

# The Line of Dichotomy

*Chris Roberson*

Bannerman Yao Guanzhong approached the bacteria farm, saber drawn, keeping behind cover, hidden from view by the large, sheltering yardangs. Close behind him followed Bannermen Jue and Seto, with Zong bringing up the rear. They'd left Bei back near the crawler in an entrenched position, braced to withstand the recoil of his rifle in the low Fire Star gravity, to cover their retreat. Bei was the most accomplished marksman in the squad. But he had displayed in recent months a ruthless impatience for hand-to-hand combat, and this was an operation which required subtlety and restraint.

It had been two days since the squad had picked up the garbled transmission from the farm. They had been squeezed into the crawler, tending to their minor wounds and bruises, returning to base camp after an operation in the west, out along the boundary between the highlands to the south and the lowlands to the north. They had been running silent for some time; radio communication with their base had been impeded by sandstorms to the east. Through bursts of static they heard a coded call for assistance from a technician at a bacteria farm, a few hundred kilometers from their present position. He was pinned down with a group of others by a Mexic raiding party. Assuming - rightly, it seemed - that no one else would have been in range to pick up the garbled transmission, Yao had ordered Bannerman Zong to divert course and head east toward the farm.

Drawing nearer the bacteria farm, Yao motioned to his men with a series of abbreviated hand signals. He crawled on his belly, until his helmet just crested a low rise, to survey the terrain stretched before them. The farm was still a few hundred meters off. From Yao's vantage, he could see the nearest of the Mexica positioned around it, entrenched to counteract the low gravity, armed with rifles and Mexic fire-lances. In their garishly-painted surface suits, they stood out in sharp contrast to the dull pinkish-orange of the soil and sand. Yao could see, stretching out in intervals in both directions, a ring of Mexic warriors, encircling the farm.

The surface suits of the Mexica were, in principle, the same basic design as those of Middle Kingdom manufacture. Their surface suits were not pressurized, like the bulky suits used out in orbit, or on the surface of the Earth's moon. They were constructed from an elastic mesh that applied roughly the same pressure to the body as Earth's atmosphere at sea-level. Much lighter than a pressure suit, the surface suits also granted the wearer a broader range of motion. Most importantly, only the helmets were airtight,

so that if a cut or tear ripped open the elastic on any of the extremities, the worst the wearer would suffer would be a bad bruise and a frozen bit of skin. Cut a hole in a pressure suit, by contrast, and you would die of suffocation in a matter of minutes. Crack the helmet on a surface suit, and you'd be dead even faster, quickly and painfully.

Joints at shoulders, hips, elbows, and knees allowed for freedom of movement. The helmet, reinforced and strong enough to withstand a significant impact, was sealed onto the hardshell carapace that covered the wearer's chest. The carapace provided room for the wearer to breathe, which the constrictive elastic would not, while the armored casing on the rear of the carapace housed the suit's air and water supplies.

While the surface suits of the Middle Kingdom were utilitarian and plain, with only markings and colorations required to denote rank and position, those of the Mexica were gaudy and arresting. Painted in a riot of colors, their suits were designed to resemble Earth animals and figures from myth and legend. Helmets constructed to resemble the heads of birds of prey, the faceplate set with a hawk's beak. Suits painted yellow with black spots, made to resemble a jaguar's hide. And stranger creatures still: blue demons, skull faces of white, black suits spangled with starfields and emblems.

Yao had long since given up wondering how the Mexic warriors could wear such outlandish armor without dying of shame. It hardly mattered, anyway. They were his enemies. What difference was it to him if they went to their reward dressed as a chicken or a dog? They would bleed and die the same as if they were dressed as men.

After a few moments of careful study, Yao detected a weak section of the Mexic line. Several dozen meters from his current position were two Mexica, the barrels of their rifles facing the bacteria farm, their backs to Yao and his men. A distance of over fifty meters separated the pair from the next post of warriors to their left, of over sixty meters to their right. As they were positioned in a slight shallow in the rockface, the ground to either side of them rose at a gentle slope for a few dozen meters before dropping off again. With the Mexica stationed on either side entrenched and low to the ground, if Yao and his men approached the pair keeping low to the ground themselves, the chances of the banner men being seen would be reduced considerably. Still, if the Mexica on either side were to stand and look directly toward the pair of Mexic warriors, Yao and his men would be exposed to projectiles fired from either side, if not both.

To the east, beyond the plinths and yardangs, Yao could see a dust

storm rising. It would be upon them in a matter of moments. Yao allowed himself a tight smile. It hardly mattered to the bannermen, since they had traveled in strict radio silence since leaving the crawler on foot. Once it hit it would serve to hamper their Mexic enemies, making it difficult for them to keep in visual contact with one another and garbling their radio transmissions. That was the cover they needed.

Yao slid back down the rise and, through a series of simple hand gestures, relayed his orders to his men. In a few moments, when the storm's leading edge hit, they would charge over the rise and take out the pair of Mexica, quickly and without giving the warriors time to raise the alarm. Then, as the dust wall swelled, the gap in the line would be wide enough for them to approach the bacteria farm, undetected by the rest of the enemy.

Seto moved into position at Yao's side while Zong, Yao's second-in-command, and Jue, the newest member of the squad, moved forward, their sabers drawn and ready.

As Zong and Jue inched over the rise, keeping low to present as little profile as possible, Seto tapped Yao's elbow. He made a motion with his hands, two fists brought together, knuckle to knuckle. He wanted to talk.

Yao sighed and, turning from the waist, leaned forward until the faceplate of his helmet was touching that of Seto's.

"Chief," the voice of Seto buzzed in Yao's helmet, the vibrations transmitted through the faceplates in contact. "Not to question your judgment, but wouldn't it be safer to entrench further back, with a clear line of sight, and pick the two Mexic off with rifle fire?" Seto jerked a thumb to indicate the long-barreled rifle slung in a harness on his back, secured to his carapace.

Yao shook his head, fractionally, careful not to move his helmet out of contact with Seto's. "Even if the projectile punctures through the hardshell into their bodies, even with a chest shot, they'll still have a few moments to call for help, and we can't count on the dust to block out all radio traffic. A headshot would do it, if we had a clear shot through their faceplates, but from the rear it's more likely to ricochet off the armor plating."

