I never even managed to get them off back at Thagó's place. Good thing, too, or I would've been running through downtown in stocking feet.

But I didn't grab my coat, and now, post-cardio and post-adrenalin, I'm shivering with sweat that's turning into ice up and down my back. Shaking, thinking about all the dead people behind us. And how we almost joined them.

Thagó leads me southward silently towards the dark cliff of the river valley. Late March, and the park's still snow-choked, blue-white beneath streetlights.

The wooden staircase echoes like snapping bark as we descend nine or ten storeys. At the bottom, Thag hustles me over to the Menzies Bridge, where the LRT runs.

"Thagó! Where the hell are we going?"

He glances east, a couple of hundred metres up towards black industrial skeleton called the High Level Bridge.

But we still take the footpath beneath the Menzies, where the wind's so cold that my teeth are chattering hard enough to hurt, like I'm chewing a mouthful of dice. All the muscles of my neck and back are aching.

But Thagó—and he's got no coat on either—he might as well be strolling on a Mazatlan beach looking for a goddamned fried fish joint.

Halfway across the Menzies, Thagó stops.

I scan around. What's he looking for? Why in god's name is all this is happening to me? Why I can't be at home right now and asking myself how I'll explain all this to Linda and then deciding I won't tell her all of it or any of it?

"If angry, Taharqa," says Thag, "I understanding. Too much secrets and surprises. And danger of the death, today. Certainly sorry. But still needing your help for rescue. You still needing mine for saving from hunter-capture-killers."

"I wanna go home, Thagó. Now."

"Can't, Harq. Sorry."

"Why not?"

He reaches for the small of his back, as if for a gun. Instead he grabs two gold-lined black metallic discs the size of coasters.

He slaps one onto the blue rail of the footbridge, and it chimes out four squat metal "toes" that grab the rail.

He takes the other disc, holds it out away from him while facing the High Level, squints as if it were a rifle-sight.

Then he tosses it into the void like a tiny Frisbee.

A tiny, tinny *tunk* echoes across frigid night air from a hundred tons of metal, concrete and rails waiting out there.

"Harq, full truth, as soon as can. Too much, too soon, you no believing anyway. Some things, must seeing first."

He presses the toe-gripping disc on the rail. I hear low bass.

And Thag hops up on the rail, and then runs over to the High Level Bridge, running up goddamned nothing but thin air and darkness.

My jaw's so slack it almost snaps off my skull.

Now he's actually scrambling up into the under-gantry of the bridge, like this Spiderman act were an everyday thing.

It's only then I notice what's coming out of the disc in front of me. What the hell is it? A stripe, I guess? A black, shiny stripe.

I touch it. It pushes back. Doesn't feel like cloth or metal or wire. Touching it's like trying to shove two repelling magnets together. It gives me a chewing-aluminum taste in my mouth, and ice water sensation on my scrotum. I yank back my hand.

What kind of technology is this?

For what feels like ten minutes I can't even see Thagó over there, but then there he is, boot-surfing back down the stripe like a kid sliding down banister.

He hops off the stripe and onto the hand rail, and then down to the bridge's footpath.

Transformed.

Holding an ovular equipment case with arm-straps, as if it doubles as a shield. Wearing a black poncho, or maybe a cape? Underneath that, black pants, a black blazer, a black shirt, and at the centre of his shirt collar, a white square, and below that, a big, shiny, metal cross.

Oh. My. God.

Thagó's a super-priest.

EIGHT: MIND-BLOWING FATIGUE

It's an odd sensation, believing so many impossible things.

Detached, like being in a car plunging over a cliff and thinking, *So this is how I'm going to die.*

Thag lends me his cloak on the way back to his office, which we discover is surrounded by police, fire department, and a host of "anti-terrorist" brain trusts from RCMP, CSIS and Immigration. We ditch that leg-hold trap, scamper down the block to my Saturn and drive to my place in McKernan.

We're grabbing necessities—food (haven't eaten since lunch), water, tea in a Thermos, and warm clothing, before the five-hour night-drive to the Brooks Aqueduct. And one more thing.

A vision.

After seeing that black-stripe thing that Thagó ran along and later retrieved, I'm simply accepting things without trying too hard to understand them. Way too much to *try* to understand.

Linda called it "ruins-fatigue," something she had after we toured Egypt. After ten days of seeing the greatest archeocultural achievements in human history, you're so wiped out, you become blasé bordering on disappointed. *Well, the Pyramid's big, but it's not as big as I thought it would be.*

So I guess now I've got "mind-blowing-fatigue."

And "got-to fatigue." Got to come with him. Got to help him rescue the Princess. Got to save millions of lives. Got to let him protect me or these men will get me because of my alleged power—

Which is why I don't resist when Thagó has me lie down on my couch and puts his knock-out electro-anaesthesia device on my skull again, the only thing he grabbed on the way out of his deathzone-office, which shows just how much he needs it—and me.

"This device never intended to bringing the opening of the Dark Eye," he says, "but apparently it doing so for you. Until I can training of you to do on your own, we needing it. Now closing eye-caps and counting backwards, Harq, from dozen-dozen."

By the time I get to the seventies, there's a rippling inside the darkness of my eyeballs.

It's folding upon itself, glinting, like a lake melting the moon into a million twirling silver coins.

By the fifties, the shining blackness is whispering into a turquoise haze, like the Aurora Borealis in a winter's midnight...

And by the forties....

