

# Summerlight

By  
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# Koen of Summer

“Incoming, seven life signs, in addition to smart-tech,” Dread growled in my implant. While wandering wildlife crossing over onto Ranch-land was not unusual, smart-tech accompanying them was.

I activated my implant. “Raiders,” I broadcast Ranch-wide as I strapped up. Raiders are the worst of the bad-guys, anarchists that delight in despoiling anything they can’t rape or murder. They multiply exponentially, with more of their wicked tribe arriving by the minute once they establish a beachhead—you have to stop them before that.

Navire joined me in the passageway and we trotted rapidly through the halls of Fort Lilith to where Katy the Sledge was waiting. Behind us, the defenses of Fort Lilith began shifting to siege-mode. It might have been an excess of caution, but these days I always erred on the side of security.

I had secrets.

Katy the Sledge was wearing her favorite battle-train; all purple and shiny and layered in dull, carbon-fiber bumpers that could bust through anything—Katy liked to keep her options open. As usual, she greeted us with smoking-hot music; she was playing a classic Strut with White-haired Jack on keyboards, East Gravtown style. Lotsa dancehall energy. It was very-fine.

Katy took off at high speed, as always. We crouched and held tightly onto the vibrating handles set in the floor as we

hurled through the tunnels beneath the crystal ranges of the Ranch.

That day, we rode a hell-bound train into battle, with sizzling Gravtown horn laying the beat. We rode to protect our home from the bad-guys, to create immersive battle-art.

We rode to fight the good fight.

When Katy screeched to a halt dramatically, (as usual), we stepped out into the smaller cross passageway. It was too narrow for Katy's battle-train to take us any further. I had made her promise not to rip her way into the hallway; she was pretty disappointed.

All dressed up and then couldn't get into the dance.

Sometimes life sucks when you're a teenager.

I touched my implant, shifting my Shadowsuit into full-recording-mode, sucking in all spectrum Signal. I now appeared only as a man-shaped black hole in the bright crystalline world of Summer. Light itself bent to me as I full-body recorded everything I experienced.

"The raiders have fully breached the Fort Medusa corridor, and are apparently looking for Control," Navire breathed in my implant. "I don't think these guys are ordinary raiders; they're too organized," she added.

"Why do you think that?" I asked.

"They've bypassed several easy targets already; seems as if they have a mission and goal. Not standard raider behavior. Might be pro's," she continued through my implant.

I felt a thrill flood me; such rich material to work with was rarer than you might think.

Navire was wearing a familiar hard-body crafted for battle, but at the same time she also rode my implant,

whispering new-data on the fringes of my perception. The Children of Electron can do that.

We heard them before we could see them. As we drew close, the raiders came to an uneven stop in front of us, leering and mocking. Kinda noisy for pros; seemed we weren't very scary. Navire painted pink tutus and clown noses on them through my implant.

Guess it went both ways.

It never occurred to the bad-guys that there was a reason why only two of us showed up; truth was, one of us was only backup. I sighed. Not the sharpest knives in the box.

Navire whispered in my implant not to be disappointed, that there were sure to be some surprises and lotsa Boom. I slung her a micro-grin. It was good to have friends.

The leader was the loud one in the middle of the pack, surrounded by other bad-guys in all kinda battle dress. Of course, they were heavily strapped, with lotsa Boom and no shortage of pointy-things. They were also clustered too close together; they either had too much faith in their armor, or simply weren't used to people fighting back.

Definitely not pros, at least not of our caliber.

In front were two massive Weiss hard-bodies somebody salvaged from a defunct deadShip. I knew it was defunct because the Weiss weren't around anymore. To the best of my knowledge, their civilization was completely extinct. They had left no mark on the galaxy except for a handful of strange artifacts known only for the savagery of their weapons and an inability to turn to the side with any speed worthy of modern combat. I was guessing these clowns were the frontal attack kinda guys.

At this point I was almost completely non-verbal, and it was hard to process even linear new-data. I was almost fully immersed in the Now, and peripheral concerns like language had sloughed away, leaving me in a timeless state of base reality. I was profoundly aware of everything around me, without visually focusing on any one thing as I accelerated to my left. When I reached the corridor wall, I rebounded to close in on the nearest hulking hard-body's right side. I snapped my nine-sectional corrosive whip under its main guns as they trailed just behind me in silver and orange Boom. It stopped firing and began to list to the side as I accelerated on past it.

I am very hard to track in full-recording-mode.

Navire spun up the other side of the corridor, auto-shotguns pouring heavy H<sub>2</sub>O across the bottom half of the second archaic monstrosity. As it fell, it began to twist slowly (to me) to follow Navire in a hailstorm of ceramic/metal projectiles from a massive hand cannon clutched in one hand.

How quaint.

It also managed to take out two of its own slower comrades in thunder and fire before Navire removed its belly with a slap-grenade. (That's where the logics are).

Despite Navire's encouragement, I was beginning to experience a bit of disappointment at the quality of my opponents. I fanned a crescent of implusive grenades across the tunnel above the remaining raiders. Two more fell, with what remained of their imploded forms cascading to the ground like a shower of glass shards. Navire was high tide, sweeping her opponents before her like the seventh wave, leaving nothing standing in her wake.

The three remaining bad-guys, (including the leader), separated automatically into a triangle with me at the center. They moved very well and I could tell that they had trained to fight as a unit.