"So it's the hose, then?" Seto asked.

Yao gave an affirmative hand signal and then pulled away, getting back into position.

The surface suits of the Mexica were, if anything, better armored than those of the Middle Kingdom. However, they had one significant flaw - a hose leading from the airtanks at their back up into their airtight helmets looped, for the span of a few bare centimeters, into the open air. Early Middle Kingdom surface suits had shared this same design flaw until the artificers of the Dragon Throne devised a means to route the airflow directly from the tanks, through the carapace seal, into the helmet. The warriors of the Mexic Dominion, though, were still forced to go to battle with this one fatal problem. The Mexica were aware of the weakness, but it was a rare occasion in a melee when a bannerman had an opportunity to exploit it, since the Mexica were always on their guard.

The pair of Mexica nearest them faced away from Yao and his men, exposing the airhose at their shoulders. If Zong and Jue were able to creep right up to the Mexica without being spotted, they could sever the airhoses. If they then delivered a blow to the Mexica's abdomens, driving out the oxygen in their lungs, the pair would be left unable to speak as they suffocated quickly, unable to call through their helmet radios for help. If the Mexica were able to squeak a few last syllables before expiring, Yao had to hope that the dust storm would provide sufficient interference that radio signals would not travel far, even over short distances.

Yao snaked up the rise, just far enough to see over the crest, to where his men stealthily approached the Mexica. They were now just within saber range. Yao's palms itched; a part of him wished he could always take point himself in these circumstances and not be forced to delegate to his men.

"Come on," Yao whispered, his voice rebounding low and harsh in the helmet for no one's ears but his. "Strike. Now!"

Zong and Jue carried out their mission with textbook accuracy, though Jue became over-exuberant and, rather than merely striking his target in the abdomen after severing his airhose, drove his saber point-first into the Mexica's stomach. When he pulled it out, blood sprayed over a meter in a bright, arterial spray, painting the sands an even darker shade of red. Luckily for Jue, the Mexica was no more able to sound the alarm than his comrade, now fallen at Zong's feet, had been.

Yao slid a short distance back down the rise and, turning, signaled to Seto. The pair of them then maneuvered forward to join Zong and Jue.

The storm bore down on them. After Yao checked both sides,

standing at his full height, he nodded in grim satisfaction to see that the nearest Mexic positions were obscured from view. The way was, for a brief moment at least, clear. He signaled his men to proceed. They made their way across the open ground to the bacteria farm as quickly as their long, loping strides would carry them.

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The bacteria farm was essentially a low, wide dome. It was the same pinkish-orange as all the buildings constructed of materials fabricated from the rock and soil of Fire Star, with airlocks of metal and ceramic set at intervals around its circumference. It stood only five or six meters tall, while its diameter was easily three times that. Here and there, through the obfuscating dust swirling in the thin air around them, they could see the pockmarks of Mexic projectile fire, and scorched areas where fire-lances had been sprayed against it. The Mexica had not been able to get through the heavy, reinforced doors of the airlock and so had been forced to encircle the farm, in the hopes of starving out those trapped within.

Yao and the other bannermen huddled in the lees of the nearest airlock. The way was barred from within, naturally, and the call controls set in their metal plate had been completely destroyed by projectile fire. Undeterred, Yao pounded repeatedly on the door with the base of his saber's hilt. He positioned his helmet's faceplate in front of the thick viewport of transparent ceramic.

The airlock and the farm beyond, as seen through the small viewport, seemed darkened and deserted. He continued to pound on the doorway, hoping that the airlock was currently full and that the sound of his pounding would carry to the farm beyond. He wondered whether anyone survived within the structure or not. At length, a shadowed helmet appeared on the other side of the viewport. Dimly visible eyes met Yao's own.

"Let us in!" Yao shouted. His faceplate was pressed to the viewport, but he exaggerated his mouth's movements in the event that the sound of his voice was unable to propagate through the unbreakable ceramic.

The shadowed eyes on the other side of the viewport seemed to hesitate, uncertain, and then disappeared from view. At first, Yao thought that they had been left outside to rot, but after a few moments Yao could feel the door begin to vibrate through the fabric of his gloves as the lock was cycled slowly open.

In brief moments, the door was open, and Yao and the other

bannermen slipped into the open chamber. As they closed the door to the outside behind them, they saw that they were alone in the chamber. The airlock slowly drew in air, the pressure gradually increasing. The lights inside the airlock were extinguished, the only illumination the faint daylight visible through the viewport.

Finally the lock completed its cycle, and the door to the farm's interior began to open. Yao signaled his men to keep their helmets locked and pressurized, and to advance with their weapons at the ready. This time Yao took point. His saber held before him, he cautiously advanced through the open door.

"That's far enough," Yao heard a voice say in Official Speech, sounding muffled and distant through his heavy helmet.

In the corridor before him, lit dimly by red lamps burning high overhead, stood a woman in a surface suit, her helmet on the ground at her side, a rifle trained on Yao, its butt against her shoulder.

Yao reached up, slowly, and hit the latch that lifted his helmet's faceplate. The stale air of the farm hit him like a wave smelling of unwashed bodies, offal, and despair.

"You don't want to fire that thing, lady," Yao said, his voice level. "The recoil will knock you off your feet, and you'll land on your hindquarters at least a meter back."

"Maybe," the woman said, smiling slightly but not lowering the rifle's barrel a centimeter. "But by then you'd have a projectile buried in your body, wouldn't you, so you'd have better things to worry about than how foolish I looked, I think."

Yao smiled back and lowered the tip of his saber to the ground.

"We caught your call for help over the radio, two days back," Yao said, stepping forward as his men came around the door to stand behind him. "We've come to rescue you."

"Well it's about time," the woman said, and lowered the rifle. "We had about decided that this damned dome would be our tomb. Those of us who haven't already gone on to our rewards."

The woman slung the rifle over her shoulder, and then held out her hand to Yao.

“My name is Thien Ziling,” she said, “and I suppose I’m in charge here.”