*:the lights swim in groups,
flashing scales on darting fishes,
luminescent portholes on the flanks
of ancient beasts in oceanic netherworlds...
:the lights gather themselves and wriggle away
until all is dark and quiet again...
strain to open my eyes wider, but
can't see a thing, as if I'm in a cave...
or in a grave...
cold sliding against my skin,
like a dagger
seeking space to slip between
the bones of my spine—*

*::silhouetted men
a dozen... two dozen
::sweating, shivering,
panting in the darkness*

::tropical mist, like lime

*:::and her face,
glowing like sunrise*

*:::and looking up through a
black arched gate
into the belly of a
VAST STONE SERPENT*

Whites of eyes.

White of teeth.

White square on collar.

Shape-of-Tható emerges from the amorphous darkness, like an ebony idol slipping free of crude oil. Goddamn... that machine... makes my brain feel like I'm drunk on hundred-proof poetry. And now I've got the prose hang-over.

I somehow croak out, "I know where she is."

NINE: THE REVELATION OF THE ASTRIARCHY

"She's being held right below the aqueducts. There must be some sort of... mechanical control booths or, or... flow-stations or something down there. You don't have any of your monitors anymore, do you?"

"No," he growls, standing there in his black cape and Vatican CIA costume. "When I throwing hunter-killer, him hitting-destroying my 'monitors.' Why?"

"Because—wait a second." I haul him to my computer, then search for a moth-eaten memory. And suddenly there it is.

"Yes!" I exclaim. "This's it! The Diefenbunker!"

"Is what is *deefanbunkle?*"

"It's a Cold War bunker built during Prime Minister Diefenbaker's time. They built it to withstand a nuclear attack and protect the PM and the cabinet. Sposta have enough food and water to last for however long they needed to stay down there."

I scan the entry, then point at the screen. "I thought there was only one, here in Alberta, but that wouldn't make any sense. Says here they built them in seven provinces."

"But Harq," says Thag, reading over my shoulder, "article saying Deefurbakel, she is near the Red Deer. Red Deer is near the Brooks and aqua-duck-tus?"

I'm confused. I click onto the image search, scroll and scan the screen's photos. "I'm sure this's what I saw... but...."

Thagó has me go back to the original article, then reads.

"Article says Deefurbagel, she is gone. Destroyed."

Now it's coming back to me. The government was worried that Hell's Angels or gun-nut militias would take over the Diefenbunker (bunkers, I now realise) if they weren't properly protected, so they decided to blow them up or fill them with concrete or something. Happened a few years ago.

"Says here they turned the one near Ottawa into a museum, apparently, but the rest are gone. I don't know, Thag. Unless...."

"Look, this province is soaking in oil, right? So maybe for strategic reasons they built a second bunker here, where no one expected it? Retrofitted it? I mean, it's abandoned anyway, and if maybe they got military engineers to build it... and look, if my dream or whatever really is real, then I'm positive that's what I saw when you used that thing on me. I'm sure of it. If this woman you're after is real, if my dream is real, then she's below the aqueducts."

Thag puts his hand on my shoulder, smiles.

"If you saying, Harq, then I believing."

"Thag," I ask, "these kidnappers holding—what's her name, again?" It's too embarrassing to keep saying the words *the Princess*. Undermines my ability to believe any of this.

"Azir Utto."

"These men holding Azir Utto... they *will* try to kill us for rescuing her, obviously—"

"Obviously—"

"—so will they be armed like the men we fought in the street today?"

His mouth does some weird squiggling.

"Oh, I get it. You're smirking because I said 'we?' Well, hell, I at least ran away effectively, didn't I?"

We laugh together today for the first time.

"To answering question, yes, them having many weapons. Will fighting bad-hard."

"But in my, my vision or whatever, I got the sense there are at least twenty guys down there. Maybe more. Now okay, you're some kind of super-fighter, but *my* single biggest victory in combat today was not shitting my pants. What good'm I gonna be crawling into an underground death-hole full of super-terrorists?"

"When them meeting me last time, Harq, I am unarmed. You see how well I doing. Four of them being crushed—me, not even cut. But now, ready. Armed. Not us trapped down there with twenty of them. Twenty of them trapped down there with two of us!"

Bravado? Or insanity?

“Well, one of us, Thag. Look, I can drive you there, but I’m telling you, I can’t go fighting down inside that bunker—they’ll kill me before I even get the *chance* to shit my pants. Can’t I just, y’know, wait in the car?”

I smile, hoping he’s going to laugh. Give any sign he’s not going to make me do this.

He gives no such sign.

“Needing you to finding Princess, Harq. Can’t ‘wait-in-car.’”

“And if I stay here—”

“Then they tracking you down here. Itchy-grains them throwing at you, she is for finding you, like scent. I must going to Brooks aqua-duck-tus. You staying here alone, they—”

“Well, can you give me a weapon at least? A gun? Anything?”

Thag opens his shield-case, hands me something like an ostrich egg. That is, if ostrich eggs were turquoise, with recessed handles underneath.

“I protecting you, getting you close to Princess. You getting her, holding her. Anyone attack, you squeezing soft-spot on egg’s gripper.”

“Is this a smart grenade or something?”

“No. It expanding, creating armoured shield. Anchored. Having air supply. It skin giving off shocks. Painful for attacker. Can’t cutting it. But lasting only a while. Eventually bad men getting in, but before that time we safe, probably. You no worry—you no having for kill them.”

