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Geoffrey A. Landis: Winter Fire

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I am nothing and nobody; atoms that have learned to look at themselves; dirt that has learned to see the awe and the majesty of the universe.

The day the hover-transport arrived in the refugee camps, huge windowless shells of titanium floating on electrostatic cushions, the day faceless men took the ragged little girl that was me away from the narrow, blasted valley that had once been Salzburg to begin a new life on another continent: that is the true beginning of my life. What came before then is almost irrelevant, a sequence of memories etched as with acid into my brain, but with no meaning to real life.

Sometimes I almost think that I can remember my parents. I remember them not by what was, but by the shape of the absence they left behind. I remember yearning for my mother's voice, singing to me softly in Japanese. I cannot remember her voice, or what songs she might have sung, but I remember so vividly the missing of it, the hole that she left behind.

My father I remember as the loss of something large and warm and infinitely strong, smelling of—of what? I don't remember. Again, it is the loss that remains in my memory, not

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the man. I remember remembering him as more solid than mountains, something eternal; but in the end he was not eternal, he was not even as strong as a very small war.

I lived in the city of music, in Salzburg, but I remember little from before the siege. I do remember cafés (seen from below, with huge tables and the legs of waiters and faces looming down to ask me if I would like a sweet). I'm sure my parents must have been there, but that I do not remember.

And I remember music. I had my little violin (although it seemed so large to me then), and music was not my second language but my first. I thought in music before ever I learned words. Even now, decades later, when I forget myself in mathematics I cease to think in words, but think directly in concepts clear and perfectly harmonic, so that a mathematical proof is no more than the inevitable majesty of a crescendo leading to a final, resolving chord.

I have long since forgotten anything I knew about the violin. I have not played since the day, when I was nine, I took from the rubble of our apartment the shattered cherry-wood scroll. I kept that meaningless piece of polished wood for years, slept with it clutched in my hand every night until, much later, it was taken away by a soldier intent on rape. Probably I would have let him, had he not been so ignorant as to think my one meager possession might be a weapon. Coitus is nothing more than the natural act of the animal. From songbirds to porpoises, any male animal will rape an available female when given a chance. The action is of no significance except, perhaps, as a chance to contemplate the impersonal majesty of the chain of life and the meaninglessness of any individual's will within it.

When I was finally taken away from the city of music, three years later and a century older, I owned nothing and wanted nothing. There was nothing of the city left. As the hoverjet took me away, just one more in a seemingly endless line of ragged survivors, only the mountains remained, hardly scarred by the bomb craters and the detritus that marked where the castle had stood, mountains looking down on humanity with the gaze of eternity.

My real parents, I have been told, were rousted out of our apartment with a tossed stick of dynamite, and shot as infidels as they ran through the door, on the very first night of the war.

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It was probably fanatics of the New Orthodox Resurgence that did it, in their first round of ethnic cleansing, although nobody seemed to know for sure.

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In the beginning, despite the dissolution of Austria and the fall of the federation of free European states, despite the hate-talk spread by the disciples of Dragan Vukadinović, the violent cleansing of the Orthodox church, and the rising of the Pan-Slavic unity movement, all the events that covered the news-nets all through 2081, few people believed there would be a war, and those that did thought that it might last a few months. The dissolution of Austria and eastern Europe into a federation of free states was viewed by intellectuals of the time as a good thing, a recognition of the impending irrelevance of governments in the post-technological society with its burgeoning sky-cities and prospering free-trade zones. Everyone talked of civil war, but as a distant thing; it was an awful mythical monster of ancient times, one that had been thought dead, a thing that ate people's hearts and turned them into inhuman gargoyles of stone. It would not come here.

Salzburg had had a large population of Asians, once themselves refugees from the economic and political turmoil of the twenty-first century, but now prosperous citizens who had lived in the city for over a century. Nobody thought about religion in the Salzburg of that lost age; nobody cared that a person whose family once came from the Orient might be a Buddhist or a Hindu or a Confucian. My own family, as far as I know, had no religious feelings at all, but that made little difference to the fanatics. My mother, suspecting possible trouble that night, had sent me over to sleep with an old German couple who lived in a building next door. I don't remember whether I said good-bye.