“Bannerman Yao Guanzhong,” he answered, taking her hand, “and as far as I’m concerned, I’m in charge here now.”

“You won’t get any complaints from me,” Thien said, then turned and headed back up the corridor. “Come along, and I’ll introduce you to what’s left of us. Then you can get right to the rescuing part.”

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Thien led them to a small central chamber, where two men and a woman sprawled along the wall, eyes half-lidded in the harsh-light from the lamps above, and vacant, weary expressions on their dirty faces.

“Crew, meet our rescuers,” Thien said, propping her rifle against the wall. She hung her helmet on a hook on the wall and collapsed into a makeshift chair constructed of shipping crates. In the chamber’s light, Yao could see now that she was older than he’d first imagined, fifty terrestrial years old at least. The years showed their tracks in the lines around her eyes. “Rescuers, meet what’s left of the Fifth Regional Tech and Resupply Division, Third Work Crew. Those two are all that remains of my technicians, Kuai Cunxin” - she pointed at the middle-aged man, sitting with his legs folded under him - “and Min Jinping” - she pointed to the younger woman, no more than twenty terrestrial years old. “And that one there” - she indicated a young man in the uniform of the Army of the Green Standard, sitting with his legs folded up, his chin resting on his knees - “is Xun... Xun... Hey, Xun, what’s your name again?”

“Xun Bingzhang,” the young man said, his voice sounding hollow and far away. There were deep shadows beneath his eyes, and his skin looked wan and mottled.

“Right. Well, Xun was one of the soldiers assigned as our protection on this trek. There was another, Dea something or other, but he got picked off by sniper fire before we reached the safety of the farm, and who knows what happened to his body once we got inside. There was another tech with us at that point, a man named Ang who’d been with the crew for a few Fire Star years, but he caught a projectile in the leg, right through an artery. He bled out before we could get him stitched up. He’s stored in one of the cold storage lockers” - Thien jerked a thumb at a row of doors set into the wall behind her - “but I don’t see any reason to dig him out. He’ll keep just

fine back there, for as long as he needs to. Besides," she smiled up at Yao, "I don't figure you were all that hot to be introduced to him anyway, were you?"

Yao smiled, grimly and shook his head. "So this is all of you, then?"

Thien looked around, as though making a final headcount. "Yes, this is it."

"And are you all fit to travel?"

"Well, Xun got clipped by a projectile in the abdomen, below the line of his carapace," Thien answered, "but we were able to get his wound bandaged and the fabric of his surface suit repaired once we got inside. I think the wound is infected, but we don't have a full medical kit on hand, so there wasn't anything we could do about it."

"We've got a full kit back in the crawler," Yao said. "Once we're onboard we can get the wound disinfected and properly dressed." He turned and flashed an affirmative hand signal at the Green Standard soldier. "You hold on, soldier. You hear me?"

Xun nodded, his head wobbling slightly from side to side. He licked his lips before answering, "Y-yes, sir. I hear you."

"Good." Yao sheathed his saber at his side. He paced back and forth across the small chamber's floor, considering their options. "Now, here is what we're going to do. We're going to gather up whatever supplies you've got on hand. Water, oxygen tanks, foodstuffs, any essentials. Then we're going to haul out to our crawler as quickly as we're able, and we're all going to make it out of this in one piece. You hear me?"

"It's all in the crawler," the young woman named Min said.

Yao turned to her. "What?"

"All our gear," said Kuai, the older technician at her side. "It's all still back in our crawler, outside the farm."

"Not all of it, you two," Thien said, shaking her head like someone scolding a poorly trained pet.

"We managed to bring in a fair amount of water and oxygen when we got here, before the shooting started."



“But not enough,” Kuai said, a hysterical edge to his voice. “How long can we last on it?”

“Long enough,” Thien said, but Yao looked from the two technicians to their leader, unconvinced.

“How much do you have, Thien, in the way of provisions?”

“We could have held out for another couple of days on what we have here, probably. We’d have run out of food before we ran out of water, and run out of both long before we ran out of air. Lucky for us the oxygen scrubbers in the farm’s temporary living quarters are still operational, so we haven’t had to crack open any of the tanks we brought in with us when the Mexica attacked.”

Yao chewed on the inside of his cheek, doing quick sums in his head.

“It’ll be tight, but we should be able to make it back to base camp, if we don’t hit any snags,” he said, at length. “Suit up, everybody. I want to try to get out of here and back to our crawler before the dust storm passes.”

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Thien and her crew took longer to get themselves ready to move than Yao would have liked, certainly longer than it would have taken a full division of bannermen, but their luck held out. By the time everyone was ready to get moving, the dust storm still blew outside. It provided ample cover for the eight of them to make it across the open ground without being seen, and through the hole in the Mexic line that Yao and his men had punched just a short while earlier.

With Yao in the lead and Zong bringing up the rear, they made their way through the yardangs toward the position where the bannermen’s crawler was secreted, behind a large outcropping of rock. They traveled in complete silence, their radios set only to receive, watchful of any sign of Mexic pursuit.

When they reached the midway point between the farm and the bannermen’s crawler, Yao motioned the others to come to a halt. Crawling up a slight rise, he could see the rock outcropping just shy of a half-kilometer ahead, hazed only slightly in the lightening dust storm. He pulled a disk of metal from a pocket on his upper arm, polished to a mirror sheen, and used it to flash the light from the indistinct disc of the sun

towards the rocky outcropping. He waited, looking for a flash in response. None came, so he signaled again, and again. Still nothing.

Yao turned, and motioned for Zong to join him on the crest of the rise. When the bannerman reached his side, Yao gave the hand signals for a remote-viewing mirror. Zong unlatched a sheath on his thigh and handed over a long, slender tube capped with precision-ground lenses on either end.

Yao held the remote-viewing mirror up to his faceplate. Through the glass he could see Bannerman Bei in his prescribed position, just as Yao had ordered, obscured from the direct view of the farm.

He had a rifle at the ready and his sword at his side, driven point-first into the ground.

Swearing under his breath, Yao turned to Zong and brought his fists together, knuckles touching. When Zong's faceplate touched with his, he said, "Bei is dead. We're walking into a trap."