I get up, pace, trying to de-ice my brain. “Thagó, the collar, the clothes, the cross... seriously, what is it with this get-up?”

“Get... up?”

He almost has me. Never should’ve taught him coyness.

“C’mon! You’re dressed like a Catholic priest, but you’ve got all this high tech shit, like that stripe-thing you ran on... what was that, anyway?”

“We calling it *Luaa-tlon*. It meaning, ‘Black Path.’”

“Exactly! So who are you? What the hell kinda group are you with? Some kinda Catholic secret army? Freemasons?”

He looks at me like I’m crazy.

“Look, I’m not the one who’s nuts, here! The US government has dozens of spy agencies and tons of secret technology and they’ve only been around for two hundred years, so why *not* the Catholic Church? They’ve been around two thousand years and have trillions of dollars! That’s it, isn’t it? My dad always talked about stuff like this. This is how the Church stayed in power so long with such major influence on the world, right? That’s it, isn’t it?”

Thagó stares at me silently.

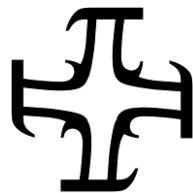
I stare back down at him. Waiting.

“Taharqa, before, I telling you my full name. Now I telling you who I am.”

I give him my total attention.

“I am *Sufterm*... and how saying in Ingi-lish? ‘War-monk.’ Yes... *Warmunk*. I am Sufterm Warmunk. Our Order, for a thousand years, she protect all the peoples with secrets of the religions, of the science, of the technology, of the mind.”

He touches his cross. It glitters.



Doesn’t look so Christian to me anymore. It’s more squat, like an Iron Cross. A *Sufterm* cross?

“We the protectors of the ancient religion, even older than Sufterm Assembly. She is called... hm... how say... ‘star kingdom,’ or the ‘star order.’ The, ah... *Astriarchy*.”

Never heard of it. Great. Figures. High-tech fundamentalists? Now I *know* I’m screwed.

But wait—oh, hell, *surely* he doesn’t mean—

“What do you mean by ‘star’ kingdom?”

“That the stars holding the knowledges for the peoples and their salvation.”

“Thank god! For a second, I thought you were gonna tell me that you were from outer space or something.”

He waits way too long before saying anything.

“Yes, Harq,” he finally says. “From space.”

TEN: A DOZEN WORLDS, TWENTY-NINE BILLION LIVES

What in the hell am I supposed to do with that?

"You not believing."

"No, it's not that. Except...." I take a breath. "Well, yes, it's that."

"I understanding—you being fool to believing unless I prove. I proving, okay?"

"Okay, Thag, I'm getting really, really scared, here. How're you gonna prove—"

Thagó throws his cape back over his left arm. Before I noticed he was wearing only one glove. Now I see that his glove is black sectional metal glinting bronze. When he twists it, I see the three metallic pipes on the back and one on either side.

He holds up his arm.

Out of the pipes slither curling, swirling metal tentacles.

Thagó gestures towards the desk and picks up a clock, a glass and a spoon to show me the dexterity of his super-hand.

"Is called *Qomnor*," he says. "Means 'Hand of *Qomn*.'"

Then he tentacle-plucks a small turquoise pyramid out of his belt, snakes it out to the rug, taps it.

The top of the pyramid gives birth to a tiny sun.

It swells from tennis ball to basketball and rises to the ceiling until it eclipses the lamp. His *Qomnor* tentacles flick off the light switch until only the "sun" illuminates the room.

In darkness, planets emerge and swirl into orbit.

Goddamn.

Stars—or asteroids?—float over and around me like silver shrimp in a lagoon. And there's a ringed planet! And another one—and two more... hey, this is *our* solar system! Jupiter with the Great Red Spot... red Mars, blue Venus, orange Mercury... white Halley's Comet!

But that's weird... is this supposed to be symbolic? On the other side of the sun from the Earth... two *other* Earths, one with rings and a moon, and the other with neither, orbiting each other?

"This is the System," says Thag. "But not like Humans thinking is like. Secrets kept from all your planet. Secret of dozen worlds, twenty-nine billions of peoples. The 'Civilisation of Fire.'"

Thag hums, and everything inside the asteroid orbit shimmers gold-black.

"This is the Core. *Atju, Thuwitl*," he says, pointing to Mercury and Venus, "*Memekhu*," pointing to Mars, "your world, and here, *Shumnum*," pointing to the second "Earth," and then to the third, the one with the rings, "and *Qorodis*, 'the Crown.' Centre of the System."

"But how the hell is that possible, Thag? Wouldn't we know about two extra planets, not to mention all your spaceships flying around? Even if telescopes couldn't spot those extra 'Earths' with the sun in the way, we've got satellites!"

"Harq, Earth-people barely able to detect, how-say, incoming asteroids that nearly hitting and killing everybody-and-thing. Really think you see void-crafts?"

"But... is deeper fact. Truth kept from Earth peoples by illusion-mask. Simple to fool all your *satty-lights*, even ones that leaving the Core, to keep you from knowing truth."

Thagó taps the pyramid, and the ringed planet Qorodis swells, scaling up until all the other worlds and the sun disappear through the walls and ceiling, and we're inside the planet's rings.

When Qorodis is so big that its poles touch ceiling and floor, borders snake their ways across the two supercontinents that look nothing like our seven.