Johann Achtenberg became my foster father, a stocky old man, bearded and forever smelling of cigar smoke. "We will stay," my foster father would often say, over and over. "It is *our* city; the barbarians cannot drive us out." Later in the siege, in a grimmer mood, he might add, "They can kill us, but they will never drive us out."

The next few months were full of turmoil, as the Orthodox Resurgence tried, and failed, to take Salzburg. They were still disorganized, more a mob than an army, still evolving toward the killing machine that they would eventually become. Eventually they were driven out of the city, dynamiting

buildings behind them, to join up with the Pan-Slavic army rolling in from the devastation of Graz. The roads in and out of the city were barricaded, and the siege began.

For that summer of 2082, the first summer of the siege, the life of the city hardly changed. I was ten years old. There was still electricity, and water, and stocks of food. The cafés stayed open, although coffee became hard to obtain, and impossibly expensive when it was available, and at times they had nothing to serve but water. I would watch the pretty girls, dressed in colorful Italian suede and wearing ornately carved Ladakhi jewelry, strolling down the streets in the evenings, stopping to chat with T-shirted boys, and I would wonder if I would ever grow up to be as elegant and poised as they. The shelling was still mostly far away, and everybody believed that the tide of world opinion would soon stop the war. The occasional shell that was targeted toward the city caused great commotion, people screaming and diving under tables even for a bird that hit many blocks away. Later, when civilians had become targets, we all learned to tell the caliber and the trajectory of a shell by the sound of the song it made as it fell.

After an explosion, there is silence for an instant, then a hubbub of crashing glass and debris as shattered walls collapse, and people gingerly touch each other, just to verify that they are alive. The dust would hang in the air for hours.

Toward September, when it became obvious that the world powers were stalemated, and would not intervene, the shelling of the city began in earnest. Tanks, even modern ones with electrostatic hover and thin coilguns instead of heavy cannons, could not maneuver into the narrow alleys of the old city and were stymied by the steep-sided mountain valleys. But the outer suburbs and the hilltops were invaded, crushed flat, and left abandoned.

I did not realize it at the time, for a child sees little, but with antiquated equipment and patched-together artillery, my besieged city clumsily and painfully fought back. For every fifty shells that came in, one was fired back at the attackers.

There was an international blockade against selling weapons to the Resurgence, but that seemed to make no difference. Their weapons may not have had the most modern of technology, but they were far better than ours. They had superconducting coilguns for artillery, weapons that fired

aerodynamically-shaped slugs—we called them birds—that maneuvered on twisted arcs as they moved. The birds were small, barely larger than my hand, but the metastable atomic hydrogen that filled them held an incredible amount of explosive power.

Our defenders had to rely on ancient weapons, guns that ignited chemical explosives to propel metal shells. These were quickly disassembled and removed from their position after each shot, because the enemy's computers could backtrail the trajectory of our shells, which had only crude aeromaneuvering, to direct a deadly rain of birds at the guessed position. Since we were cut off from regular supply lines, each shell was precious. We were supplied by ammunition carried on mules whose trails would weave through the enemy's wooded territory by night and by shells carried one by one across dangerous territory in backpacks.

But still, miraculously, the city held. Over our heads, the continuous shower of steel eroded the skyline. Our beautiful castle Hohensalzburg was sandpapered to a hill of bare rock; the cathedral towers fell and the debris by slow degrees was pounded into gravel. Bells rang in sympathy with explosions until at last the bells were silenced. Slowly, erosion softened the profiles of buildings that once defined the city's horizon.

Even without looking for the craters, we learned to tell from looking at the trees which neighborhoods had had explosions in them. Near a blast, the city's trees had no leaves. They were all shaken off by the shock waves. But none of the trees lasted the winter anyway.

