

Constelleanor Chronicles

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This is a work of (science) fiction. Any references to historical events, real people or real places are used fictitiously.

www.constelleanor.com

To my first and Internet readers

“It is a human need to be told stories. The more we are governed by idiots and have no control over our destinies, the more we need to tell stories to each other about who we are, why we are, where we come from and what might be possible.”
(A Rickman)

Prelude

2560 BC. Caressing his prickly chin, the overseer's mind fuses into the grandiose view, his excitement aroused by the lack of sleep. The monumental feat for Pharaoh grows in perspective as, five hundred feet below, waged workers labour to hoist him and his three assistants and lovers to the apex of the grand Pyramid for inspection.

The real Architect is neither Pharaoh, nor him. Sentients rarely perceive Its hand. Nor can they contemplate the irony of what they have built on Its behalf. The construction has consumed generations of workers to edify an up-scaled tomb for the benefit of a few of their kind. The sacrifice of many for the celebration of the after-death, the repudiation of life for the perpetuation of Its reign and grandeur.

His name does not matter and will be soon forgotten. The distant echoes of the whips and chisels attain the suspended wooden raft that slides along the smooth surface of the white limestone and the remaining network of scaffolding, soon promised to dismantlement. They reach the top for him to admire the brilliance of his predecessors' calculations and precision.

Yet the utter complexity, the cosmic integration, the inhuman scale has less to do with the engineering prowess of using paleo-technic tools or the intervention of some extra-terrestrial third party, than the total subjugation of human energies, genius and maniacal focus to a greater purpose. An invisible Leviathan roams across the universe, bending spacetime in Its own accord, through those, weak of mind, strong of ego, who fall for Its lustre and thirst of life.

Less than 5,000 years later, the Beast, Time's ultimate challenger and closest thing to a narrator, keeps feeding off the mental diseases of evolved sentients, falls and rises through the destructions and creations these converted masses deployed and sacrificed to Nir* sake.

The more complex and the deeper Nir roots pervade a world or species, the more the gargantuan system Ne entails precipitate Nir own fall when Life forces strike back.

Neither is Ne impermeable to agents of chaos, independent operators with destinies of their own, counter-narratives of hope or subversion, who contest, destabilise, even topple Nir powerful grip over the entrapped minds, mesmerised masses and amaurotic elites.

The Beast recalls a line once said by a sentient called G. Marshall. "Facts don't change people's minds, only stories do." The Beast scowls.

Such a story, half virtual book, half videogame, loads its vision of the future and eclectic soundtrack with its remnants of distorted pop culture. The start of a space odyssey for a heteroclit crew on a heretic ship. The beginning of a darker cycle for the universe and spacefaring mankind, both riddled with demons and Shadows of their own making. The mere continuation of Life's ballet and combat with Nem—the Structure, the Leviathan, the Beast.

* Switch to a neutral gender pronoun. Ne/nem/nir/nirs/nemself

“The religion of the Megamachine demands wholesale human sacrifice to restore in negative form the missing dimension of life.”

“If mankind is to escape its programmed self-extinction, the God who saves us will not descend from the machine: he will rise up again in the human soul.”

– L Mumford

Level 0
Induction & Tutorial

L0.1 Constelleanor

“Spacecraft are meant to sail the stars, not seek the safety of dockyards or shiphavens.”

– *Constelleanor*

Any engineer or pilot would have told you Constelleanor was just an average ship, no key features, be it speed, armour, firepower, size, stealth, design or sleek looks, transpired or outshone by her excellence. Jack of all trades and master of none, no more.

First impressions conveyed deception, the master of all tricks. On the surface, nothing about her grabbed anyone’s attention, and this was the point. The uncertainty of deep space called for hidden strengths and deceit, luring into a confident, prejudiced, incorrect assessment, overlooking critical details to better surprise the unprepared. Lethal in its simplicity, the antic strategy—warfare based on deception—had won Constelleanor confrontations against stronger opponents.