"Astriarchy based here, in *Kaiabreen*," says Thagó, and a tropical peninsula glows blue. "Kaiabreen is Qorodis-centre. Major political, economical power in System. Secondary power is *Baimakhtfrai*, controlling Baimakhtu Imperium."

Another mass, now gold, glints to the south of Kaiabreen. Around the planet, other territories (its 'Imperium?') gleam copper.

“Princess Azir Utto’s father once undisputed ruler there. But she is rising authority, some saying real power. Strong country, but she government divided in ruling-class power struggle among sisters and uncles. No new government, terrorist-rebels fighting in country, everything crumble into tiny chaos-pieces.

“She being kidnapped by terrorist-rebels, then disappearing. Them threaten killing her unless their fighters released, power-share in new government.

“If no government form, Kaiabreen and Astriarchy must send troops. Or maybe strongest states in *HotokThon Federation* (another region glints emerald) “attempt foolish invasion. Or even new revolution beginning, spreading. And then maybe Baimakhtu forces using macrocide weapons.

“Whatever case, horror-death. Starvation, civil war, maybe reaching across all Qorodis. Affecting city-states on planet Tluwitl by stoking independence movements. All bad. At minimum, millions die.

“Everyone is searching for Princess: Kaiabreen, Astriarchy, Suftem, factions across Baimakhtu Imperium and HotokThon Federation, from Shumnum and Mememkhu. Everyone searching, but my helper, him who having Dark Eye? He telling me she here. Only *me* come to Earth. Earth, she is forbidden to us, you know? Off-limit. Can’t let Human-people know we exist.”

“Why not?”

“Kaiabreen say, because destroy primitive culture. But Astriarchy say is to stop enslaving the Human.”

“What?”

“Yes,” says Thagó, looking toward his boots. “Not all. Many free. Illegal in Kaiabreen, most other places, but in some, still happening. Long time taking the Human from Earth. You call it, I reading here, ‘alien abduction.’”

I burst out laughing, and then suddenly I’m ice.

“You mean that’s *real*?”

“Is not for joking. Over centuries, steal dozens-dozens-thousands. Breed millions of babies, and enslave them, too. Very shameful-wrong.”

For fuck’s sakes. The answer to the question *Are we alone?* is *Nobody’s alone on the plantation*. But why the hell would beings with superior technology need slaves for anything? Wouldn’t they have robots or something? Thagó: “Suftem saying different reason to forbid travel to Earth. To protecting us all.”

“From what?”

“From destroying everything.”

“But how? Why?”

“Secrets are here, Harq. Secrets no one, not even Suftem knowing for sure. But great-important, so important could threatening everything. *We* research, but no one else allowed. So whole world off limits. Penalty is death.”

“So how come you—”

“Special... um... ‘dispensation.’ Astriarchy allowing me to find-save Princess. Must leaving immediately afterwards.”

“You mean you’re telling me all this, and then you’re leaving? My life is permanently turned upside-down with knowledge that no one else on Earth even has, that our solar system is a full of billions of aliens, and you’re just gonna leave me here babbling about it all like a mental patient? And I’ll never see you again?”

“No, Harq—remember when you hit by killer-man?”

“Those iron filings or whatever? The tracking device?”

“Poison for Human. Can’t leave you here to being captured, but also can’t leave you to being poisoned.” I involuntarily pat my torso, but I don’t feel anything. “Can only remove them on Qorodis. You must coming with me, *and* so you can become Suftem.”

“What?” I leap up. Two seconds ago I was panicking that Thagó was going to abandon me, and now I’m panicking because he won’t. I stagger into the rotating planet in front of me, step back out, disoriented, bewildered. “I’m not going anywhere, and I sure as shit aint become a Suftem!”

“Must, or dying!”

“I’ve got a job here, a house, I’ve got bills to pay—”

“Staying here and dying, bill-paying not matter. Coming with me, then training, becoming Suftem, and living.”

“I don’t *want* to be a Suftem!”

“You having gift. Must learn. Owe universe. Owe Glory.”

“I’m a school teacher! You think I care about glory? Listen, even if I go with you so you can get these things out of me, you’ve gotta take me back here as soon as possible! Even if *you* don’t care about my life here, *I* do!”

“If can’t removing all locaters, maybe neutralise poison, but... you maybe never able to coming back to Earth. More hunters finding you. Or killers.”

I turn away from the world in front of me, look out into “space.”

Linda leaving me was one thing, but there was always the thought, the hope, that we could reconcile. But now, to lose my career, my home, my whole life... and my world?

My knees snap like crackers. I hit the floor, and nearly hit my head. I sit up, gathering in my knees, shaking my head.

Thagó stares at me.

Apparently my face poses the question my mouth doesn't have the energy to ask.

"Because you special, Harq," he says. "Like maybe one in three-dozen million. You knowing future. You what we call... hmm... chron... *Chronostic*. You reveal enough, you help *make* future. Very valued on Qorodis. Join us, my brother. Place of honour for you. Beholding wonders of universe."

"If I survive."

"Honour even if you do not."

I push myself up onto unsteady legs, brace myself against the walls, wobble out of the room and away from the ringed not-Earth and the schools of stars, wander to my very earthly kitchen, pour earthly water, drink an earthly glass of it.

I can barely get down half.

Sit down. Close my eyes. Fight to drag in a full breath.

I hear Thagó's feet creaking my hardwood floors.

"One more thing to showing, Harq. No, you liking. Come."