He handed Zong the remote-viewing mirror and slid back down the rise to join the others.

Yao hated to risk using the radios to communicate to the others, but time was of the essence. He signaled with quick hand gestures for everyone to turn their broadcast settings to the lowest power. With any luck, down in the slight ravine, and with the last of the dust storm passing overhead, their radio signals wouldn't carry as far as the nearest Mexico, whether waiting in front of them or still in position around the farm behind.

"Listen up," Yao said, after motioning the others to huddle together. "We've got to find another way out of here. Our crawler is out of the question."

"What do you mean?" Thien glared through her faceplate at Yao. "There's really only forward or back, isn't there? And I tell you now, I'm not about to head back to that thrice-damned farm."

Zong, taking a few long leaps from the base of the rise, came to stand beside Yao, tucking the remote-viewing mirror back into the sheath at his side. "I concur with Bannerman Yao. Bei is dead, and the crawler compromised."

"How can you be so sure?" Min objected.

“Bei was obsessive about his equipment, his weapons in particular,” Zong explained. “He would never have stuck it into the ground in so reckless a fashion.”

“Most likely,” Yao said, “he was picked off at a distance by Mexic sniper fire and left as bait. The Mexica will capture the rest of us alive, if possible, to torture and execute at their leisure.”

“No, thank you,” Thien said, shuddering. “I’m in no hurry to die, but if I am to do so, it better be damned quick.”

“No one’s dying,” Yao said sharply, then added, his tone more reserved, “No one else is dying, at least.” He turned, glancing from one faceplate to another. “Listen, there’s got to be an alternate mode of transport available to us. Kuai, you mentioned a crawler. Where’s that?”

“It’s still parked on the far side of the bacteria farm,” Kuai answered.

“It should still be parked there,” Thien interjected, “but the Mexica could have driven off with it, or buried it for all we know. We haven’t been back there since we first reached the farm.”

“Well, at the moment, it’s our best chance. The Mexica must have seen our approach, and sent enough warriors to subdue us back at our crawler. The fact that they haven’t attacked us yet means they don’t know that we’ve gotten back out of their lines. They must still think we’re inside the farm. If we can work our way around to the north, skirting the Mexic line in a broad circle, we should be able to stay safely out of view of the Mexica still in position around the farm.” Yao paused, glancing around those gathered before him. “Any questions?”

Silence was their only response.

“Fair enough,” Yao said. “Then let’s move.”

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It took the better part of several hours, traveling in a wide arc, as near to the farm as was absolutely necessary, but finally Yao signaled the others to stop. They had gone far enough. He motioned to Zong, retrieved the remote-viewing mirror, and trotted ahead, keeping as low to the ground as the gravity would allow with each short step. Finally, peering around an outcropping of rock, he trained the remote-viewing mirror on the scene

before him, surveying the situation. To his left, obscured by plinths and yardangs, rose the bulk of the farm's dome. Here and there he could see little flashes of bright, garish colors, indicators that Mexic warriors were still in position. To the right, outside the Mexic line and some distance from the farm, was Thien's crawler. Smaller than that of the bannermen, it was lying on its side, a burnt husk, surrounded by a halo of broken machinery in bits and pieces.

Yao made his way back to the others. With their radios set to the lower broadcast setting, and squatting low to the ground, he described the state of the crawler, left demolished, burnt, and inoperable.

"But how could anything burn here?" the Green Standard soldier Xun asked, waving his arm to take in all of Fire Star, with its oxygen-poor atmosphere.

"They must have used magnesium charges," Thien said. "That stuff'll burn like crazy in carbon dioxide."

Yao nodded, impressed. "You must have been on Fire Star a long while," he said to her.

Thien shrugged, the movement obscured by the bulk of her surface suit's carapace.

"At this juncture," Yao went on, "we don't have any choice but to proceed on foot. I've got to do an inventory, but I can't imagine we've got enough oxygen and water to last us for more than a few days. Now, is there any safe harbor in that kind of radius?"

"None that I know of, chief," Zong said, his head shaking within his helmet.

"Damn," Yao said. "Okay, here's the order of the day. Zong, Jue, and Seto, I want you three to range out and scout the terrain. See what our options are, and report back. I'll work with Thien on getting a full accounting of our resources, and then we'll see where we're at."

The three bannermen saluted and turned to head out.

"You're with me," Yao said, pointing a finger at Thien.

In the following hour, Yao and Thien supervised as Kuai, Min, and Xun checked and rechecked the levels on their oxygen tanks and water

supplies. When the numbers came up distressingly small, Yao ordered them checked again, and finally insisted on personally verifying each of the numbers individually. But each time, the answer was the same. Divided amongst the eight of them, their supplies could last no more than two days, three at the absolute maximum.

Yao sat on a spur of rock, considering their options, waiting for the three bannermen to return. After a long while, Thien came to sit beside him. She switched off her radio, tapped first her faceplate, then his. Yao, curious, switched off the broadcast on his own radio and leaned in until their faceplates touched.

“Listen, something just occurred to me,” Thien said, her voice buzzing in Yao’s helmet, “but I didn’t want to broadcast it to everyone until you had a chance to think it over. I’m not absolutely certain, but I think there used to be an old research facility about a two-day walk to the north-east from here, in the direction of Bao Shan. But it’s been a few Fire Star years since I last saw it, if this is the place I’m remembering, and I don’t know if it’s still up and running.”

“So it’s a long shot?” Yao said simply.

Thien only smiled, weakly. “Basically, yes.”

A few moments later, Zong, Jue, and Seto returned from scouting the terrain. No good news lurked in their reports. When their findings had been collated, it appeared that they had wandered into the one gap in the area, with large concentrations of Mexica to the northwest and the southeast. Behind them to the south lay the bannermen’s crawler and the trap baited by their dead comrade, and the farm to the west. Their only option was to travel northeast.

It appeared that Thien’s long shot was the only chance they had.