My foster father made a stove by pounding with a hammer on the fenders and door panels of a wrecked automobile, with a pipe made of copper from rooftops and innumerable soft-drink cans. Floorboards and furniture were broken to bits to make fuel for us to keep warm. All through the city, stovepipes suddenly bristled through exterior walls and through windows. The fiberglass sides of modern housing blocks, never designed for such crude heating, became decorated with black smoke trails like unreadable graffiti, and the city parks became weirdly empty lots crossed by winding sidewalks that meandered past the craters where the trees had been.

Johann's wife, my foster mother, a thin, quiet woman, died by being in the wrong building at the wrong time. She had been

visiting a friend across the city to exchange chat and a pinch of hoarded tea. It might just as easily have been the building I was in where the bird decided to build its deadly nest. It took some of the solidity out of Johann. "Do not fall in love, little Leah," he told me, many months later, when our lives had returned to a fragile stability. "It hurts too much."

In addition to the nearly full-time job of bargaining for those necessities that could be bargained for, substituting or improvising those that could not, and hamstering away in basements and shelters any storable food that could be found, my foster father Johann had another job, or perhaps an obsession. I only learned this slowly. He would disappear, sometimes for days. One time I followed him as far as an entrance to the ancient catacombs beneath the bird-pecked ruins of the beautiful castle Hohensalzburg. When he disappeared into the darkness, I dared not follow.

When he returned, I asked him about it. He was strangely reluctant to speak. When he did, he did not explain, but only said that he was working on the molecular still, and refused to say anything further, or to let me mention it to anyone else.

As a child, I spoke a hodgepodge of languages; the English of the foreigners, the French of the European Union, the Japanese that my parents had spoken at home, the book-German of the schools, and the Austrian German that was the dominant tongue of the culture I lived in. At home, we spoke mostly German, and in German, "Still" is a word which means quietude. Over the weeks and months that followed, the idea of a molecular still grew in my imagination into a wonderful thing, a place that is quiet even on the molecular level, far different from the booming sounds of war. In my imagination, knowing my foster father was a gentle man who wanted nothing but peace, I thought of it as a reverse secret weapon, something that would bring this wonderful stillness to the world. When he disappeared to the wonderful molecular still, each time I would wonder whether this would be the time that the still would be ready, and peace would come.

And the city held. "Salzburg is an idea, little Leah," my foster father Johann would tell me, "and all the birds in the world could never peck it away, for it lives in our minds and in our souls. Salzburg will stand for as long as any one of us lives. And, if we ever abandon the city, then Salzburg has fallen, even if the city itself still stands."

In the outside world, the world I knew nothing of, nations quarreled and were stalemated with indecision over what to do. Our city had been fragilely connected to the western half of Europe by precarious roads, with a series of tunnels through the Alps and long arcing bridges across narrow mountain valleys. In their terror that the chaos might spread westward, they dynamited the bridges, they collapsed the tunnels. Not nations, but individuals, did it. They cut us off from civilization, and left us to survive, or die, on our own.

Governments had become increasingly unimportant in the era following the opening of the resources of space by the free-trade zones of the new prosperity, but the trading consortia that now ruled America and the far east in the place of governments had gained their influence only by assiduously signing away the capacity to make war, and although the covenants that had secured their formation had eroded, that one prohibition still held. Only governments could help us, and the governments tried negotiation and diplomacy as Dragan Vukadinovi´c made promises for the New Orthodox Resurgence and broke them.

High above, the owners of the sky-cities did the only thing that they could, which was to deny access to space to either side. This kept the war on the ground, but hurt us more than it hurt the armies surrounding us. They, after all, had no need for satellites to find out where *we* were.

To the east, the Pan-Slavic army and the New Orthodox Resurgence were pounding against the rock of the Tenth Crusade; further south they were skirmishing over borders with the Islamic Federation. Occasionally the shelling would stop for a while, and it would be safe to bring hoarded solar panels out into the sunlight to charge our batteries—the electric grid had gone long ago, of course—and huddle around an antique solar-powered television set watching the distant negotiating teams talk about our fate. Everybody knew that the war would be over shortly; it was impossible that the world would not act.