I smiled. This was more like it.

I settled into the fighting stance of Lui Xing-yi, sinking deeper into the eternal Now in the same manner a stone drops through water and comes to rest in the quiet places.

Time crawled around me, and the peripheral noise and the concerns of my life fell from me in a sort of bright white light. I completely lost the ability to speak as my whole being sunk into the instinctual hindbrain's world of angles and counters.

I simply... was.

I felt no moral conscience, no second thoughts, or hesitations. There was only movement and counter, and I could perceive their embryonic moves in the posture of their bodies with absurd clarity.

That's the way it always begins: le Danse Macabre.

My right hand automatically tucked my steel whip back into its pocket under my left armpit. When the moment reached fullness I moved to my right, in the direction of the primary target (boss-guy), as if I was about to go after him. The bad-guys cautiously drew closer, spaced equidistantly apart.

I am hard to see in full-recording-mode, merely a black fissure in the world. Unfortunately, I wasn't actually invisible; the closer they came to me, the easier I was to see. I shifted my body and waited for them to take the bait. With painful slowness the other two moved to intercept. When they were finally close enough, I rotated ninety degrees and became

Rooster; unleashing a continuous Xing-yi Charge on the secondary target, 'big-guy' on my left. I engaged him with a collarbone split and knee break that flowed into a whirling continuous fist.

I passed over him and he never got back up.

Skinny-tall-guy moved to the center of my simple universe.

I rotated back to the bully on my other side and became Dragon, redirecting both of skinny-tall-guy's powerful strikes as well as a kick, without losing inertia. Then I crushed his throat. He fell down.

That left boss-guy, now the center of my uncomplicated universe. I moved towards center. Again, a collarbone split and knee break; (I never get tired of that). I finished with a graceful Crane hammer fist through his solar plexus and central vertebrae. In that moment I became Crane extended, in perfect stillness; motionless in that timeless instance of touching the Dark.

When I came back to myself, the world, as always, seemed different. Somehow newer, shinier; more filled with potential. Sometimes I wish I could see the world this way all the time, but as all things good and bad, it eventually passes.

Nothing lasts forever.

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After the clean-up, Navire and I went into the recording studio at Control, buried hundreds of kilometers deep beneath the massive crystal forests that made up the Ranch. There were hundreds of tracks to edit in addition to my first-person view the Shadowsuit had recorded. Navire's miniature sentry-gnats had also covered the fight from every angle. (Navire didn't care for surprises. She continuously



monitored the feed real-time for tactical new-data during a fight. Her threaded consciousness can handle the massive Signal load without breaking a sweat).

This was Navire's forte—to sculpt the data into something better than real.

My job was to create the raw new-data. Then, during the editing, I brought a certain recognition of pivotal moments, not to mention a cadence that defined the flow of the full-immersive fight recording. This was a first-person recording that was completely indistinguishable from 'reality' when played.

My fans could relive the experience over and over, and did. For a moment they became someone else: me, better than real with all the boring parts cut away.

We were in studio for four days.

What emerged in time was very-fine, if a bit limited by its length of forty-eight blinks.

The small piece quickly became very popular; then Parkar gave it ninety-four points, and we sold out in hours. We never made more than a few thousand numbered copies, so they were always in high demand.

## Koen of Summer

The Ranch is a very big place, and has four border forts at the points of the rough diamond shape that our island nation resembles.

It is covered with enormous crystal forests and rugged ranges that stands a few kilometers above the gaseous rivers that lie between the different Ranches and other city-states. Pretty much impassable, although we still got wandering critters once in a while. The river wastelands made for good security, especially with our two-kilometer high cliff overlooking the toxic waters.

There is a rhythm to my days on tour. I am a hands-on kinda guy or a control freak, depending on who you talk to. I just think that good stewardship of the land requires personal involvement. So when I wasn't away on a mission, I regularly went on long tours that covered every terra-formed Crystal and project in progress. It took about three weeks for the whole tour. I inspected, troubleshoot, and got a fresh feel for each of the stations along the way.

Katy the Sledge loved to travel, and usually pulled three or four cars for us to live in. After a long workday, dinner time was a party, where anyone might drop by—and usually did. This maintained the family ties with our scattered Ranch hands. We enjoyed celebrating the synergistic alchemy of good food, great conversation, and fine wine, beer or smoke—one of those, sometimes all.

These were ties that bind, and tended to made sure the big problems didn't sneak up on us and catch us by surprise. It may not have seemed like much at the time, but it was

these small pleasures and simple evenings that later nourished us through the dark times.

The four forts of the diamond were Fort Lilith, Fort Cerberus, Fort Charon, and Fort Medusa. That's where we were headed first, Fort Medusa.

We approached our second stop after Medusa Control, with Katy the Sledge sliding dramatically to a halt, as usual. I was glad that we were holding on to the large handles set into the floor in the first of Katy's passenger cars. She had timed the music so that the last notes lingered in the air as she slammed open her doors and liltingly announced that we had arrived at Crystal Four—The Bamboo forests.

I rose to my feet eagerly, Navire at my side. The Gardener, joining us enthusiastically, laid a hairy arm across our shoulders.

We'd all been looking forward to this stop.