We slip on our shoes, step onto the back porch. The snow is indigo-silver, cratered, shining under streetlights like the surface of the moon.

Thagó reaches inside his cape and pulls out a glowing beam the length of his arm.

I check it out. Up close, it's like ten thousand diamonds fused together, a honeycomb of white-blue gems that look damn near alive, like there's starlight pumping through it instead of blood.

"Is a weapon, Harq. Very rare. Is called, uh... 'Jewelled Wing.' This one, my opinion, yes, greatest of them all. The Diamond Wing. Is named *Khepramaākheru*."

"She mean... how say... '*Vindicator*?' Or maybe... 'Maker of Triumph.'"

Despite everything, despite my exhaustion, despite my terror of what's going to happen to me and how my whole understanding of the world has just been shattered... this... *thing*... is completely amazing.

"What's it for, Thagó?"

"Watch."

He holds out his hand, as if the Jewelled Wing were a bird to be released to the winds.

And then he sings.

A deep drone, almost a moan. I can feel the vibrations and hear the rattling as the tone invades the glass of my French doors, the wall, the porch floor. It's like I'm in a cathedral, and it's not one man in front of me but an entire choir evoking this trembling power.

"*Sayn... nom... NEEM...*"

The Jewelled Wing rises from his hand as if by magnetism.

And like an enchanted geometric compass, it unfolds itself until it's the size and angles of a man's arm bent at the elbow. Thagó grasps it again from its counter-gravity, and I see it for what it must truly be:

A boomerang.

Thagó throws it out, blazing like a comet in the darkness over two houses, three, five, down the block, and further still... all the while singing like a sitar echoing in a canyon, until finally that shimmering sound grows louder and the comet returns to Thagó's outstretched hand like a falcon perching on a falconer's arm.

He turns to me and smiles.

Leading me to the walk way, he kicks snow away from the concrete sidewalk. "May I destroy?"

"Go ahead," I whisper, before I know what I'm saying.

He kneels, dips the blade through the cement sidewalk like a knife into whipped cream, pulls the Wing through the concrete towards himself, and removes it.

Steam rises from the gash where the slabs have melted.

He stands, his face lit neon-blue.

"With *Khepramaākheru*, Harq, nothing can stopping us."

I reach out to touch it, then stop myself at the last second.

"How come it didn't slice your hand off when you caught it?"

He sings *maa-ON doo-OON*, and the Wing folds back into a beam. He slides it into the sheath on his hip, closes his cloak.

“Because,” he says with a smile, “he knowing it is me.”

Back inside we collect our provisions, and I silently say goodbye to the house where I once had a normal life and a wife.

I’m probably never going to see either one again.

ELEVEN: FORESTALLING DEATH AT THE DIEFENBUNKER

“Hey, Thag, with every place on this whole planet you could’ve looked, why’d you start your search in Edmonton?”

Darkness on icy highways. Less than an hour from the Brooks Aqueduct. Fighting off exhaustion with eight teabags in my Thermos and teeny bottles of Drive-A-Lert, and losing. So firing questions at Thag is my best bet to survive long enough to die at the Diefenbunker.

In mangled English, Thag tells the “chronosis” of his dead comrade:

*Defenseless, amid savages
At centre of city of champions
Making a place of balms and dispensing alms.*

*There you will being led to shining raptor
By one-eyed man
Who beholding new temple upon horizon.*

“City of champions?” Funny. And by funny, I mean pathetic and scary. “That’s what led you here?”

“Yes!” he says, wounded. “I even seeing sign on road into city.”

“That was just the City’s stupid slogan because we used to win Stanley Cups and Grey Cups, about a million years ago!”

“What *matter*? Chronostic Imhot Uthmanes say I finding one-eyed man—is you. Remembering your injury today? ‘Beholding new temple’—you doing that.”

“These aqueducts are hardly new.”

“Maybe ‘temple’ part not happen yet.”

“And ‘shining raptor?’”

“Is Princess.” (*Obviously*. So stupid of you, Harq.)

Maybe to smooth the moment, Thag puts a CD into the car stereo. Seconds later I’m hearing “Brick House” from *The Best of the Commodores*. Is there a less appropriate piece of music?

“And so you set up a medical clinic because of this prophecy?”

“Not ‘prophecy.’ *Chronosis*. And keeping no weapons, either; this is why I am hiding them under the bridge. ‘Defenseless.’”

Offenseless, actually. This is pointless. I switch angles. “Thag, if you’re from another planet, why do we even look like alike?”

“Don’t look alike. Me, much taller than you, Harq. Some probably saying better-looking, maybe, but is just their opinion.”

“Amusing. What I mean is, why would aliens have two arms, two legs, a head, speak English—even crappy English—and so on?”

“Not alien. I Human, Harq.”

“But you said—”

“From outer space, yes, but not say *not*-Human. I telling you of abduction, slavery? Is me, brother. From population of Humans on Qorodis, and rescued by Suftem Warmunks and raised in Suftem orphanage-monastery.”

A highway sign, white-green in the darkness. Forty minutes away.

“Yes, Astriarchy, she saving me from living as slave. I am praising the true Astriarchy forever. She is faithful servant to the Glory.”

“The Glory?”

“Is... hmm... the heart... the pain... the compassion... the *joy*... of all the universe.”

“God?”