The world did not act.

I remember taking batteries from wrecked cars to use a headlight, if one happened to survive unbroken, or a taillight,

to allow us to stay up past sunset. There was a concoction of boiled leaves that we called "tea," although we had no milk or sugar to put in it. We would sit together, enjoying the miracle of light, sipping our "tea," perhaps reading, perhaps just sitting in silence.

With the destruction of the bridges, Salzburg had become two cities, connected only by narrow-beam microwave radio and the occasional foray by individuals walking across the dangerous series of beams stretched across the rubble of the Old Stone Bridge. The two Salzburgs were distinct in population, with mostly immigrant populations isolated in the modern buildings on the east side of the river, and the old Austrians on the west.

It is impossible to describe the Salzburg feeling, the aura of a sophisticated ancient city, wrapped in a glisteningly pure blanket of snow, under siege, faced with the daily onslaught of an unseen army that seemed to have an unlimited supply of coilguns and metastable hydrogen. We were never out of range. The Salzburg stride was relaxed only when protected by the cover of buildings or specially constructed barricades, breaking into a jagged sprint over a stretch of open ground, a cobbled forecourt of crossroads open to the rifles of snipers on distant hills firing hypersonic needles randomly into the city. From the deadly steel birds, there was no protection. They could fly in anywhere, with no warning. By the time you heard their high-pitched song, you were already dead, or, miraculously, still alive.

Not even the nights were still. It is an incredible sight to see a city cloaked in darkness suddenly illuminated with the blue dawn of a flare sent up from the hilltops, dimming the stars and suffusing coruscating light across the glittering snow. There is a curious, ominous interval of quiet: the buildings of the city dragged blinking out of their darkness and displayed in a fairy glow, naked before the invisible gunners on their distant hilltops. Within thirty seconds, the birds would begin to sing. They might land a good few blocks away, the echo of their demise ringing up and down the valley, or they might land in the street below, the explosion sending people diving under tables, windows caving in across the room.

They could, I believe, have destroyed the city at any time, but that did not serve their purposes. Salzburg was a prize. Whether the buildings were whole or in parts seemed

irrelevant, but the city was not to be simply obliterated.

In April, as buds started to bloom from beneath the rubble, the city woke up, and we discovered that we had survived the winter. The diplomats proposed partitioning the city between the Slavs and the Germans—Asians and other ethnic groups, like me, being conveniently ignored—and the terms were set, but nothing came of it except a cease-fire that was violated before the day was over.

The second summer of the siege was a summer of hope. Every week we thought that this might be the last week of the siege; that peace might yet be declared on terms that we could accept, that would let us keep our city. The defense of the city had opened a corridor to the outside world, allowing in humanitarian aid, black-market goods, and refugees from other parts of the war. Some of the people who had fled before the siege returned, although many of the population who had survived the winter used the opportunity to flee to the west. My foster father, though, swore that he would stay in Salzburg until death. It is civilization, and if it is destroyed, nothing is worthwhile.

Christians of the Tenth Crusade and Turks of the Islamic Federation fought side by side with the official troops of the Mayor's Brigade, sharing ammunition but not command, to defend the city. High above, cities in the sky looked down on us, but, like angels who see everything, they did nothing.

Cafés opened again, even those that, without black-market connections, could only serve water, and in the evenings there were night-clubs, the music booming even louder than the distant gunfire. My foster father, of course, would never let me stay up late enough to find out what went on in these, but once, when he was away tending his molecular still, I waited for darkness and then crept through the streets to see.

One bar was entirely Islamic Federation Turks, wearing green turbans and uniforms of dark maroon denim, with spindly railgun-launchers slung across their backs and knives and swords strung on leather straps across their bodies. Each one had in front of him a tiny cup of dark coffee and a clear glass of whisky. I thought I was invisible in the doorway, but one of the Turks, a tall man with a pocked face and a dark moustache that drooped down the side of his mouth, looked up, and without smiling, said, "Hoy, little girl, I think that you

are in the wrong place."