This morning Navire was wearing a new hard-body I'd never seen before. She was rocking a slow motion tree-like nymph of immense grace and power. Impossible, blue-green iridescent body with branches for arms and myriad thick roots that slipped through the earth without resistance. Even her head was treelike, with enormous vermilion eyes and a mouth built for laughing. Navire sank her roots deep into the soil as we roamed, tasting its metallic salts and organic compounds in broad spectrum swatches.

Stepping out into the Crystal Four garden is like stepping out into the clear air and sunlight of a tropical planet's dawn, although that description doesn't begin to do it justice. It was so much more.

Overhead a large lightstorm was working its way across Far Summer. Violet and bronzed straw surged across the sky

in slow motion combat. The wastelands separating the island-nations of Far Summer stood out as giant blue/white fractures in the sky. From here, they looked like enormous glowing cracks in the world.

That was, of course, how the light got in.

The interior of the fifteen-kilometer long crystal had been completely hollowed out, leaving a quarter of a kilometer of thick crystal on all sides. All surfaces of the huge crystal had been polished to extreme clarity. We were bathed by vintage light cascading down in undulating waves. The overall impression was almost overwhelming in its beauty.

Then you saw the bamboo forest.

The tall lean bamboo trunks were clustered in areas that at first seemed to be separated by color. The old warriors leaned protectively over shorter, more diverse groups of work-horse bamboo. Patches of brilliant white reflective grasses interrupted the ground between clusters. It was beautiful and timeless and somehow haunting.

Directly in front of us a broad rough path, built of salvaged ship hull fragments embedded in scrubber-moss, snake-walked into the swaying forest. It had an organic/metallic mélange going on: very Hive, very Auntie Tao.

As we got deeper, the quality of the light in the forest grew noticeably richer with the organic reflections, and gained a golden hue with light turquoise highlights. The canopy was blushing purple behind the green.

Navire and I and the Gardener strolled comfortably through the forest. As we walked, Navire painted an analytical new-data flow of Crystal Four's stats through my implant. It appeared as a carmine waterfall of new-data in my right eye's peripheral vision. The coral contrasted nicely

with the rich bamboo background; Navire's artistic side was showing.

The Gardener passionately shaped verbal new-data about the forest into concise word-pictures that spoke richly of the land and its underlying ecosystem. He wanted to import a species of tree-frogs, but was having difficulty finding a proper niche for them. He wouldn't introduce them unless they fit just right. I told him we had plenty of crystals and he chuckled. Said it seemed indulgent, but didn't say no. We'd find a place for his singing tree frogs in time.

The trail slowly worked its way uphill.

A gentle breeze wafted through the forest, carrying rich, organic scents of minty chlorophyll and pungent loam. The breeze traveled down from Up-Crystal to play the wood winds in a weaving pattern as old as time. Navire slow danced to its tune, sliding frictionless through the deep, organic-rich soil.

It was a good morning.

After walking long enough all data became old-data—Man wasn't meant to sit down at desks all day and be carried everywhere by g. I had attempted to achieve a balance at the Ranch. We walked a lot of places by design. It gives you time to think, and your body needs it to stay in fighting trim. Oh, some Ranchers stay buried like a tick in their Control for years, but eventually all old-data gets purged, including Ranchers. You stop moving, you start dying. I learned that when I was very young. Long story.

You know the walk is just right when sweat breaks out across your forehead, but hasn't got in your eyes yet. About that time, we came around a corner and saw it. Constructed entirely of the bamboo and the plant fibers grown around it,

the simple-to-the-point-of-elegant open air structure was a masterwork of renewable engineering. Almost Hive.

It was a brewery fully staffed by the E.

I stumbled upon the E, fighting in an obscure war halfway across the galaxy in a place called Amber. What had begun with a long-missing regent had degenerated into a Machiavellian nightmare of siblings consumed with 'climbing to the big chair'. The battle had lost all semblance of honor. When my prince was captured and blinded, we scattered, running for our lives. When I looked around on my way out, the only warriors I still had any respect for were a Ronin tribe of small, hairy mammals called the E. (And g, of course). I offered them a ride out, and we escaped as the redoubt was being brought down around us by heavy weapons fire.

That was one bad day. Still wake up in the night sometimes.

But that's another story.

The E were a lost cast-away crew who had finally given up looking for Old-Home after a century or thereabouts. Decided it was time to stop wandering around and find a New-Home. They were with us in those heady, early days of building the Ranch. We worked out a deal that made everyone happy, and ended up creating a New-Home together; and we were just getting started. The Ranch has lotsa elbow room.

They work together extremely well, flowing in a communal consciousness that raised efficiency to an art form. If a bit loud, with everyone talking at the same time. Chaotic, but effective.

And they worked for beer.

Admittedly prodigious amounts of it.

And it had to be *good* beer.

The E stand half a meter tall, and are covered everywhere in short velvety fur the color of cinnamon. Two arms, two legs, one head. They were adrenaline junkies and entirely fearless. The more dangerous, the more they liked it. This made them favored shock troops among the knowledgeable.

Normally, they wore extensive battle harnesses that covered most of their body, with the odd tuft of cinnamon fur sticking out here and there. They favored large (for them) knives or short swords of high carbon meteor-iron. Assorted pointy-things, but the emphasis was on things-that-slash. Lotsa straight razors. Not to mention Scimitars, and something that reminded me of primitive Kukri. Long and intermediate range Boom. Salvage tools. Anti-personnel mines. Blowguns and toxic darts. The usual.