"Humans... having many meanings with 'God.' But what is Glory? Not like human myth of 'throne-man.' Not like, how-say, 'Santaclaus.' Maybe like old memory. Like old wound. Like sun cracking horizon... like sap flowing in spring. Like bird-baby cracking through egg shell... like moment when first understanding important thing. Like last breath before death. Like first scream of baby, saying, 'I am!'"

Three or four cars have shot the other way on the left, headed north. I haven't said a word to his little soliloquy.

Thagó: "You not liking what I saying, brother."

"What makes you say that?"

"Every since meeting you, I talking on religions, you sneering. Or you silence."

"No, Thagó, I... I don't feel that way."

"Harq, you is not so good liar as you think. Remember when we first meeting at store of the Chineses? I know you having troubles with your Linda.⁴ Just like I seeing this now."

"Thagó, you're exaggerating. I'm completely open. *Very* open. I just don't personally believe in any of that. But if you do—"

"Before tonight you probably not believing in life on other planets."

"That's different, isn't it? Give me proof God or the Glory or whatever's real, fine. You showed me super-high tech, the flying wing. I can't explain any of it. So yeah, it's possible you're from space. But 'God'? If you had proof, you'd've shown it to me already."

"Harq... proof is Thought."

"Then the whole concept of 'god' really doesn't claim very much."

"So where did people Qorodis and Shumnum come from?"

"Evolution, I assume."

"No. *Numans* not evolved. Created *whole* on Qorodis and Shumnum, looking overall same. Same with plant, same with animal."

I don't know what to do with this information. "Numans?"

"Sentient population of the System, except for Humans."

"So you're saying there're no fossils on your worlds?"

"No fossils older than two-dozen thousand years. The Glory creating Numanity and all life on the two worlds 'from scratch.' Is miracle."

I've got my eyes on the road, but peripherally I can see Thag staring at me.

"You face, again—I see it at word 'miracle.' Why you hating the religions, brother? Not understand."

"I just don't understand how you can have all this high technology and even be asking that question. I mean, haven't you outgrown all that?"

He's silent. I keep going.

"Anyway, whatever, you've got all this superior alien knowledge, so maybe you know something I don't. Believe whatever you like. None of my business. It should be personal anyway, not a big public show. I'm all for religion, as long's it's private. When it's organised—"

"Astriarchy very organised. It is being centre of civilisation."

Super-powered aliens running their own goddamned theocracy? An interplanetary Iran? Or given Thagó's get-up, a cosmic Crusade?

Another road-sign: **Brooks 50 km.** Half an hour on icy roads.

"So why'd these rebel kidnapppers bring her here, anyway?"

He pauses at the transparency of my segue.

"No one thinking to look here, probably," he says. "Also, most Numans terrified coming to Earth because death penalty, but also believing they getting infected by Humans, going mad, losing immortal souls and freezing in eternal torment, like Astriarchy teach." (Great attitude toward space exploration.) "Rebels losing civil war, so hide here—nothing to losing. But if Azir Utto dying, revenge massacres terrible. Many ethnations be killed in mass-punish, even all-kill. Can't happen. Innocent not deserving extinction because of few terrorists."

"So why kill her, if that's the risk?"

"Probably not planning to kill. Kidnapping her to plying her for data, or use her to bargaining with. But they not knowing state secret."

"Which is?"

⁴ I have absolutely no idea what Thag was talking about. I was the model of public decorum, even during that autumn when Linda blew my life to shit.

“Her having bad-bad diseasing of nervous system, called *saitocrain*. Needing treatments. Miss one or two, get sick. Miss six or seven, paralysed, coma. Miss eight, die. Rebels not knowing; citizens not knowing. She government knowing. Suftem knowing.”

“How long’s she got?”

“Only days, I thinking. I doctor; I helping her, yes, but only so much can do here. Must taking her to my vehicle⁵, do operation. Now, Harq, we not having time more for this talk. Wanting to go over rescue plan.”

“You have my undivided attention.”

“Rescuing plan: we going into Deefulbaker. I stopping guards while you grabbing Princess, take her out. We escaping.”

He’s practicing his new “coy” thing. Comic relief, I’m sure.

After two more road signs: “That’s it? That’s the goddamned plan?”

“Your Dark Eye dream not showing us die, right? This good omen.”

“It didn’t show us dying, but it didn’t show us *not* dying, either!”

A long pause. “Well... sometimes chronosis not showing everything. Maybe we living anyway, no problem.” Oh, now *that’s* really encouraging.

⁵ We couldn’t take Thag’s “alien vehicle,” I later learned, because he couldn’t risk the terrorists possibly being able to track us inbound.

TWELVE: MODERN RUINS, IN MORE WAYS THAN ONE

Just enough purple seeping from the sky to make the Diefenbunker look like the bloodied carcass of Godzilla.

I drive along the aqueducts until we're at the place that I *premembered* (my new verb for this ability).

Out of the car, him in his astro-Vatican outfit and Suftem cross, me in Michelin Man-parka and snow boots (ironically, what we used to call "moon boots"). He's packing "exo-weapons." I'm carrying an ostrich egg.

We crunch a hundred or so metres towards the aqueduct, and no matter how hard we try to be silent, snow squawks beneath our every step.

A dark wedge rising from the ground: the bunker's front door.

Thagó reaches sideways, straight-armed, stops me. I hold the egg tighter. He points.

Footprints.