In the next club, mercenaries wearing cowboy hats, with black uniforms and fingerless leather gloves, had parked their guns against the walls before settling in to pound down whisky in a bar where the music was so loud that the beat reverberated across half the city. The one closest to the door had a shaven head, with a spiderweb tattooed up his neck, and daggers and weird heraldic symbols tattooed across his arms. When he looked up at me, standing in the doorway, he smiled, and I realized that he had been watching me for some time, probably ever since I had appeared. His smile was far more frightening than the impassive face of the Turk. I ran all the way home.

In the daytime, the snap of a sniper's rifle might prompt an exchange of heavy machine-gun fire, a wild, rattling sound that echoed crazily from the hills. Small-arms fire would sound, tak, tak, tak, answered by the singing of small railguns, tee, tee. You can't tell the source of rifle fire in an urban environment; it seems to come from all around. All you can do is duck, and run. Later that summer, the first of the omniblasters showed up, firing a beam of pure energy with a silence so loud that tiny hairs all over my body would stand up in fright.

Cosmetics, baby milk, and whisky were the most prized commodities on the black market.

I had no idea what the war was about. Nobody was able to explain it in terms that an eleven-year-old could understand; few even bothered to try. All I knew was that evil people on hilltops were trying to destroy everything I loved, and good men like my foster father were trying to stop them.

I slowly learned that my foster father was, apparently, quite important to the defense. He never talked about what he did, but I overheard other men refer to him with terms like "vital" and "indispensable," and these words made me proud. At first I simply thought that they merely meant that the existence of men like him, proud of the city and vowing never to leave, were the core of what made the defense worthwhile. But later I realized that it must be more than this. There were thousands of men who loved the city.

Toward the end of the summer, the siege closed around the

city again. The army of the Tenth Crusade arrived and took over the ridgetops just one valley to the west; the Pan-Slavic army and the Orthodox Resurgence held the ridges next to the city and the territory to the east. All that autumn the shells of the Tenth Crusade arced over our heads toward the Pan-Slavs, and beams of purple fire from pop-up robots with omniblasters would fire back. It was a good autumn; mostly only stray fire hit the civilians. But we were locked in place, and there was no way out.

There was no place to go outside; no place that was safe. The sky had become our enemy. My friends were books. I had loved storybooks when I had been younger, in the part of my childhood before the siege that even then I barely remembered. But Johann had no storybooks; his vast collection of books were all forbidding things, full of thick blocks of dense text and incomprehensible diagrams that were no picture of anything I could recognize. I taught myself algebra, with some help from Johann, and started working on calculus. It was easier when I realized that the mathematics in the books was just an odd form of music, written in a strange language. Candles were precious, and so in order to keep on reading at night, Johann made an oil lamp for me, which would burn vegetable oil. This was nearly as precious as candles, but not so precious as my need to read.

A still, I had learned from my reading—and from the black market—was a device for making alcohol, or at least for separating alcohol from water. Did a molecular still make molecules?

"That's silly," Johann told me. "Everything is made of molecules. Your bed, the air you breathe, even you yourself, nothing but molecules."

In November, the zoo's last stubborn elephant died. The predators, the lions, the tigers, even the wolves, were already gone, felled by simple lack of meat. The zebras and antelopes had gone quickly, some from starvation-induced illness, some killed and butchered by poachers. The elephant, surprisingly, had been the last to go, a skeletal apparition stubbornly surviving on scraps of grass and bits of trash, protected against ravenous poachers by a continuous guard of armed watchmen. The watchmen proved unable, however, to guard against starvation. Some people claim that kangaroos and emus still survived, freed from their hutches by the shelling,

and could be seen wandering free in the city late at night. Sometimes I wonder if they survive still, awkward birds and bounding marsupials, hiding in the foothills of the Austrian Alps, the last survivors of the siege of Salzburg.