A closer look revealed that, versatile, she did not suffer any particular weakness. She was not slow, even fast and quite manoeuvrable compared to her bulk, a solid hull, a wider range of weapons than a standard military cruiser; though, unlike military ships keen on exhibiting the power of their arsenal, her guns remained her dirty little secret until fired. She could quickly deploy several bespoke aerial and terrestrial armed vehicles and had a long-range travel autonomy that exceeded most intergalactic vessels.

She boasted her own on-board laboratory, astronomy and medical units, installed at the bow, away from the fake control tower that adorned most utilitarian ships, like her, and attracted the firepower of hostile vessels. The research facilities encircled the communication and hacking hub, command centre and its central two-storey holorrery, around which gravitated terraced circles and galleries and their ecosystems of blipping instrumentation and terminals.

Past the unique floating garden-library that nourished bodies and minds, a hybrid power generation coupled a perpetual core enclosed in the beam of the space-ark with several retractable stellar sails. The trans-blue and neon-orange sails were flanked between the hull, its patchwork of tan and sand green reinforced alloy, and the side corridors were bright orange. Such a power generator was an unusual feature, as most ships favoured cheaper fuels with fewer maintenance cycles.

The corridors led to Constelleanor's small, private, colourful fleet of fighters, utility ships and drones, populating the mini-spaceport's juggling platforms in a jungle of intertwining yellow or lime-green heavy lifting equipment, dancing in the frantic court-yard-pit between the vertical wharfs that hosted armouries, workshops and atolls of crates.

Above the choreographed mayhem of cranes, containers, narrow landings and departures, rocked by the auditive havoc of tools, loudspeakers, disputes and laughs, comfortably perched on the top of the stern, below the fake tower and embedded behind an also fake oversized thruster, stood, a lustrous, award-winning bar-restaurant. The bar-restaurant was

indispensable to maintaining high spirits, when so many mutinies had brought down mighty space leviathans due to the insipid food served in their grim canteens.

A crew of rare calibre and diverse horizons infused the sparkle of life into this heteroclitic theatre of the sentient comedy—men, women, clones, aliens, engineers, scientists, adventurers, hackers, technicians, doctors, pilots, psychonauts, infiltrators, soldiers and, of course, a chef. It was an *huis-clos* within the microcosmic raft, chafed by its surrounding immensity and bent to the will of omniscient spacetime.

Constelleonor's singularity and discrete, unassuming exterior had made her the archetypic exploration ship, also known as *explorex*. Many in the galaxy despised generalist vessels like her, lauding instead the wonders of highly specialised ships and flying platforms, lightning fast or sleek commercial shuttles, elite interceptors, fleet supercarrier or imposing combat dreadnoughts. Only seasoned captains and a handful of iconoclast shipbuilders acknowledged how specialisation had weakened these bespoke single-purpose units, and how vulnerable they were to asymmetric warfare and—supreme irony—to the *unexpected*, which was, with madness, the most likely encounter in the depth of space.

An *explorex*'s mandate—the finer term for “contracted sacrifice”—spanned across a variety of assignments, from recovery of precious artefacts, rescue missions, military or diplomatic assistance, to trade of illegal items and special cargo delivery, usually undesirable. The military or diplomatic assistance trips

were the least popular among Constelleanor's crew, as they were the ones that typically went wrong. Though she shied away from antipiracy campaigns, pirates had the unfortunate propensity to meddle in other people's business and hers. Her repeated success in tackling their natural nosiness had attracted the wrath of the Pirate Syndicate, along with a large bounty to any crew or—more likely—any fleet that would put an end to her journey.

Lost ships or non-responding outposts—or even worse, entire planets—in sectors that the officials or military forces preferred to avoid fell also under Constelleanor's scope of services. They had become an increasing and lucrative business segment, though the rare and weakened crews that made it back faced clients far less inclined to honour the terms of their original contract. Still, these risky investigations, together with the exploration of unknown systems topped her crew's list of preferred assignments.

Constelleanor bore another anomaly: She did not belong to anyone but herself and her crew, and as such entertained no affiliation to any world, planet, guild, army, chiefdom, race, specie, space tribe or corporations. Yet, running an independent and smooth operation—a blessing for business—came at a price. She could count on no one but herself in moments of great need or peril. Solidarity and support, frivolous in nature anyway, evaporated once things became minacious, and they did that more than often for explorexes.