The long and short of it is; the E made very good friends, and bad enemies.

Luckily, we were in the favored friend category.

Oh, and they were essentially indistinguishable from each other. That wasn't as bad as it sounded. They traveled everywhere in constantly changing groups; you never saw just one E. You got used to it after a while, and it helped that they were voracious gossips. Eventually you ended up addressing them as the same person, as if they remembered your last conversation. And they did, g. Gossip mutated a bit as it was passed from E to E; extended conversations with them entered surreal territory rapidly. Still, it worked, after a fashion. Got the job done, and beers all round. Lotsa beer.

In fact, during the early days, our trade balance with Gravtown quickly grew out of balance due to the prodigious

capacity for fine ale the E embodied. I had to find a better solution for our trade imbalance before our \$cred rating went completely to hell. It was the import costs that was the monster in the hen house.

That was how we got into the brewing business.

Turns out that the E not only have very high standards for the barley nectar, but they also make very-fine beer. I guess they got tired of relying on other people to produce acceptable brew, and applied their high standard to production and aging of fine ale in all its glorious manifestations.

Over the years as the E wandered, lost in the ever-changing Chaos Sea, (always looking for the way home), they adapted and incorporated local practices and new innovations they came across. Substituting local ingredients that were widely available. In the quiet years they even supported the tribe by brewing great beer. Despite the brew skills, they remained a warrior culture. I was proud to fight by the E's side, or drink, for that matter.

The Gardener had studied the matter, consulting with the E brew-masters, and trading seeds with his fellow Gardeners in the colonies. Eventually he planted part of Crystal Four with five and seven row John Barleycorn. Then he planted over sixty rare and downright arcane hop varieties. The Gardener originally expected the E to choose a handful of strains for use, and move the rest to cold storage until they could be sold.

Turns out the E are *very* good brewers. Used over thirty different hops in their Imperial IPA, and the flavors never muddled; they layered. One on top of the other. It was glorious.

Which brings me to now.



Here I was, all thirsty and hot, walking up to an E brewery in the middle of a towering bamboo forest hanging in the sky, cascaded by waves of vintage g.

We stepped inside and eased up to the polished bamboo bar. We were surrounded on three sides by deep forest. It was a riot in celebration of life; turquoise Verde, and bone parchment splashes slashed by sunlight flowing down like honey on the pungent air. The shade was cool on my skin. On our fourth side, a small group of E were pouring draft Gold Ale and a hop-monster they called Sister Scythe (The E usually giggled when they said it—seemed to be some obscure off-color joke only the E understand).

On stage, a Stomp band was deep into its afternoon practice; they kept stopping and restarting. At first it was irritating. The lead horn wouldn't let them progress further until they had the first part down. Repetition after repetition until it began to have a kinda rhythm to it, with the pause always on the beat. The gradual progression of the piece g crept down the back stairs and grew bolder, louder with each new step. You just knew it was up to something bad.

The torch singer was beautiful; she had the elongated body of a being that had never known planetary gravity growing up. She was a bad-siren-girl, with exotic blades and tools of mayhem layered all over. She belted out song with low-pitched attitude, promising trouble of the feminine type, the kinda trouble that men should know better than to get too near. Her eyes met mine in an invitation as old as time; all knowing and blatant as hell. I inhaled deeply and Navire suddenly focused on me with the gift of discernment.

I yanked my attention away from the bad-siren-girl with an almost audible snap.

Then I tossed a micro-grimace of self-abasement leavened with tarnished innocence to Navire, and got back to what I was doing. The Gardener smiled sympathetically at me, as old friends will do in these situations. Navire seemed amused by the whole thing.

I ordered the Sister Scythe all round. Everyone smiled or snickered as expected even if we didn't exactly know why it was funny. It was like that.

The first round was lugged over by small groups of chattering E. It was served in tall frosted goblets that were sure to keep you busy for a while. Everybody grinned. I took a long, slow pull off the sweating amber nectar.

It was very-fine. A toffee, whiskey barrel's caramelized vanilla. IBU near threshold. So rich and dense that you wanted to slice off a piece and chew on it a while. Very refreshing, with just the right amount of complex flavor profiles. You didn't feel obligated to fall down and worship it. Just... enjoy. It was true-yummy.

I slowly set the tall crystal glass back on the bar and looked around in satisfaction. After a disdainful glance at the torch singer Navire smiled back, a mouse of froth left on her upper lip. It quickly vanished, and we both pretended we hadn't seen anything.

The g filtered down through the purple bamboo's swaying heights. It streamed in gold/emerald ribbons, slicing through the softer, azure shade. A gentle breeze bathed us in jasmine and citrus hops. Cold Beer. Good tunes. Fine company. Beautiful surroundings. It was turning out to be my kinda day.

I ordered another round.

The Stomp band made it all the way through the new piece, and it was tight. Bad-siren-girl slung me a wet kiss

and I looked the other way. Some guys can't help stopping to smell the roses on the way home. But I had a flower of startling beauty beside me and wasn't even a little tempted by lesser blooms.

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The days shuffled past as we toured the Fort's Crystal gardens; a water garden filled with lilies and blue lotus and trout. A budding temperate rainforest still under construction. An orchard of key lime and mango trees. And the newest; Bayou, complete with delicious Umami river eels and cypress knees beyond counting.