It was a hard winter. We learned to conserve the slightest bit of heat, so as to stretch a few sticks of firewood out over a whole night. Typhus, dysentery, and pneumonia killed more than the shelling, which had resumed in force with the onset of winter. Just after New Year, a fever attacked me, and there was no medicine to be had at any price. Johann wrapped me in blankets and fed me hot water mixed with salt and a pinch of precious sugar. I shivered and burned, hallucinating strange things, now seeing kangaroos and emus outside my little room, now imagining myself on the surface of Mars, strangling in the thin air, and then instantly on Venus, choking in heat and darkness, and then floating in interstellar space, my body growing alternately larger than galaxies, then smaller than atoms, floating so far away from anything else that it would take eons for any signal from me to ever reach the world where I had been born.

Eventually the fever broke, and I was merely back in my room, shivering with cold, wrapped in sheets that were stinking with sweat, in a city slowly being pounded into rubble by distant soldiers whose faces I had never seen, fighting for an ideology that I could never understand.

It was after this, at my constant pleading, that Johann finally took me to see his molecular still. It was a dangerous walk across the city, illuminated by the glow of the Marionette Theater, set afire by incendiary bombs two days before. The still was hidden below the city, farther down even than the bomb shelters, in catacombs that had been carved out of rock over two thousand years ago. There were two men there, a man my foster father's age with a white moustache, and an even older Vietnamese-German man with one leg, who said nothing the whole time.

The older man looked at me and said in French, which perhaps he thought I wouldn't understand, "This is no place to bring a little one."

Johann replied in German. "She asks many questions." He shrugged, and said, "I wanted to show her."

The other said, still in French, "She couldn't understand." Right then I resolved that I would make myself understand, whatever it was that they thought I could not. The man looked at me critically, taking in, no doubt, my straight black hair and almond eyes. "She's not yours, anyway. What is she to you?"

"She is my daughter," Johann said.

The molecular still was nothing to look at. It was a room filled with curtains of black velvet, doubled back and forth, thousands and thousands of meters of blackness. "Here it is," Johann said. "Look well, little Leah, for in all the world, you will never see such another."

Somewhere there was a fan that pushed air past the curtains; I could feel it on my face, cool, damp air moving sluggishly past. The floor of the room was covered with white dust, glistening in the darkness. I reached down to touch it, and Johann reached out to still my hand. "Not to touch," he said.

"What is it?" I asked in wonder.

"Can't you smell it?"

And I could smell it, in fact, I had been nearly holding my breath to avoid smelling it. The smell was thick, pungent, almost choking. It made my eyes water. "Ammonia," I said.

Johann nodded, smiling. His eyes were bright. "Ammonium nitrate," he said.

I was silent most of the way back to the fortified basement we shared with two other families. There must have been bombs, for there were always the birds, but I do not recall them. At last, just before we came to the river, I asked, "Why?"

"Oh, my little Leah, think. We are cut off here. Do we have electrical generators to run coilguns like the barbarians that surround us? We do not. What can we do, how can we defend ourselves? The molecular still sorts molecules out of the air. Nitrogen, oxygen, water; this is all that is needed to make explosives, if only we can combine them correctly. My molecular still takes the nitrogen out of the air, makes out of it ammonium nitrate, which we use to fire our cannons, to hold

the barbarians away from our city."

I thought about this. I knew about molecules by then, knew about nitrogen and oxygen, although not about explosives. Finally something occurred to me, and I asked, "But what about the energy? Where does the energy come from?"

Johann smiled, his face almost glowing with delight. "Ah, my little Leah, you know the right questions already. Yes, the energy. We have designed our still to work by using a series of reactions, each one using no more than a gnat's whisker of energy. Nevertheless, you are right, we must needs steal energy from somewhere. We draw the thermal energy of the air. But old man entropy, he cannot be cheated so easily. To do this we need a heat sink."

I didn't know then enough to follow his words, so I merely repeated his words dumbly: "A heat sink?"