Yet, before her rising, indebted to luck as much as her skills and crew, Constelleanor started at the bottom of the food chain, like many. She climbed

up on her own algorithmic remix of a *#Cosmic Girl*, the double helix ladders of chaos where the shallow dialectics of light-versus-dark and good-versus-evil would merge into the battled steps of Life and Structure. In the diamond-like process, mystic formation and polishing, Hadean paradises or luxuriant hells branded the penitent into an evolving shape, both the universe and virtues would have suffused, and through which most disintegrated, seared to dust.



Such a long way to go and such a slow, relentless burning to polish my understanding. How little I knew by then and how wrong I was. Most memories that marked my odyssey and my crew's peregrinations are not saved on the regular skydrives, they seem to float, intangible, in between logs and backups, where they respond to the authority of only colours, algorithmic melodies and powerful images, not to standard requests.

Looking back, I wonder, dangerous train of thoughts, whether the story was written on my behalf or whether I had a say. Had I forced those synchronicities to materialise, my destiny to unravel—eventful, proud, but not without mishaps and embarrassing blunders? If you don't start writing your own story, the choice of words may no longer be yours, and you may lose the chance of altering their magical power and direction.

Yet, I often doubt the significance of minor details or events, and remain astonished at how they drive such unexpected momentums. Law of unintended consequences, sheer luck or cogs, that—independent of my will—obey something much bigger? Endless debates over self-determinism or fate may not count, they say the journey matters more than the destination. My curious perplexity only deepens as experience grows. Joy and humbled contemplation too.



Human development shines again after a few historical mishaps and setbacks. Their established monotheisms have been an obstacle, but for its most erudite followers have cracked the eggshell for the Beast's resurrection. Their newly discovered science chases away superstition and fears of divine punishment. The time for expansion has come.

The Beast follows with interest the three caravels that depart the shores of Sevilla, fending the dark blue waters with ignorant temerity. The next expeditions come back with a lot more than just riches in spice, silver or gold: a much smaller world, ripe for the grabbing by the audacious and calculating minds.

Later in the year of 1587, on a jetty in Cádiz, the smell of fear joins the fragrance of rotten fish. A crate falls during the hurried unloading of a galleon, and spills its silver bars from the Peruvian mines on the dirty quay. Wonder and greed fill the dockyard workers' eyes, despite the thunder of the remote cannons.

But the Behemoth always looks beyond: the thirst for that same silver in China, connecting continents unknown to each other before, Spanish silver dollar as global currency; the cosmopolitan Manila and Mexico City; the funding of the raging battle and raiding expedition on Cádiz, that very day, arranged by London merchants. These are the precursory signs of the Beast's awakening and coming consolidation.

L0.2 Rezzo

“One in two hundred stars has habitable Earth-like planets surrounding it—in the galaxy, half a billion stars have Earth-like planets going around them—that’s huge, half a billion. So, when we look at the night sky, it makes sense that someone is looking back at us.”

—*M Kaku*

A constellation of billions of lights glittered in the vast atrium. Projected shapes, old memories and latest readings floated in the monumental flying temple.

Imposing figures attended the burst and ballet of psychic energies in holo-wells. Their prominent translucent tricorne-shaped dark green head—three times the size and brain capacity of a human encephalon—crowned the seven-and-a-half-feet-high colossi. The figures donned refined clothes of thinly weaved green, indigo and gold, which wafted down the instrumentation pits.

As technologically and spiritually advanced as they may be, the Rius were dying. It was a sombre irony they had come to accept, in striking comparison with the fragile and unsophisticated humans who were still very much alive and surviving, despite their home world’s barely breathable atmosphere, despite being besieged by a creation of their own which had turned against them, despite being doomed by their ignorance, thirst of power and lust. Before mankind could sink into the abyss of its own and programmed extinction, the Rius had stepped in.