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For the rest of that long afternoon, they traveled across the yardangs. The bulk of Bao Shan loomed on the horizon before them, the tallest mountain in the solar system. The evening meal was eaten on the march, water and liquefied field rations fed through nozzles set inside their helmets. The storm had abated, somewhat, though there was still too much atmospheric interference for them to have any hope of radioing for assistance, even if their small helmet radios could carry more than a kilometer at best.

At Yao's orders, they kept communication to a minimum. Unless absolutely necessary, they were to maintain complete radio silence and to keep their radio transmitters turned down to the lowest broadcast signal in the event of an emergency. Only when they stopped to rest, periodically, erecting temporary shelters of metallic fabric pulled from the bannermen's survival kits, were they able to communicate freely. The reflective material served not only to block out the bright rays of the sun coming in, but also blocked any outgoing radio transmissions from within.

They weren't able to remove any part of their suits, even when they stopped to rest. The external pressure was far too low and the thin atmosphere was far too cold for their skin to handle. So they stayed suited up at all times, helmets pressurized and locked to their carapaces, their skin growing ever more chafed and worn.

They traveled in a narrow column, Zong and Jue in the lead, followed by Kuai and Min, then Yao, then Thien, and finally Seto and Xun bringing up the rear. They made slow but steady progress through the fossae, with the sand-sculpted yardangs to either side of them. These streamlined ridges were shaped like inverted boat hulls, some of them no more than a few centimeters long and fewer high. Others ran several kilometers from end to end, standing almost thirty meters tall.

At sunset, they made camp. Seto carried in his survival kit a tent capable of being pressurized and filled with air, but Yao had no intention of using their already diminished oxygen reserves needlessly. He ordered Jue and Seto to erect the radiation shade instead. Everyone would sleep the night in their suits, however much they chose to grumble.

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"Chief," Zong said, coming to sit beside Yao beneath the radiation shade. The other two bannermen were setting up watch for the night. The survivors of the work crew stretched out on the ground some distance away, resting their sore and complaining muscles, their eyes on the stars dancing overhead. The bright, gray-white moons moved in their courses, the smaller making its way slowly from east to west, the larger speeding from west to east.

"Yes, Zong?" Yao tongued the water nozzle back into position on the side of his helmet, licking his lips. The stale, reconstituted water they'd scavenged from the bacteria farm was acrid and foul on his tongue, but it beat dying of dehydration.

"This is something that... maybe we shouldn't..." Zong paused. He made a show of switching off his radio transmitter, and then brought his fists together, knuckles first. Yao switched off his own broadcast and leaned in, faceplates touching. "I think we're walking into another trap, chief," Zong said at last, the faceplates vibrating with the sound of his voice.

"What makes you say that?"

"It was just too convenient to find that the Mexica had left such a large stretch of terrain to the northeast of the bacteria farm unguarded. Maybe the Mexica anticipated that we might not take the bait at our crawler, and so put a secondary trap in place, somewhere out here. We could be walking into an ambush."

"I can't disagree," Yao said, after a long pause, "but I don't see that we've got any choice, do we? We can't radio for assistance, and if we entrench here, waiting for them to come after us, we'll run out of oxygen within a matter of days. We could try to make it back into the farm, but the Mexica would pick us off before we could make the airlock. So our only choice is just to press on and be ready for any attack when it comes."

"Well, you're the chief," Zong said with a sigh. "I'll go check on the pickets, and then catch a few hours' sleep before it's my watch."

Yao sat in silence until Thien appeared before him, lifting the edge of the radiation shade with a gloved hand and peering in at him.

"Am I interrupting your thoughts?" she radioed to him.

"No," Yao said. He realized his transmitter was still off when she repeated her question. He switched his radio back to broadcast, at the lowest signal, and then said, "No, you're welcome to join me."

Thien slid beneath the metallic canopy and maneuvered herself into a sitting position, her legs stretched out before her, leaning back on her elbows. The position, the most comfortable one could achieve in a surface suit, gave her a relaxed appearance which her tone did not reflect.

"I've just checked on Xun's status," Thien said, pointing out across the sands to where the Green Standard soldier lay against the gentle slope of the nearest yardang. "It doesn't look good. I can't tell through his suit, of course, but I think he's feverish. He's started complaining of chills, and through his faceplate he looks even paler than before." She drew a heavy breath. "I think his infection is getting worse."

“Yes,” Yao said, nodding, his voice low, “I noticed that at our mid-afternoon stop. It’s unpleasant, I know, but there isn’t anything for it but to press on, and hope that his body can fight off the infection long enough for us to reach proper facilities.”

Thien turned from the waist up, so she could look directly into Yao’s faceplate. “And just what are the chances of that happening, Yao?” From her tone, she didn’t seem optimistic.

“There is every chance that none of us will reach safety. But there is that same slim chance every time any of us go walking out on the surface of Fire Star. So, in that respect, current circumstances just aren’t that unusual.”

“Humph,” Thien answered, expelling air through pursed lips. “That sounds like a pretty pessimistic view, doesn’t it?”

Yao sighed and squeezed his eyes shut. Then he leaned in close, his voice low. “Listen, morale amongst the men is low. Not just my men here, but all of the military on Fire Star. The Mexica have made some significant advances in recent months, disrupting the supply train of nitrates to the bacteria farms, impeding the flow of halocarbon gases from the refinery on the northern plain. Meanwhile, construction on Heaven’s Ladder, the orbital elevator that was to rise from the highlands south of Tianfei Valley, has been all but halted and won’t continue until we’ve been able to pacify the region. The Mexica have even managed to hit Burning Mirror from an orbital gunsling, knocking the fixture out of alignment and sending it on a slow course down to the planet’s surface. Technicians are currently working on righting the mirror, but the process is slow and laborious. And there is every chance that, once Burning Mirror is repositioned, the Mexica will be able to strike at it again.”

Thien nodded, her expression grave. “Yes, and every day that the sun’s rays aren’t being redirected down onto the south polar cap is another day that the temperature doesn’t rise and the carbon dioxide remains frozen. And another day longer until Fire Star is inhabitable.”

“Look,” Yao said. He spread his hands, fingers splayed, palms up. “I’m just a simple soldier, and I don’t know too much about that kind of thing. All I know is that people of the Middle Kingdom are in jeopardy, and that the orders of the Dragon Throne aren’t being fulfilled. And that’s why I’m here.”