He waved his arm, encompassing the river, flowing dark beneath a thin sheet of ice. "And what a heat sink! The barbarians know we are manufacturing arms; we fire the proof of that back at them every day, but they do not know where! And here it is, right before them, the motive power for the greatest arms factory of all of Austria, and they cannot see it."

Molecular still or not, the siege went on. The Pan-Slavics drove back the Tenth Crusade, and resumed their attack on the city. In February the armies entered the city twice, and twice the ragged defenders drove them back. In April, once more, the flowers bloomed, and once more, we had survived another winter.

It had been months since I had had a bath; there was no heat to waste on mere water, and in any case, there was no soap. Now, at last, we could wash, in water drawn directly from the Salzach, scrubbing and digging to get rid of the lice of winter.

We stood in line for hours waiting for a day's ration of macaroni, the humanitarian aid that had been air-dropped into the city, and hauled enormous drums across the city to replenish our stockpile of drinking water.

Summer rain fell, and we hoarded the water from rain gutters for later use. All that summer the smell of charred stone hung

in the air. Bullet-riddled cars, glittering shards of glass, and fragments of concrete and cobblestone covered the streets. Stone heads and gargoyles from blasted buildings would look up at you from odd corners of the city.

Basements and tunnels under the city were filled out with mattresses and camp beds as makeshift living quarters for refugees, which became sweaty and smelly during summer, for all that they had been icy cold in winter. Above us, the ground would shake as the birds flew in, and plaster dust fell from the ceiling.

I was growing up. I had read about sex, and knew it was a natural part of the pattern of life, the urging of chromosomes to divide and conquer the world. I tried to imagine it with everybody I saw, from Johann to passing soldiers, but couldn't ever make my imagination actually believe in it. There was enough sex going on around me—we were packed together tightly, and humans under stress copulate out of desperation, out of boredom, and out of pure instinct to survive. There was enough to see, but I couldn't apply anything of what I saw to myself.

I think, when I was very young, I had some belief that human beings were special, something more than just meat that thought. The siege, an unrelenting tutor, taught me otherwise. A woman I had been with on one day, cuddled in her lap and talking nonsense, the next day was out in the street, bisected by shrapnel, reduced to a lesson in anatomy. If there was a soul it was something intangible, something so fragile that it could not stand up to the gentlest kiss of steel.

People stayed alive by eating leaves, acorns, and, when the humanitarian aid from the sky failed, by grinding down the hard centers of corn cobs to make cakes with the powder.

There were developments in the war, although I did not know them. The Pan-Slavic Army, flying their standard of a two-headed dragon, turned against the triple cross of the New Orthodox Resurgence, and to the east thousands of square kilometers of pacified countryside turned in a day into flaming ruin, as the former allies savaged each other. We could see the smoke in the distance, a huge pillar of black rising kilometers into the sky.

It made no difference to the siege. On the hilltops, the Pan-Slavic Army drove off the New Orthodox Resurgence, and when they were done, the guns turned back on the city. By the autumn, the siege had not lifted, and we knew we would have to face another winter.

Far over our heads, through the ever-present smoke, we could see the lights of freedom, the glimmering of distant cities in the sky, remote from all of the trouble of Earth. "They have no culture," Johann said. "They have power, yes, but they have no souls, or they would be helping us. Aluminum and rock, what do they have? Life, and nothing else. When they have another thousand years, they will still not have a third of the reality of our city. Freedom, hah! Why don't they *help* us, eh?"

The winter was slow frozen starvation. One by one, the artillery pieces that defended our city failed, for we no longer had the machine shops to keep them in repair, nor the tools to make shells. One by one the vicious birds fired from distant hilltops found the homes of our guns and ripped them apart. By the middle of February, we were undefended.

And the birds continued to fall.

Sometimes I accompanied Johann to the molecular still. Over the long months of siege, they had modified it so that it now distilled from air and water not merely nitrate, but finished explosive ready for the guns, tons per hour. But what good was it now, when there were no guns left for it to feed? Of the eight men who had given it birth, only two still survived to tend it, old one-legged Nguyen, and Johann.