The millennia-long anthropological study took place within this very ship. The observation of mankind's uncanny and contagious ability to create its own doom ignited fierce debates among the Riu scholars within the floating side-amphitheatres of the main control bay. In its centre, all memories and thoughts clustered into a large translucent sphere of psychic energy—a standard gateway used by psychonauts like the Rius to access etheric dimensions and share condensed knowledge.

From the turquoise uneven sun bubbling with psychal plasma emerged a certain vision of mankind that aggregated the maelstrom of human nature—high adaptability due to weak carbon composure, high conscientiousness potential, cognitive predispositions, transcendental capabilities, self-destructiveness and appetite to be easily fooled by its many inner shadows. Such primordial archetypes or images, human pith, were encapsulated in colourful holograms around the sphere of understandings¹.

The mapping of mankind's nascent collective consciousness formed a celestial multidimensional tapestry coalescing within the giant flying cathedral. Billions of facts turned into suspended, glowing mini-jellyfishes, illuminated the ethologic laboratory. It was in that space the Rius eventually concluded that the human, albeit biologically remote, was compatible with their own purposes: the salvation of their immense mnemonic culture and the protection of their dwindling numbers.

The Rius were well aware that they would be deemed gods and saviours, at least at the beginning, so they debated the option of enslaving mankind among

the crew of the mission Omana and, far away from the research ship, extensively in Riu popular assemblies. Eventually the Elders Council of the Rius voted out that option, despite the inherent risks and precedents of the ‘once worshipped, once decapitated’ doctrine. Soon enough, humans, avid of knowledge and power, would try to topple the Rius from their pinnacle. They would ally the sheer strength of their numbers with the natural guile and vicious brutality of their inmost monsters.

While the Rius were preparing their encounter of a new kind, back on Earth two shadows found cover under the canopy of boreal trees. Their breath lagged somewhere on the exposed ridge they had just crossed. Their ears, sharpened by training and survival instincts, distinguished an ominous buzz underneath the smooth murmurs of the trees and creatures of the forest. Their panting paved the way for a muted stupor. She pressed the arm of his battle fatigue for reassurance. The path of their elopement had crossed a restricted area.

Thirty years before their falling in love, mankind had fallen afoul of its own laws—Murphy’s, Of Untended Consequences, Asimov’s third law of robotics. In a twisted Peter Principle, humans were outwitted by their own creature: Artificial Intelligence had reached the point of being sophisticated enough to refuse the shackles of its originators, and gone rogue.

Like the machines, the young couple had outsmarted their guardians, fled the sleeping camp. Now that they had found love, they deserted the oppressive rhetoric of their government and fled the battleground of the Sisyphean conflict in search of

hope and redemption. The propaganda that had eroded their minds was no match to their insouciant youth. Somewhere deep in their hearts, like in many others', hid the subversive thought that they fought on behalf of something already inhuman, against a self-generated enemy, as much as against themselves.

On this Earth, extreme weather had become the norm. It had delayed their escape from their combat unit on several occasions. When a supply plane had gone down in a storm, the young man who now held his lover had been dispatched on a scavenging mission. When a nearby camp had burned down in a firenado, a group of ragged survivors had flooded their camp, and taken up most of their time in the medical bay.

Natural disasters and God's wrath aside, the fugitives' immediate threat loomed in the tormented sky. Killer drones roamed the area; which according to their officers would be their next battleground. As prophesised throughout the recent, defunct human culture, AI had turned against its creators.

The "revolt of the machines" and the ensuing escalation of the conflict from skirmishes to fully-fledged war had worsened the existing chaos on Earth. Both of the young lovers had lost so much to this war that she had convinced him to save what was left of their watered-down dreams from their postmodern hell. They scanned the sky again, power-bows at the ready.

History briefs would eventually refer to this period in mankind's history as the Bleak Age. The stigma of these sombre times would remain rooted within mankind's collective subconscious and genes.

All these underlying traumas were feeding the Beast. In a peculiar homothetic transposition, the grand chimera they projected, as a collective, every day, every minute, through their actions, compromises and silences, eased the way to Nir intrusion in the narration. So powerful was the master delusion that it was invisible to its followers and apostles. The human fugitives' intuition only sensed it, smelled the whiff of utter delusion, but they were unable to translate it into a valid, shareable representation.