Each massive Crystal had been hollowed out, polished to optical quality, and planted with a different eco-system. Because the Crystals thrust out of the surface of Summer at different angles, each terrain had a grade of seven to forty-two percent.

This made for good hiking, and the water always chuckled musically downstream. There was a wealth of waterfalls, with high-arching bamboo bridges leading to switchbacks and private niches with fabulous views. A couple of E breweries; almost always remote. Ripe fruit you could eat right off the branch, juicy and dripping with sweet flavors. The minerals tainted the crystals in delicate hues, adding faint nuances to the g as it passed through.

Every day we covered a different Crystal, unless something needed my attention for a while. I don't mind getting dirty and breaking a sweat. It was good, honest work. Good kinda tired at the end of the day. I slept like a baby most nights. These were the fine days; the kinda days you remember in feelings more than visuals. Times when the survival of our civilization was wasn't in doubt. Innocent

pleasures to be remembered well, later out there in the Dark.

We usually spent about four or five days at each of the Forts when we were on tour. Three days working, then one off; four-part beat made for good rhythm. It seldom got boring, and we tried to leave the gardens for the better. You know; worked hard and had fun.

The Ranch got in your blood after a while, and we were all better for it. It was good to finally have a Home after all those years of wandering. Something worth fighting for tends to bring out the best in us.

When we headed to Fort Cerberus, Katy the Sledge was obsessing on classic Stomp, playing live-jam from the masters; (so few left; they that burn brightest burn fastest). By the time we had worked our way through the Fort Cerberus Crystals, a week had passed and we had covered the roots from g Harlem colony, to the Neo-tune and early Strut cycles. Katy has impeccable taste in music. Still a little room to grow in some other areas, but I had nothing but faith in her. Teenagers change daily, and you had to pay attention or you'd miss something vital. Most days I got it right.

I like the kitchen and dining rooms at Fort Cerberus best. Tonight Katy the Sledge and the Gardener were cooking dinner, and everyone was getting together for a long, wonderful night of great wine, good food, and long conversations of the kind you seldom found anywhere else.

Not that we got out much.

Navire was wearing a new hard-body. She was styling a punk street-fighter girl with lotsa tattoos and asymmetrical anime-girl hair in a shining lavender that burned your eyes if you stared at it too long. Worn, high quality body armor and

boots that were born to kick ass. Kinda dark mahogany/gold motif going on. Dual Wing-g butterfly swords tucked in here and there, along with a surprising number of pointy-things within easy reach. Smudge across one cheek, accenting citrine topaz eyes. Tonight she was a bad-girl with a soft heart, a tarnished angel gone human. She was wearing a familiar lopsided grin, and it seemed like too long since I saw her.

I shined her an idiot grin with a bit of wicked tucked in around the corners. Her eyes widened for a micro-blink before she smiled back, shining like the sky on a hot Summer's day.

Katy the Sledge, (who absolutely loved trying on new bodies like some kinda deranged fashionista), was wearing a leopard-girl—a jaguar, if I was correct.

She was dressed in an intricate rig that covered her body in weapons and tools and all kinda Boom. Her spotted fur webbed her body under everything, and she was sporting six centimeter black retractable claws that clicked the floor in a strident beat. She looked very grown up tonight.

Dread was wearing a humanoid hard-body for once, dressed as a very urban young man of means and good taste. Of course, he was still strapped from here 'to the black', I mean, Dread was still Dread, no matter which body he wore to dinner.

But tonight he was dressed in fine golden linen and bronzed leather with shining ebony skin (never mind the bits of pointy-things and Boom tucked here and there). It was a good look for him. Maybe he'd even smile.

Pasteur was slowly making the rounds, with lotsa shoulder slaps and quiet smile. His ursine body was thick

and immensely strong. Short thick fur rioted in red earth colors all over the place. His tooled leather (some scaled reptilian type), harness was strapped with lotsa blades and a wealth of Boom.

Somehow, conversations with the warrior monk always had a layered complexity that rang true and made you ponder things beyond your ken. He had a paternal flavor that made you feel safe if you needed that, and a sense of humor that was both salt and pepper.

The Gardener was moving quickly, but fluidly as he and Katy balanced the timing of the various dishes. They were cooking so that the dishes would arrive at the table together in a synergistic harmony of flavors and textures. The aromas pouring forth were amazing.

Dread opened up a Champagne from Nouveau Reims, a pinot-dominated, finely tuned magus work of rainier cherries and brioche dripping with butter and drizzled in a delicate acidity that made your taste buds tingle. Everything was wrapped up in a small bubble deluge of nose tickling mousse that was delightful. It was very-fine.

First course was a florescent pink, chilled borscht drizzled with sour cream and dried Moro chilies sprinkled generously across everything. The Gardener's innocent beets had been living happily in the rich soil of Crystal Garden Three just a few hours ago. Now they were a delicious pleasure to consume. Sigh.

At least they ended well. (I know. But guy humor seasons my days with these absurdist thoughts. Small smiles are under-rated).

The rich borscht was accompanied by rounds of hot, fresh-baked pizza g flatbread finished with course-ground black-sea salt and olive oil liberally splashed around. Hot and

cold paired with a g wine that comfortably shared the stage without trying to take over. Balance was good.