One day Nguyen stopped coming. The place he lived had been hit, or he had been struck in transit. There was no way I would ever find out.

There was nothing left of the city to defend, and almost nobody able to defend it. Even those who were willing were starved too weak to hold a weapon.

All through February, all through March, the shelling continued, despite the lack of return fire from the city. They must have known that the resistance was over. Perhaps, Johann said, they had forgotten that there was a city here at all, they were shelling the city now for no other reason than

that it had become a habit. Perhaps they were shelling us as a punishment for having dared to defy them.

Through April, the shelling continued. There was no food, no heat, no clean water, no medicine to treat the wounded.

When Johann died, it took me four hours to remove the rubble from his body, pulling stones away as birds falling around me demolished a building standing a block to the east, one two blocks north. I was surprised at how light he was, little more than a feather pillow. There was no place to bury him; the graveyards were all full. I placed him back where he had lain, crossed his hands, and left him buried in the rubble of the basement where we had spent our lives entwined.

I moved to a new shelter, a tunnel cut out of the solid rock below the Mönchsberg, an artificial cavern where a hundred families huddled in the dark, waiting for an end to existence. It had once been a parking garage. The moisture from three hundred lungs condensed on the stone ceiling and dripped down on us.

At last, at the end of April, the shelling stopped. For a day there was quiet, and then the victorious army came in. There were no alleys to baffle their tanks now. They came dressed in plastic armor, faceless soldiers with railguns and omniblasters thrown casually across their backs; they came flying the awful standard of the Pan-Slavic Army, the two-headed dragon on a field of blue crosses. One of them must have been Dragan Vukadinovi´c, Dragan the Cleanser, the Scorpion of Bratislava, but in their armor I could not know which one. With them were the diplomats, explaining to all who would listen that peace had been negotiated, the war was over, and our part of it was that we would agree to leave our city and move into camps to be resettled elsewhere.

Would the victors write the history, I wondered? What would they say, to justify their deeds? Or would they, too, be left behind by history, a minor faction in a minor event forgotten against the drama of a destiny working itself out far away?

It was a living tide of ragged humans that met them, dragging the crippled and wounded on improvised sledges. I found it hard to believe that there could be so many left. Nobody noticed a dirty twelve-year-old girl, small for her age, slip

away. Or if they did notice, where could she go?

The molecular still was still running. The darkness, the smell of it, hidden beneath a ruined, deserted Salzburg, was a comfort to me. It alone had been steadfast. In the end, the humans who tended it had turned out to be too fragile, but it had run on, alone in the dark, producing explosives that nobody would ever use, filling the caverns and the dungeons beneath a castle that had once been the proud symbol of a proud city. Filling it by the ton, by the thousands of tons, perhaps even tens of thousands of tons.

I brought with me an alarm clock, and a battery, and I sat for a long time in the dark, remembering the city.

And in the darkness, I could not bring myself to become the angel of destruction, to call down the cleansing fire I had so dreamed of seeing brought upon my enemies. In order to survive, you must become tough, Johann had once told me; you must become hard. But I could not become hard enough. I could not become like *them*.

And so I destroyed the molecular still, and fed the pieces into the Salzach. For all its beauty and power, it was fragile, and when I had done, there was nothing left by which someone could reconstruct it, or even understand what it had been. I left the alarm clock and the battery, and ten thousand tons of explosives, behind me in the catacombs.

Perhaps they are there still.

It was, I am told, the most beautiful, the most civilized, city in the world. The many people who told me that are all dead now, and I remember it only through the eyes of a child, looking up from below and understanding little.

Nothing of that little girl remains. Like my civilization, I have remade myself anew. I live in a world of peace, a world of mathematics and sky-cities, the opening of the new renaissance. But, like the first renaissance, this one was birthed in fire and war.

I will never tell this to anybody. To people who were not there, the story is only words, and they could never understand. And to those who *were* there, we who lived through the long siege

of Salzburg and somehow came out alive, there is no need to speak.

In a very long lifetime, we could never forget.

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