“How long have you been here, anyway?” Thien asked. “On Fire Star,



I mean?"

"Nearly ten terrestrial years," Yao said, without having to think. "Almost five and a quarter Fire Star years. Before that, I was stationed in Vinland, doing maneuvers along the border with the Mexic Dominion." Yao paused, tonguing his helmet's nozzle into the open position and taking a long sip of acrid water. "How about you?" he asked, licking his lips. "How long have you been on planet?"

"Twenty terrestrial years," Thien answered with a long sigh. "Eleven Fire Star years."

"That long?" Yao was impressed.

"When I was young, just a girl, really, I found employment with the Ministry of Celestial Excursion, translating intercepted Mexic transmissions and documents. My grandmother had emigrated from a satellite state of the Mexic Dominion, and still spoke Nahuatl when I was growing up. But I really just wanted to work with my hands, not spend all day trapped indoors translating cold, dry technical documentation. And so I transferred into the technicians' arm of the Ministry and found a place with the Treasure Fleet to Fire Star. I returned with the Fleet to Earth, but when the Emperor sent the first wave of colonists and technicians back to begin the permanent habitation, there I was among them. I've been operating at Fire Star gravity for so long I don't think I'd ever be able to walk under Earth-normal gravity again. I can't complain, though. I once met a technician who had spent ten terrestrial years stationed at Cold Palace on the surface of the Moon. When he finally returned to Earth, his muscles had atrophied so badly that he could hardly walk. When he did manage to take a few tenuous steps, so much calcium had leached from his bones that his legs broke beneath his weight. He hopped the first transport back to Gold Mountain, rode the line up to Diamond Summit, and went straight back to the Moon. He'd had enough of Earth to last him." She sighed again, peered out under the edge of the radiation shade, and turned to Yao. "How about you? Ever intend to head back to Earth?"

"Me?" Yao gave a muffled shrug. "I'll go where my Emperor sends me. It's not like I have any family to go home to, so it matters little to me."

"I used to dream about returning to Earth," Thien said, wistfully, "in my first years on Fire Star. But now? This is my home now. If not for this damned war, it would be perfect. If we were ever to find peace with the Mexica, it might be perfect again. But either way, I don't think I'm ever going to leave it." She chuckled, ruefully. "Of course, I might die any time now and

my bones will rot unburied beneath these pink skies, in which case the choice is taken out of my hands, isn't it?"

Yao couldn't help but laugh. All around them, the night's darkness deepened.

\* \* \* \*

Xun died in the night. Thien spoke some words over him about the mutability of life, which Yao vaguely recognized as a Taoist prayer, while Zong ordered Seto to retrieve the dead man's oxygen supplies and weapons. The weapons were to be distributed to the technicians in the event that circumstances were such that they'd need them, and the oxygen put with the remainder of their supplies. Thien was given Xun's knife in a sheath-which she attached to a loop at the waist of her suit. Kuai was handed the soldier's rifle, and Min wore his saber.

At Yao's orders they struck camp and set out again. They marched in the same order as the day before, traveling in silence. A dust storm blew, though whether it was the same as the day before or another following in its wake, Yao couldn't say. With the increased interference, they were scarcely able to radio to one another, even from a few feet away. And so they continued on through the morning.

At midmorning they found themselves between two long yardangs, the one to their left rising some twenty meters tall, the one on their right almost thirty. The rock formations stretched before them through the dusty haze farther than the eye could see. And on they walked. On and on until finally, at midday, they reached the end of the long corridor where the two yardangs almost touched. Beyond, in the dusty haze, they could see indistinct hummocks rising from the windblown ground.

Yao felt a tap on his shoulder and turned to see Thien standing behind him. She pointed ahead, her mouth moving behind the faceplate, forming words he could not read. He moved to lean in, to bring their faceplates into contact, when he saw from the corner of his eye Seto raising his weapons in a defensive posture. Yao spun around; Zong and Jue did the same. He drew his saber from its sheath and narrowed his eyes.

Through the curtain of dust before him Yao could see figures rising up from the ground, painted in garish shades. Mexic warriors sprang from concealment in pits dug into the hard ground at the base of the yardangs, weapons at the ready.

Yao turned back to signal to Thien and saw even more Mexica rushing at them from the rear, coming out of the clouds of dust. They were pincered in, trapped.

“Form on me!” Yao roared into his helmet radio, toggling on the transmitter, but got only static in response.

\* \* \* \*

As Yao fought, he caught staccato glimpses of the melee on all sides, brief flashes that strobed before his eyes, bloodstained.

He saw Seto engaged with a Mexica wearing a surface suit decorated to look like a jaguar, carrying a fire-lance. Seto swung his sword in a wide arc, connecting with the Mexica’s helmet and cracking the face plate. The Mexica stumbled back, firing his fire-lance and dousing Seto in a spray of burning liquid magnesium. And then Yao’s attention was torn away.

One Mexica already lay at Yao’s feet. Another rushed toward him, a club lined with razor-sharp blades raised high overhead. Yao just had time to take in the Mexica’s surface suit, its carapace and limb-coverings painted in garish blue, the helmet constructed to resemble a bleached-white skull, the faceplate set in its open maw. As the Mexica brought his club down, ferociously, Yao met it with his saber in a parry that vibrated right to his teeth. In a return movement, Yao drew his saber’s blade across the Mexica’s arm, opening a line in the constrictive fabric just below the elbow joint. His opponent dropped his club, staggering back, clutching the rend, and hissing in pain.

Yao glanced back, catching the briefest glimpse of the tableau behind him: Zong down on his back, saber raised to block the downward swinging club of the Mexica standing above him, while a short distance away Min kneeled on the ground clutching her stained-red shoulder, the saber of the dead Green Standard soldier lying in the dust at her feet.

There was a flash of movement in the corner of his eye. Yao turned to see Thien a few meters from him, Xun’s knife held in her wavering grip. Another Mexic warrior advanced on her, club held high, his surface suit jet black and spangled with white stars, his helmet conical. Yao didn’t waste an instant in thought but rushed over, raising his saber and closing on them.