Hands me goggles. I put them on, and the landscape turns into grey planes and lines. Thagó's a bright blur pointing to its own eyes. Is he trying to tell me his goggles are built in?⁶

He tests the door on the wedge-portal. Locked.

Thag flips aside his cloak, barely touches the exposed tip of the glowing Wing, draws it out. He sings to it: *Sayn nom NEEM...* It shines like a blue star.

He grabs it, slides it through the door. Cuts out a giant upside-down *U*.

The metal groans when he pulls down inch-thick steel like nothing more than the lid off a tin of anchovies.

Nobody inside could've failed to hear that.

Down the ramp. Into darkness. Smells like frost and gasoline.

Along the hallway, another door. Thagó neon-knives through it, too.

A long, curved tunnel past that.

I de-goggle, pull out our downloaded print-outs of the Diefenbunker, read them by the glow of the Wing.

Four levels, each a diamond-shaped loop with two stairwells on opposite corners. Gotta hope all the 'bunkers were built from the same plans. The best-armoured and best-defended room in the entire hundred-thousand square-foot complex is the Bank of Canada vault. Fourth sub-level. Built to withstand a five-megaton blast two kilometres away.

That's where she'll be.

Re-goggle. Thagó slips out what looks like ten pairs of scissors on a hang-tray. Lays them down, slides a finger on the tray's side.

The scissors unfold into steel dragonfly-machines. All ten take flight, halo us in a quiet whine. Our personal escort squadron.

Thag waves me forward. We walk silently.

Breathing's so shallow I'm panting. Sweat-soaked inside my parka. And I've gotta go to the can. Goddamned tea—what was I thinking?

Corner coming up. Gasoline smell's thicker. Thag checks around the corner with a techno-periscope.

Waves me on: clear.

Down the hall. Stairwell entrance up ahead.

He points at two of the dragonfly squadrons, makes a circular motion, then points backwards and ahead. They whiz away. Can he see what they see through his implant-goggles?

He tries the stairwell door. Unlocked.

He points at another dragonfly, makes a crawling gesture with his hand. It lands on the door, crawls to the edge.

Thag opens the door—just a crack. The dragonfly nips inside.

⁶ Thag deployed a dozen "exo-tech" devices during our rescue mission. Looking back, my best guesses for two of them: the emerald carrot he shoved into the ground was a communications jammer, and the black pliers he clamped to one of the aqueduct support struts was a motion beacon.

Head's so airy I feel like I'm gonna faint. Grip the egg tighter.

Thagó opens the door all the way. We move inside.

At Sub-Basement 3, Thagó stops, directs two more of the dragonflies to keep descending to final floor, Level 4. He takes out two small gasmasks. We put them on, enter Level 3, six drones with us.

Assuming the specs are correct, we're headed to the section of level 3 directly above sublevel 4's fuel tanks and bank vault.

He directs two more 'flies in opposite directions down the halls, then cuts a hole in the bulkhead, sending two drones inside wall-guts.

Immediately a whine: they're drilling.

He grabs my arm. We sprint down the hall, yank a hard corner towards the staircase—

Ten paces before the door we hear the explosion.

Heat scorches down two hallways of the diamond-shaped floor plan, whites-out my goggles just as we leap inside the stairwell.

Thagó: "Now they know we here for sure."

Voices, screaming in gibberish. Are they burning to death? Is *she*?

Jumping down the last leg of stairs, bursting through the final door, and I see what hell looks like.

Bodies that don't even know they're dead yet—on fire—hobbling, staggering, falling in front of us. Pipes bleeding steam, some sprinklers pouring instead of spraying. I pull off my overloaded infra-goggles. The puddles are all reflecting flame, so the floor looks like a river of fire.

Towards the bank vault. It should've been built to withstand the explosion. If not, the explosion flash-fried her.

Ahead, screaming men stagger out of the smoke. *Weapons—*

—Thagó flashes beside me, and I'm hitting the ground, splashing—

—glance up, see the Wing slipping back into Thagó's hand like a yo-yo.

Thagó yanks me up and forward, my soaked parka sloshing heavily, and I see it all in the flickering puddles:

Forearms. A leg. A shoulder with its arm and nothing else. A scuba-masked head.

Thagó drags me sopping and slopping beside him and trying not to hit the egg's trigger. Final hall, where the sprinklers are working better—fire's out, it's dark, so I re-goggle. I'm heavier with water by the second. At least the vault should be clear. But if anything explodes near me, I'll be scalded to death inside my coat—

Halfway down the corridor: the vault door.

No guards. Dragonflies must be tripping all their motion-detection, so they're thinking it's a whole platoon invading instead of just two men. I race for the door, frantically hoping that on the other side there's no detachment of murderous scuba-faced space motherfuckers seeking revenge on whoever did this to them.

Door's locked.

Last two dragonflies whine from behind me, land on the door. One drills the keypad, the other drills the navigator-wheel door handle.

Me, pointlessly: "Hurry up!"

—finished drilling quarter-sized holes—they're wriggling inside—

—more yelling, echoes of fighting, and the door *ka-chunks* open.

Pull the handle—goddamned door must weigh eight tons. Shove the egg into one of my parka's oversized pockets. Grip the door handle with both hands. Brace my feet. And pull.

The door begrudges me a centimetre. My soaking moon-boots slide. Pull, pulling, *PULLING—*

—when the door's a hand-span open, I brace myself against the still-hot wall beside the door jamb, put one foot against the monster-thick edge of the door, push with all my strength while the jamb gives birth to more edge of the door... and more edge... and more edge still...

