

Summerlight

By
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ISBN: 978-1-937046-09-5

“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 H₂O 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 implosive 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.

*

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.

2—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 liltily 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