Before Yao could intercept the blow, the spangled Mexica brought his club down in a two-handed arc, crashing it into Thien’s leg below the knee.

Yao angled as he ran and barreled shoulder-first into the Mexica warrior, knocked him from his feet and sent him sprawling almost a meter. Yao swore beneath his breath as the Mexica managed to maintain his balance, feet planted, and turned to face off against Yao, club raised high overhead.

A long instant passed in which Yao and the spangled Mexica faced one another, each sizing up the other, considering their next moves. Yao's elbows still ached from deflecting the skull-headed Mexica's blows, and his shoulder throbbed from its recent collision with the spangled warrior. He counted himself lucky, though, that the Mexica prized so highly the capture of live prisoners, or he and his men would have been picked off long ago by sniper fire from the Mexica entrenched further along the corridor. The warrior he faced had a rifle slung across his back, but even if the Mexica chose to employ it, he could never get into position before Yao reached him with his saber's point.

Finally Yao and his opponent closed, dancing back and forth, thrust and parry, neither able to get the upper hand. Yao's teeth vibrated with the force of the Mexica's blows, but he was able to drive the warrior back time and again, giving as good as he got. Suddenly, without warning, the Mexica stumbled backward, his hold on the club slipping, the expression behind the faceplate distorting in agony. The Mexica turned away, as though to flee. Yao, startled, caught sight of a brief flash of red and a knife protruding from the Mexica's thigh, the blade buried several centimeters deep in the muscle.

Thien lay close by, propped on her elbow, the knife's sheath in one hand, her face red with exertion and pain behind her faceplate.

Yao smiled grimly. Taking one large stride forward he swung his saber in a precise motion, aiming for the exposed air hose on the Mexica's back. The blade struck home and the hose flopped away, leaving the warrior with only a few mouthfuls of air before he was breathing the thin Fire Star atmosphere. Repositioning, Yao raised his saber again and brought it down in a fierce arc, aiming for the joint between the left arm of the Mexica's surface suit and his armored carapace. The sword bit deep, nearly cleaving the arm from the body. It sent out an arterial spray of bright red that shot an impossible distance through the thin air, freezing in the low pressure and cold so quickly that it fell like scarlet sleet onto the sands.

The dust storm had worsened. Yao could not see more than a few meters in front of him. He knelt down, helping Thien into a sitting position.

He bent low over her, looking over her wounds.

Thien maneuvered her head forward until the faceplate of her helmet made contact with Yao's. "I..." she began, her voice strained. "I saw something ahead, before the attack. Mounds. One of them looked like the entrance to the shelter."

Yao intended to point out that, even if this were so, the shelter they sought was on the other side of a ring of Mexic warriors and beyond a line of entrenched riflemen. But before his lips could frame an answer, another Mexica rushed forward and his response was cut off.

This Mexica's surface suit was fiery red, his helmet made to look like some sort of dog. He carried a mace, a large metal ball on a handle nearly a meter long. Under Earth's gravity, such a weapon would require several men working together just to lift. With Fire Star's lower gravity, one strong man could lift and swing it with relative ease.

Yao raised his saber to parry, but the movement came too late.

The mace crashed into Yao's chest. It caved in the hardshell carapace, pushing the hard metal into his ribcage. Yao's torso exploded with pain. The Mexica was momentarily unbalanced by the inertia of the blow. Yao saw the slimmest window of opportunity, and burst into motion. He lunged forward, ignoring the pain in his ribcage as best he could, and drove his saber point-first into the Mexica's belly, just below the protection of the blood-red chest carapace. As he released his grip on the handle the faceplate of the Mexica went red, matching his dog armor, as the warrior sprayed the inside of his helmet with spitted blood.

Yao blinked back tears and helped Thien unsteadily to her feet. The storm was such now that they could scarcely see a meter ahead of them. Yao could barely force himself to breath, every attempt a riot of agony.

Yao leaned over and touched his faceplate to Thien's. In a harsh whisper, the loudest he could manage, he said, "We should make for the shelter." He left unspoken the hope that Thien was right, and that they weren't just heading for shadows.

\* \* \* \*

Yao could walk, somewhat, but had trouble breathing, every attempt sheer agony. Thien's leg was broken, the fabric of her suit open to the elements, her skin bruising badly. Leaning one against the other, they were able to

make slow, painful progress through the haze.

Miraculously, they managed to blunder their way through the blinding storm without encountering anyone, neither their own people nor the Mexica, and at no point did they feel the sting of a sniper's projectile ripping into their flesh.

After what seemed an eternity, the shadow of the hummock loomed out of the billowing dust and sand before them. Yao could see that it was, indeed, the shelter they had sought. It was a long, low ridge, like a cylinder cut in half, standing some six meters tall with an airlock hatch set into a half-circle of dark metal at one end.

With some difficulty, working together, they opened the hatch and fell into the airlock. The pain in Yao's chest was by now almost unbearable, and he wasn't sure how long he could retain consciousness. He was sure Thien was doing little better.

As the airlock cycled, Thien and Yao were able to communicate via radio, without the dust to scatter the waves.

"This... this was an early research facility, constructed out of a lava tube," she explained, leaning against the rough-hewn wall of the lock. "They just capped the ends, pressurized and heated it, and used it as their base of operations. There are a lot of these sorts of shelters scattered across this hemisphere of Fire Star, though most, like this one, have been deserted for years."

"We..." Yao began, hissing through his teeth with pain. He squeezed his eyes shut and struggled to remain conscious. "We... should be able... to ride out... storm here."

"Assuming the Mexica don't come looking for us."

"Yes." Yao managed a rueful smile and the ghost of a nod. "There is that."

The airlock completed its cycle, the indicator on the inner wall showing a breathable atmosphere beyond. Yao and Thien struggled to remove their helmets; the sickly sweet, stale air of the shelter filtered into their nostrils as the hatch slid open.

Yao took a single step forward, into the gloom. In the dim light beyond the hatch, he could see an indistinct figure seated against the far wall. Yao's

eyes adjusted to the low light and the figure resolved into a Mexica warrior, a fire-lance in his hands, trained on the pair of them.