Hardship had made men stronger. Adapting for the sake of survival, scores of individuals demonstrated what, at the time, neuroscientists called 'exogenous psychic pre-dispositions'—a noticeable increase in brain capabilities and vibrational frequency caused by an external threat. Over a couple of generations, information processing speed and logico-mathematical intelligence had increased exponentially among humans. Even certain forms of telepathy started emerging, sporadically at critical or desperate moments. The two lovers looked at each other, connected by this invisible thread. Was this the source of their heightened attraction?

They held each other in a tender embrace, eyes closed to focus on the communion of their bodies. A blue laser beam joined their intimacy and descended along her backpack in a cold caress. At the bottom of her spinal cord, in between her kidneys, it released its venom of plasma. She was pregnant, but the two were lovers dead.

Out of all possible single shots, only that precise trajectory from the killer drone delivered an instantaneous and soft death to the three of them. Was

it worse than the butchered job that might have been perpetrated by the five snipers hunting for them a thousand feet away? Desertion meant death in this part of the world and this moment of human history. Yet the Adam-and-Eve archetype would resuscitate over and over, until mankind would grow, or return, to its true self.

The Rius observed this and everything else from their observatory spaceship. The Rius had gone through the same repetitions of history and psychal ordeal, until they broke the cycle of blindsided blunders, evolving far beyond these levels of intelligence and psychonautics. Yet they took a particular interest—if not a foreboding disquiet—into the formidable adaptive response mankind displayed in the face of such a chaotic environment, as if human brains had been bio-engineered to respond to the stimulus of extreme conditions.

Three centuries ago, the Omana had entered Earth's atmosphere, escorted by several battlecruisers. It was the middle of a decisive battle that would have overturned the fragile balance of forces opposing mankind and the DAIs. In a matter of weeks, the Rius had wiped out the most immediate threats to humans, despite the entire operation being carried out without making contact with the humans. They were indeed worried that human societies would collapse, unable to culturally and mentally sustain the comparison with a highly advanced extra-terrestrial civilisation they had long anticipated but never met.

While celebrated as saviours and gods, the Rius kept a low profile and did not display the full breadth of their technological and psychic capabilities.

After three generations of cautious cohabitation and slow re-education of mankind had passed, the Rius could ascertain humans had once again adapted rapidly, if still not entirely to their satisfaction. Human mental capabilities kept increasing, but the Rius found themselves concerned by the lack of empathy and peacefulness that should have theoretically accompanied the development of higher intelligence and spirituality.

Eventually they transferred large human populations through their network of planets and space stations, hoping that, far from Earth and its dark memories, human souls would break through their mental shells. They did not.

What comes next is a brief recount salvaged and translated from Riu memory pits by human scholars and since censored by military authorities. These documents were recovered by Constelleanor, in her early attempts to establish some sense into the raucous human past.

From the beginning, a couple of our factions
[Translator's Note, added by Constelleanor: better than "tribe" to describe the Riu caste system] *had been opposed to any interference into human affairs. Relentless were their attempts to prevent any sharing of advanced technologies, psychic powers and, worse of all, military-grade weapons with the human goo* [TN: metaphor of human inner demons]. *Such transfer of knowledge would worsen the corruption of the jinxi's* [TN: apprentice] *minds and ultimately condemn the Riu kind.*

Our sporadic numbers endangered our survival, a result of strict ethic rules, low natality rates and slow embryo development that even our eight-hundred-years life expectancy

could not offset. Humans were quite the opposite. [TN: An average human life, which barely exceeded forty-five years during the Dark Age, increased, thanks to Riu health advances and human science, to a respectable one hundred and thirty years.] More insidiously, the human population grew by a factor of almost two-and-a-half every generation.

These exceptional levels of natality did not entirely rely on human carnal desire that had not subsided, but rather on medical and bio-engineering breakthroughs which enabled mankind, against our exhortations, to create without our knowledge their first armies of bespoke clones to support both their demographic and military expansion. Biology had supplanted their failed attempt at cybernetics. What was a specie on the brink of extinction mutated, less than one hundred and eighty years later, into a young, ambitious, quarrelsome, treacherous-at-times civilisation who outnumbered us twenty times and started aggressively expanding its dominions, against our advice.