We sat at a large, comfortable curved table set in a half-circle around Fort Cerberus's central kitchen/alchemical station, chatting and watching the action. We could all comfortably see everything (and each other) as the Gardener skillfully juggled culinary tasks in teamwork with Katy the Sledge. They danced through the work to the beat of a Strut number straight outa Gravtown. Oldtown dancehall tune. Neo-classic horns ushered in the moment. Bawdy piano hammered out the melody to drums bonged by a madman guzzling bootleg absinthe. Couldn't sit still in the presence of that. Just couldn't.

We didn't.

When we sat back down, all sweaty and smiling, the next course was just being served. Crystal Thirteen Ocean prawns had been blanched in a lime juice/serrano chile bath, then vacuum chilled at the perfect doneness. Mounds of split limes, and pulped horseradish punctuated with ramekins of hot sauce and alabaster sea salt covered the rustic platters filling the table. Piles of warm damp cotton napkins of generous proportions. And right in the center of the table was a small mountain range, consisting of steaming fresh corn, baby red potatoes, Turin artichokes (Chrystal Three), and the aforementioned spotted prawns.

How do you eat a mountain? Answer: messily, with lotsa napkins and Vino Albarino in the big bottles. One bite at a time.

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I first met the Gardener on the back-side side of nowhere, out there in the dark places. Navire and I were

running a freshly salvaged Residential space station we were planning on flipping, to generate \$creds for a Ranch project. The Gardener built an oxygen-generating Garden outa scrap and latrine biologicals. He began with nothing but passion and hard work, soon he was feeding us all. We got to know each other pretty well. Navire liked him and I knew him to be a man of honor. He stood about a meter and a half tall, with long arms tipped by claws built for digging. He had limpid black eyes large enough for me to suspect his original world was low-light. He had longish chocolate fur which was usually well groomed, and he smelled really good. I know that sounds kinda funny, but constantly growing aromatic plants had saturated his scent in juniper and blood oranges. Sometimes tarkuna, too. He was peaceful, easy to hang with in comfortable silence; a sign of good people everywhere.

Eventually we sold out, and moved on. I offered him a home at my new Ranch on my way out. We told him that we had gardens to tend, in a fabled place where the sun always shined and everything thrived with hybrid vigor. Entire eco-systems to design and build. A Home in paradise. Family.

He smiled that rare but true one, and came with us. We worked hard, started a Home with the E, Smitty, the Gardener, Navire, and me. Everybody was happy. Life had a simple purpose to it. I slept well in those long days.

We never discussed my art, or missions, because that wasn't the kind of thing the Gardener found interesting or important. But he could talk all day about the glories of a copper-based plant system vs. a chlorophyll eco-system. My eyes would eventually glaze over and I'd move on, just to stay awake. Didn't mean we weren't friends.

I'm afraid that I was also responsible for creating a world class wine snob that strapped up with ethereal memory in



full g\* quality. Sight, nose, mouth, back-nose, throat, finish. The works.

I had started it all one evening after work when I introduced the Gardener to the wonders of fermented grapes. Garnacha, I think. Several bottles with tapas scattered through the evening lent a certain cadence to that night. He just couldn't get over the fact that a human developed such a sublime thing. See, his people had never even thought of fermentation. Deliberately drinking something spoiled was a bad idea. Crazy. Now the Gardener had abruptly become aware of a huge blind spot in his g. H didn't like it at all. Being ignorant in such an art was simply unacceptable for a Gardener. Fortunately, this was curable, and the Gardener was nothing if not a consummate professional. He dove into the study of the Vine a like a broke pearl diver.

He lived, drank, and loved the Vine.

Sometimes these days you got the impression that he thought wine was wasted on most humans, present company excluded. (I learned a lot about wine during that time, and we were gradually amassing a collection of nice wine from odd corners of the galaxy). Eventually he began to bug me for rare genetic samples of the Vine, and began collecting g\* tastings of all the fine wines. This eventually became a high usage of resources, aka expensive. But it balanced overall, so I didn't say anything.

Besides, I enjoyed the g\* tastings quite a bit as well.

After all, he had over thirty crystals about fifteen kilometers long and six kilometers wide to fill with vegetative life and bio-environments. And now he knew exactly where to start. I just made sure to provide diverse enough genetic

samples of g AE in all its glories and manifestations. This made him happy and kept him in the gardens.

We both got more done that way.

# The Prince

Prince g waited for exactly the right moment to leave the confines of the royal palace; timing was never a problem when the possibilities spread out before you like a map you could read in your sleep. The prince was very handsome and no longer a child, as of yesterday. While he was still young, his painful gauntlet was over; he was even capable of breeding now. The court still regarded him as a teenager in the long-lived life cycle of his kind, but he knew he was more. He was a seer of the first water, a future leader who would walk the fabled golden path through the myriad possible futures into the light. The golden path was much more difficult than the other possible futures, but in the end it would bring millions through the darkness. Prince g knew he was destined to save uncounted lives and even entire civilizations. It was clear that walking the golden path meant grave personal danger, and bad odds all around.

Even with all his advantages, g wasn't assured of success. However, this didn't bother the prince. He could see it all clearly, even if he and his race were physically blind. That was of little meaning, because the royal line could still perceive light, electric and magnetic fields, entropy and gravitational waves; and, well, all the possible paths that lay down that road.

To be a seer was both a burden and a gift, and a great responsibility. He had heard that so many times growing up that it had become a null sound, without meaning or value, a boring drone of white noise from the mouths of his

trainers. His teachers and the royal tattoo artist-priests, (who had painfully inked his long elegant body since the age of four), had drilled this into him. Literally.