Until the edge finally surrenders to air. Shove a hand in, then a shoulder, push with my feet now against the wall. The door slides, swings, smashes through the air, thundering against the wall.

I'm inside. There's light. I slide off my goggles.

Standing here. Right here. Where I am now. I *remember* this.

And then in the now, I see her. Lying on a cot in boots and a skin-tight tunic, hair wrapped around her like a veil. And even unconscious, she's—

I mean, I'm aware I could be slaughtered at any second by depraved extraterrestrial fanatics, that for all I know Thagó's already been murdered back there, that I'm having the single most inappropriate thought I could possibly have in the midst of all this—but this woman is so electrifying it's all I can do to keep my knees from melting. Her hair's flowing like an underground river, her waist tapers from achingly curvaceous hips and chest,

and her face... it's just *beautiful*, literally glowing, glowing the way the wax glows from the golden light of a candle.

The Princess.

THIRTEEN: A GLASS SLIPPER AND A DEFIBRILATOR

The Princess. *Now* those words don't sound so stupid. Now they're the only words imaginable. Except maybe angel. Or goddess....

Focus, genius. What the hell do I say? Not as if she speaks any English. Oh, well.

"Uh, your highness?" Stupid. "Princess!" She's still not even moving. "Azir Utto! Azir!" (Of course.) "I'm here to rescue you!"

Not a whisper, not a twitch. Great. Gonna have to carry her.

Wait.

Great—I'm going to get to carry her!

But can I actually even lift her? This dame must be six-four!

I slip one hand under her shoulders. Citrus mists into my nostrils like I'm peeling mandarin oranges—my head's vibrating, my skin's goosefleshed and tingling all over, I'm *panting*—

Slip a hand under her knees, spread my feet, lift from my legs.

How in the hell'm I gonna get her out of here? Not only is she heavy—a buxom six-foot-four, for god's sake—but goddamn if I'm not hobbled by the most powerful hard-on I can ever remember having. It's debilitating. Worse is that it's snaked through my soaking long johns like a snake caught in a screen door, as my dad used to say. Carrying her, I can't even adjust myself. If she spoke English, I could at least ask for a hand—

I stumble forwards, crunching myself at every step. Holding her this close, I can see what I didn't see in the vision: her skin... it's *striped*—like a zebra, or a tiger. Amazing. Her eyes are flickering underneath their lids, now opening..

Her lips are wet and dark like plums. Her voice, husky: "*Gliekhtâm gnâm... mötrilik.*"

No idea what it means, but just hearing it makes me smolder. *My hero? or I owe you everything? or I'll make you my prince?* Ask Thagó. *Gliekhtâm gnâm... mötrilik.* Gotta remember that. *Gliekhtâm gnâm... mötrilik.*

Get her to the stairwell—

FUCK—

Nearly snapped my goddamned knees slipping on the goddamned puddle floor. Moron! Good thing I didn't drop her and break her neck—that'd be brilliant. Knees feel like I've got nails piercing them. I pull her forward over my shoulder like a rolled rug. Good *god* she's heavy. And how many stairs have I got ahead of me? Four storeys' worth?

Breathe sharply, push up. Knees trembling, bracing myself against the walls. And she's mumbling again: *Gliekhtâm gnâm...*

Stumble forward. Already out of breath. Thagó, where in god's name are you? Can't wait.

Three-quarters of a flight of stairs... sub-level 3... chest's caving in....

Echoes—footfalls. Above? Below? *Thagó?*

I struggle to re-goggle with the hand under her neck, look up with my infravision goggles through the stairs. There's a ghost there.

I gamble, desperate: "Thagó! It's me!"

It stops.

It shouts. Another spectre floats behind it. And then another—and they descend towards me.

I drop the Princess, grab the egg in my pocket and hit the soft spot. The thing knocks me down like a goddamned cannonball.

Have I blown my own head off? My goggles are useless. Can't see the ghosts, my own hands, or anything but a faint shimmer.

Cramped, damn near crushed by the egg's steel-hard emergency shell. Wriggle around, trying to shift the Princess into my arms again.

Now I know where the glow's coming from. *It's from her face.*

Great. Erection's back. I could die right here inside this metal egg, and this is my body's brilliant plan to protect me—emergency blood flow. Do all Numan woman have this kind of effect?

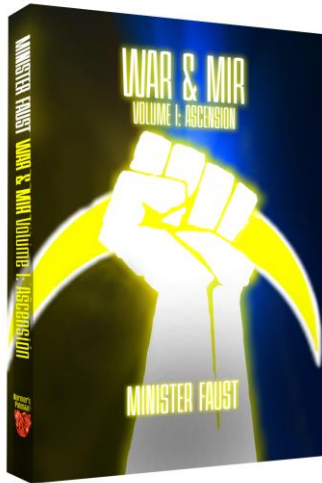
Egg walls pounding. Can those scuba-killers break through? Burn their way in? Maybe laser through it? Pounding. *Pounding.*

Shell's getting hot—how long can we breathe inside this thing? What if the outside catches on fire? Why can't I predict the goddamned future now, Mr. Thagó-knows-the-secrets-of-the-universe-but-he-can't-rescue-me-when-I-need-it-most?

POUNING—and then CRACKLING and SCREAMING—

—and then the egg shell falls away like an orange peel, and we're totally defenseless.

END OF EXCERPT



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