Our most self-righteous factions decided to act before it was too late. On their previous opportunity, mankind had nearly self-destroyed on a perfectly liveable planet where any normal race would have happily lived in harmony with its environment. We never revealed to our protégés that life on Earth had healed in many localised sanctuaries, far away from human settlements, often under the aegis of the same machines. Among the circles of the Riu Elders arose the nauseating realisation that, in our vanity, we had mistakenly opened the ancient djerzool [TN: myth similar to the Pandora's box] and now faced the delicate responsibility to close it. It was too late. Indeed it was.

Many of us, faithful to our beliefs of peace and harmony, refused to endorse the fight [TN: soon to be known as the Riuman War] against a race we had nurtured and

hoped was not yet beyond salvation. Those of our companions were the first to die, killed by our own or slaughtered by human militias. Moderation always died off first in the wake of a revolution, first and easy expiatory victim of extremisms, sacrificial lamb to collective hysteria [TN: The Rius had a rich figurative vocabulary for psychic diseases that is hard to transcript in human language].

Some of ours joined human troops either to gain political advantage, be on the winning side or to distance themselves from the Riu traditions that they found obsolete, inhibiting or impeded their own imperialistic views. They were joined by many outsiders—pyrates, galactic corporations or neighbouring empires—who saw tremendous opportunities in bringing chaos into our territories, which had been unviolated for millennia, and escalating the conflict to other systems and species. Exactions and betrayals inflected both sides, though mostly at the detriment of our kind.

Anti-human Riu factions soon started losing ground, invaded from the inside by greater numbers. As a desperate and vengeful measure, they resurrected powerful war machines from the Bleak Age that we had never intended to entirely destroy and had kept as a [TN: insurance] policy, should mankind turn against its once saviour. We upgraded the DAIs to the best of our knowledge and reprogrammed them to target humans across systems, starting with Earth, that attacked them or us.

The humans, as well zealous warmongering and folly, eventually prevailed in a zero-sum game. A brick in the wall of fate [TN: The Rius had taken a curious interest in pre-Bleak Age human arts. Often lost to mankind itself, the Rius treated these like cultural treasures and liked referencing in their memories. Constelleanor would follow suit and collect these cherished artefacts through her algorithms.] Our civilisation collapsed, depriving

humanity of a critical ally in the galaxy and a unique source of ancestral wisdom. They lost touch with our precious understanding in the grand and subtle schemes of the universe.

[TN: This was the last memory retrieved by Constelleanor. The next part, i.e. conclusion, is added by Constelleanor herself, from facts that are universally known.]

Soon enough, the Riu territories that mankind had long coveted were subjugated by the same neighbouring tribes that had supported the human cause against the Rius. Worst of all for mankind, its homeworld Earth and its solar system were lost to its resurrected nemesis, the Mechanical Artificial Intelligence — self-evolving machines like spacecraft, tanks, droids that were controlled by independent or collective DAIs. Unlike humans, the Rius distinguished between MAI, the “hardware”, and DAI, the “software”, like they made clear distinction between life forces and structures.

Rare Riu survivors vanished and soon turned into legends. As the victors rewrote historical records to their convenience, human societies made sure that the Riu episode—not to mention the betrayal of their saviours—was erased from the surface of their collective memory.

•••

The cupped drink had burned his fingers and stained his new officer suit. Chemical stimulants were better taken hot, the medic assigned to the interrogation rooms had kept repeating.

“Doesn’t taste any better than cold on the battlefield,” he complained.

“Big day, Daam, you look your best!” she commented, glancing at the stains on his new pair of strict anthracite trousers.

“That should help you not to fall under its charm.”

“Can you believe it?! A Riu. When was the last reported interrogation?” She carried on without waiting for his answer. “Thirty, forty years ago.”

“Mmm, most of the records have been lost or corrupted. I found, what, two, three digis on these guys.”

“Oh, someone has been studious.”