Princes and princesses of the royal line are not happy children. They are neither giggly nor prone to boisterous play and pranks. Oh, they laugh or smile sometimes, but never as wholeheartedly as the other children. The trade-off for foreknowledge is a dampening of happiness. All the adults say so. Repeatedly. The elders believe this is necessary to produce a seer of the first water, and have adapted the tools of the artist-priests to produce a precise level of pain. Regular, extremely painful experiences every day, every month, every cycle throw a damper over life. With great power comes great pain. They said that a lot, too.

Sometimes Anodos wondered what it would be like if he were a commoner, to be happy just because it was a sunny day or something. He couldn't really visualize it, and none of the paths came from there. It was mystifying.

There is something in this ritual tattooing of genetic lineage, mystical protection glyphs, and piercing of a predilections' nature, that is physiologically arduous. Only a few of the royal line survive to adulthood. Adult females are capable of producing a handful of eggs every six cycles. Each stage of the development of the young shaves off a few of the clutch; some entire hatchings never make it to adulthood at all. Anodos was the last surviving royal heir of his. Now the intrigues of court awaited; another even more deadly gauntlet to survive.

Anodos knew that he was an awesome sight—females had been known to faint upon seeing the full majesty of the giant salamander's crimson spotted body. He had grown to young adult size: over six meters from nose to tail, and

would continue to slowly grow throughout his hopefully long life. Every centimeter of his skin was heavily inked with rare compounds known to enhance clairvoyance and luck. Every symbol had meaning millennia old. Even his lineage was laid out in meter after meter of tiny script. There were no pretenders to the throne among his people. The process of inking took decades of painstaking work and resources few could afford. A prince of the line in all his glory was unmistakable.

That was the problem.

Once upon a time it was traditional for the young newly-adult princes and princesses to embark upon an adventure, out there in the uncivilized wastelands of the frontier. They learned to walk the futures in a harsh classroom; very few ever returned to take their place in the monarchy. Those that did return were a force to be reckoned with and usually ended up ruling the empire.

This practice had fallen out of favor centuries ago, and the monarchy was weaker for it. These days' intrigue and duels accounted for the majority of deaths among the nobility. The royal court's older scions were well-known for arranging the unpleasant endings of potential rivals that might one day compete for the throne.

It was all about the throne, in the end. A royal scion that had survived the life in court was extremely dangerous; they had been blooded in duels fought with potential futures and strategic paths blazing.

Only the most dangerous seers thrived.

Anodos knew he was inexperienced, and the futures before him dwindled and darkened should he tarry in the

only home he had ever known. The golden path lead elsewhere anyway, and he was destined to follow it. To linger was to invite death, and that was how he came about to be sneaking out of the palace, accompanied by only two bodyguards: the Stones that Speak.

The Stones that Speak had been his personal guard since he could remember. They had saved Anodos' life many times over the years. Their loyalty was unquestioned. The Stones were massive; over twenty meters long and powerfully built for battle. Their warrior tattoo's had infused and toughened their skin into a flexible armor that deflected most anything. They were quick too, unexpectedly so. And their bite was worse than their bark. Much worse.

The little-used hallway they found themselves in was quite dusty. The young prince had never been in a place like this. It was dirty, something he had only heard of. It was unexpectedly exhilarating. Eventually the Stones that Speak halted in front of an inlaid stone mosaic. It took up an entire section of the wall, and depicted an ancient battle between some long dead king and a horde of pale daemons on their spindly two legs and bony arms swinging unfamiliar weapons. They were quite ugly, and the royal warrior was cutting large swathes through the tiny figures with tail and claw. Anodos thought it was boring, and impatiently twitched his tail. This must be a very old section of the palace. Nobody did mosaics anymore. What were they waiting for?

One of the Stones that Speak delicately pressed a series of inlaid stones with a dark finger; suddenly the entire mosaic shuddered and moved up into the ceiling, exposing a dark tunnel that slanted down. A cool breeze rose from the opening carrying the scent of wet stone and mesquite and

something long dead. One of the Stones that Speak rotated his enormous head back to calmly consider the prince.

Anodos hesitated for a moment; the Golden Path beckoned, but he had never actually been outside the palace before. He felt balanced on the knife edge of fate; behind him was inevitable death by intrigue. Ahead, the Golden Path threaded through a great abyss, eventually emerging into the light only he could see. After a moment Anodos smiled to himself, and plunged forward into the future.

An hour later they emerged into a red stone gully shaded by twisted burgundy mesquite and divided by a creek that sang softly as it danced its way among the sand and boulders. Harsh sunlight sliced through the squat trees in spears of bright heat.

The prince wasn't used to being hot and didn't like it much. There wasn't enough room to bath his pampered skin, but Anodos was able to splash his sizable head and belly. The Stones that Speak didn't seem to need a break, dividing to scout the immediate area for threats.

"It's time to move on, the smuggler's ship waits for no one," one of the Stones said.

"I'm ready," the young prince stated bravely, "Let's go." The future paths narrowed quite a bit here; in some he died by ambush, in others from exposure, his skin peeling badly from the harsh sun and wind.