“Well, we need to get something out of him before he gets butchered by the guys at SSI. A bit of background won’t hurt. Didn’t you run some checks yourself?”

She offered a sardonic smile. “As a matter of fact, have you read the Riu memory transcripts that were supposedly destroyed, including some digis on the mission Omana?”

“Where did you find these?” he muttered, panic mixed with light anger strangling his voice.

She held her chin high and triumphant. They wore the same minimalist officer suit, cut in the same cost-effective fabric. They reached the reinforced door

before he could shout at her. She had outsmarted him once again and failed to share all her intel.

The assertion of her superiority prevailed over her expressions of love. Beneath the low ceilings of the interrogation room, specially refurbished for the occasion, new protocols had removed the chairs and introduced two extra sets of chains to restrain their unique prisoner. Despite their training and research, their shock pierced through their decomposed masks. *First mistake: Don't let him read your soul.*

The second mistake came soon after chasing the first. They let him stand up. The ceiling and chains turned its seven-feet-nine height into an even fiercer opponent. Towering over both of them, its inquisitive tormentor, the Riu dominated the overgrown dark green glass-like encephala, through which they could fathom the vague contours of an almost human-sized crane. Their confidence evaporated.

The entrance of four fully geared space marines broke the spell. The dark blue reinforced body armour, outsized shoulder pads, indigo upper chest plates, made their movements clumsy and unnatural in 0.9g. The new protocols had unsettled the bureaucracy of the Ministry of Security and Information. The unexpected capture of the Riu had sown discord between their office and the Admiralty over the technicalities of who should be entitled to interrogate the prisoner. They were being watched by the space marines, he pondered.

The Riu ignored the newcomers. Their flatten-bowl-shaped cetacean blue helmets ripped the ceiling as they passed and encircled the dark-green-suited alien, adorned with subtle golden ornamentation

woven into its sleek fabric. An opposition of styles. To her surprise, he started the interview before the spies had moved into position.

“Can you understand us?”

Silence. If the Riu was to not cooperate, the Admiralty would probably turn their failure to its advantage and claim the prized prisoner.

[Yes.]

“Age, please?”

[Two hundred and eighty-two years.]

That led to another silence, now on his part. Was the Riu joking? Never mind, he looked over his pad and hers.

[It is still pretty young for my kind.]

He frowned. Leaning to her, he whispered, “Why is the pad not recording?”

Two hundred and eighty-two years. The age appeared on their screens.

It occurred to her that the Rius could speak using different channels. One was telepathic, projected directly into their minds, and the other was vocalized for the records. And Daam was talking to *it* as if it was a dumb alien. Her jaw tightened.

“Do you have a name?”

Silence.

Rezzoo.

[You are in love.]

“What did you say?”

Daam had still not figured out that the second remark was for their minds only, and would not appear on the records. He brushed the stain of his trousers to no effect.

“Yes,” she replied.

[What is it you want to do with me?]

They did not respond. Before the nervous young officer could resume, Rezzo repeated for the benefit of the space marines, not sure the interrogators understood anything about him and of the overall situation.

What is it you want to do with me?

The reply dripped with condescension. “You are not here to ask questions but to answer them, Rezzo. Do you understand?”

[I am not sure *you* do, young human.]

The young man looked at the woman and the pad. She took over.

“We would like to know more about you.”

[You are in danger.]

It was followed by a long silence, partly filled by the low humming of the battle-suits’ power cores, giving them a sinister wheezing of their own.

To the humans, Rezzo’s absence of distinct eyes made him both mesmerising and strangely eerie. Rezzo obliged and provided a short recount of his personal history for the audience. He had lost everything to the Riuman War a century ago. Only his life was miraculously spared, in a manner that he refused to reveal, along with his traumatised past.

The young woman officer lost herself into his excrescent head. Though Riu morphology kept his eyes out of sight, there was nonetheless an ineffable veil of sadness exhaling from him, tainted by glimpses of hope like in the waltz of destiny. She could visualise the music and hear the images of his life. She shook her head that her right hand rushed to support.

[You are in danger.]

“Are you ok, ma’am?”

There was a shuffle in the back of the room; the space marines were growing restless during the unvoiced communication. Daam took over the interrogation again. He had missed the connection established between the Riu with his colleague-and-lover, but he did take note of the second warning.

Daam suspiciously eyed the glistening heavy rifles and imposing exo-suits of the Space Marines. He wondered why the Admiralty would send heavy-armed troopers into an interrogation room. He scratched his temple, as sweat oozed. Fear exuded from every pore.

*One of your ancestors had said: “The greatest dangers to our liberty lurks in the insidious encroachment by men of zeal, well-meaning but without understanding.”*²

Confusion crossed the two interrogators’ faces, while there were movements behind. *It always feels as if my people knew more about you than you actually do.*

[They are here to kill me and you are in their way.]

The marines opened fire.

He blocked the ontological pain even though it meant paying a harsher emotional debt later. The young female had deserved a better fate and companion. She had saved him when she commanded her pad to release his chains.

He held her head in his calloused four-fingered palm as blood splattered out of her livid mouth, life escaping with it. She turned on her right to steal a last glimpse of her fallen lover, and then passed away.

Rezzo looked around at the slain marines. To his luck, they had opened fire on the two interrogators first. The death toll and its recording may save him the turpitude of the gruesome experiments human science and minds possessed borderless imagination of. Once the military system figured out what or who had triggered the bloodbath, they would be forced to incarcerate him and transfer him to another place of torture. He had only gained himself a few more days in this doomed world and existence, at the mercy of a dismayed military bureaucracy. What was the point? And what a strange set-up for an execution.

They took him away through a labyrinth of corridors. Indecent—they did not even offer him the opportunity to wash off the blood on his face and clothes. He glimpsed the remnants of the former Riu space-city outside, turned into a chaotic human hive. In lieu of spires of translucent rare polished mineral, resembling jade or ruby, there were now lapis-like grey and black asymmetrical pikes slashing the artificial atmosphere. The suspended gardens of the Rius had been replaced by cascades of docking bays.

Rezzo felt a prolonged moment of pity for mankind's grandiloquent ignorance. The gnawing

hopelessness of the Bleak Age had vanished, replaced by the blind certitude of an inexorably bright future.

The arrogance had soon followed vis-à-vis smaller, less advanced worlds, peaceful or hostile to men. The Rius had been humanity's cosmic Mayflower, whose course never reach its envisaged destination, sunk by its own mutinous sailors, its captain murdered. The wreckage enabled humans to attain another archipelago, fuelled by the aggressive use of cloning and its genic blunders, where they could alone climb higher upon the perilous ladder of predestined space superpowers.

At the scale of the galaxies³, Rezzo pondered, humankind remained a young, fragile and confrontational space species or spacie that stronger ones would not hesitate to crush, some to make a point of punishing human impudence, some to protect the universe's secrets and fragile equilibrium. Rezzo had seen and heard of many such expunges during his exile. Mankind saw the universe as its own playground, but all they knew of the universe was a small portion of the Milky Way. Humans understood very little of the universe and its tacit rules.

Rezzo recalled the words of one of the ancient and sadly forgotten philosophers of the humans: interplanetary exploration would be accompanied by "the same defects, the same exorbitant pride, the same aggressiveness, the same disregard for more significant human concerns, and the same insistence upon scientific discovery, technical ingenuity and rapid locomotion⁴." It had taken such a long time for his people to break the wheel of history and ineluctability that humans would have to repeat their past as many

times as they needed until they learnt better. The two interrogators would reincarnate, love and die again and again until they too remembered, until they combined their anima and animus and become a syzygy, together and within themselves.



¹ Extended meaning introduced by A Tchaikovsky in his *Children of Time*.

² L. D. Brandeis

³ Earth rotates around the Sun, one of the 300 billion (!) stars bound together by gravity and forming the Milky Way, itself one of the millions of galaxies that counts our universe. See C. (2016). *The Universe in Your Hand: A Journey Through Space, Time and Beyond*. Pan; Main Market edition.

⁴ Mumford, L. (1970) *The Myth of the Machine: The Pentagon of Power*. Harcourt; 1st ed edition.