Anodos walked the most comfortable of the paths, accompanied by his ever-present bodyguards. It took a long time to reach the landing spot where the off-worlders waited. His skin was still too dry for comfort but he didn't complain; princes of the royal line had dignity. All his teachers said so. The Stones that Speak seemed

invulnerable to discomfort, and drew near to closely flank him as they approached the strange creatures.

The aliens stood tall, on two thick legs and had two long, loosely jointed arms tipped with long, sharp claws. They had unattractive noses that poked bluntly out of their flat faces, and small mouths that didn't look like they could do much damage in a fight. They had strange artifacts and gleaming knives strapped all over their battle harnesses. Tufts of dull blond fibers stuck out here and there; he thought it was called hair or fur. Anodos found it to be quite ugly, and his visions hadn't included the dank smell wafting off the whispering smugglers, either. The smelly aliens stared at him, occasionally rumbling to each other without taking their eyes off him. He understood their awe; a prince of the royal line was magnificent in appearance. Most commoners go their whole life without even a glimpse of royalty.

One of the Stones that Speak made his way up to the small group of aliens, and reached into one of his concealed flesh-pockets, pulling out a small pouch. The aliens seemed nervous, and several fondled well-worn artifacts of dull metal or the sharp things on their harnesses. The Stone that Speaks raised his massive head four meters high; towering over them, motionless as only Anodos' people could be. A hint of pungent salt crept into the scent pouring off the odd-looking creatures. Behind them stood a disreputable lander with a few non-essential pieces missing, and burn marks in all the wrong places.

Anodos could see a few paths that lead to conflict and the alien's death, but in those futures he died shortly thereafter. Most led to the lander and a fourteen-kilometer long liveShip in orbit around his world. He took three steps forward, and two to the left, settling into the best of the



futures available. The off-worlders seemed to relax a bit now that he was in full view.

The largest of the aliens spilled the pouch's contents into his paw, rumbling with approval at the sparkling nodules. Several of the other creatures crowded around, focused on the treasure, but two of the aliens remained on alert in their guard positions. Anodos approved. This boded well; as they followed the Golden Path in search of lost Summer, there were going to be a few close-calls. Maybe more than a few. Well-trained servants could make all the difference in the days to come. The Pirates of Thunder didn't know they were now in the service of the royal heir. This was just a quick side job for them to raise \$cred; they had their own desperate mission.

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The ship was vast, maybe larger than the palace complex itself, although he hadn't thought that was possible. The broad corridor they were in stretched almost the entire fourteen-kilometer length of the ship. One of the Stones that Speak was in front of the young prince, methodically jogging along—the salamander equivalent of jogging, more like waddling sideways, not pretty but it covered ground amazingly fast for such a massive body. Anodos had to hurry to keep from getting run over by the Stone that Speaks behind him. The young prince was tired, and wanted a bath but the Stones insisted that he train for the dangerous trip ahead. He tried to explain that he could see trouble coming and didn't need all this exercise. They just looked at him with serene confidence and upped the pace again. He stumbled and kept up, but he was breathing in a very undignified manner. Neither of the bodyguards seemed to be

uncomfortable, radiating a solidity normally only found in boulders and mountains. Thus the name.

They were called the 'Stones who Speak' for a number of reasons.

When they wished, the Stones could become so motionless that they faded into the background visually. Specially inked warrior tattoos helped with that. They physically loomed over the smaller, younger people of their race in the same way a wall or monolith did. The Stones that Speak rarely did—this lent a weight to their sparse words on the rare occasions they did speak.

The young prince made it to the top without getting run over by one of the Stones that Speak. That was a first.

Of course, he had known this would happen today.

They were in a large cargo hold of the massive colony ship known as Thunder, one that was used to hanger the ship's landing craft. They were climbing the walls to build his muscles and speed. It was working. At first he had only been able to climb five or six meters high. When he stopped, unable or maybe unwilling to go further, the Stone that Speaks below him had nose-butted his rear upwards, pushing him further up than the young prince had felt comfortable going. Prince Anodos was shocked the first time this happened; back home in the palace you could be put to death for touching royalty. Not to mention offending their dignity. Of course, back home he'd probably be dead by now, a victim of ruthless court intrigue. The young prince simply hadn't been paying much attention to the futures spread out before him, secure in the care of the Stones. They were in a flying fortress far from anything, tearing through deep space. What could happen?

Apparently more than he realized. He vowed to be more aware of his surroundings in the future, of the paths laid out before him. To keep his eyes on the Golden Path. As he rested at the very top, some eighty meters above the deck, Anodos felt the simple satisfaction of athletic accomplishment. This was not something he was familiar with; princes seldom expend much energy on mere physical tasks. Dignity and all that. He found that he liked the feeling.

The hard exercise also had another effect. He was beginning to automatically select the best short-term outcome of the futures thrown at him with fire hose intensity. Always before, the sheer complexity of the paths ahead took all his concentration. Now, with his subconscious taking over the minor first steps of his path, he was able to see ahead much further. Instead of minutes into the future, he could sometimes make out the future paths hours ahead. This was much different than the moment of his Awakening, when he had seen the Golden Path laid out across the cycles in all its complexity, all at once. That shining experience was burned forever into his heart. The details had faded over the past three cycles, but the emotions he felt, and the drive to walk it remained as strong as ever. He would help lead millions of people through the coming darkness, into the light. He did remember that the Golden Path truly began in an inside-out world.

A legendary place known as Summer.

*End of sample*