Reflex took over. Yao rushed forward without stopping to consider his circumstance, arms out, hands curled into fists, but before he had gone more than two steps the searing pain on the right side of his chest blossomed into a wave of agony and nausea that swept over his whole being. His vision went red, and his eyes closed on the world.

\* \* \* \*

Yao was unsure how much time had passed. The air in the shelter smelled to him of sweat and fear, and his mouth felt drier than the red sands of Fire Star.

He lay on the floor, his shoulders on the cold wall of the shelter, still dressed in his surface suit. Without turning his head - the slightest movement was sufficient to send sharp shards of pain through his chest - he saw Thien sitting beside him, her leg in a crude splint, her helmet nowhere to be seen.

“Oh, you’re awake,” Thien said, and saw Yao looking at her leg. Her voice sounded strange in Yao’s ears, so long had it been since he’d heard the sound of it not propagated through glass or transmitted over radio static. “Blue-green Feather set my leg while you slept.”

The Mexic warrior sat a few meters away, the fire-lance laid across his knees, his dark eyes fixed on Yao.

“Blue-green... Blue-green Feather?” Yao managed through gritted teeth.

“Yes.” Thien glanced over at the Mexica guardedly. “His name is Matlalihuitl. That’s what the word means in Nahuatl: Blue-green Feather. He doesn’t talk much, though. When you passed out, he helped me to move you inside and then set my leg. Once he’d made the splint, he sat back down. He hasn’t said a word since.”

Yao moved his head fractionally, the slightest of movements. On the floor at the Mexica’s side he could see his knife, both his and Thien’s helmets, and their provisions stacked neatly. The Mexica’s own helmet lay some distance away, constructed in the shape of a jaguar’s head, its faceplate shattered. From the helmet, and the jaguar pattern painted on the Mexica’s surface suit, Yao recognized him as the warrior Seto had struck

before being doused in burning liquid magnesium.

Thien followed his gaze and nodded. "Blue-green Feather threatened to set fire to you if I didn't bring him your weapons. What I don't understand is why he hasn't just killed us."

"The Mexica prefer to take live prisoners," Yao said, finding it easier to talk in a low whisper, forcing as little air through his lungs as possible. "To sacrifice later. That's how Mexic warriors proceed through the ranks, by sacrificing prisoners to their gods. His own helmet is cracked" - Yao pointed to the jaguar-shaped helmet sitting on the ground at the Mexica's side - "and our friend has no doubt discovered that helmets of Middle Kingdom manufacture can't be sealed on a Mexic surface suit. He cannot go back outside. Not until help arrives."

"What happens if the soldiers of the Middle Kingdom find us first?"

"In that case, Feather over there will likely just douse us both with flaming magnesium and then take out as many of our countrymen as he can. If his people arrive first, he progresses in rank having captured two enemies. If our people arrive first, he gets to kill as many of us as possible before leaving this plane to join his ancestors. Either way, he wins."

Concentrating, careful not to shift from the waist up, Yao slid his left leg slightly, rolling his foot slowly inwards. He smiled grimly when he felt a hard object press into the flesh of his left thigh through the constrictive material of the surface suit.

He always carried a second knife in a hidden pouch set into the fabric of the suit. If he were able to get the blade out, he might be able to make a move against the Mexica.

\* \* \* \*

Night fell. The light trickling dimly through a solitary, small skylight overhead faded, leaving the interior of the chamber a murky, moonlit gray.

They had sat in a watchful silence for long hours, and Yao had yet to hear a solitary noise from the Mexica. Now, in the gloaming, he began to speak, the liquid syllables of his speech strange in Yao's ears. The warrior's voice rose and fell, rhythmically, like some sort of song or chant.

"Thien," Yao said, his voice little more than a harsh whisper. "What is he saying?"



“My Nahuatl is rough at best, but I’ll try.” In the low light Yao could see her leaning forward, listening intently. “It’s a prayer. He says, ‘O lord of the near and the night, of the night and the wind. You see and know the things within the trees and rocks. You know of things within us, and hear us from within. You hear and know what we say, what we think, our minds and our hearts. Smoke and mist rise before you.’”

Yao scowled. He would have shaken his head if his chest could have borne it. “I don’t believe in gods or spirits. I believe only in the man fighting at my left, the man fighting at my right, and those who stand before me, wanting to kill us.”

Yao heard Thien chuckle, soft and indistinct. “Myself, I am a Taoist. I suppose I believe in the union of opposites, if anything.”

The darkness grew deeper. The sound of the Mexica carried on, into the night, praying to his gods, distant and strange.

\* \* \* \*

In the long hours before dawn, all was quiet and still. Thien shifted restlessly in her sleep at his side, and Yao was convinced that the Mexica was asleep. Slowly, painfully, Yao reached his left hand towards the hidden pouch on his leg and gently took out the knife.

After what seemed an eternity, his teeth gritted against the pain, he managed to get the knife free of the pocket. But his fingers, encased in the thick material of the suit, failed to get a good grip on the knife and it slipped from his grip. Though it fell only centimeters, it clattered loudly, echoing through the darkened shelter.

Thien only rustled, but Yao could hear the sound of the Mexica shifting. He felt the eyes of the Mexic warrior trying to bore through the darkness. Slowly, carefully, Yao reached down and picked the knife back up again. He rolled onto one hip and slid it carefully under him, the blade flat to the ground so that when he sat back it was hidden beneath his leg.

Yao sat motionless, his chest in agony, his heart pounding, his ears straining against the silence.

\* \* \* \*

Yao awoke, sputtering. He coughed violently. With each ragged noise he

spat blood. The right side of his chest felt as though it was stuck through with hot pokers.

Thien reached over and wiped the blood-flecked spittle from his chin. "I think one of your broken ribs punctured a lung," she said, her voice grave.

"Perhaps my injuries will take me, and cheat the Mexica of his prize." He coughed again, his face contorted with pain. "Wouldn't... that be... amusing?"

Yao closed his eyes and a fitful sleep overtook him once more.

\* \* \* \*

It was near midday when Yao woke again. Thien had a small flask of water, which she poured into Yao's mouth.

Swallowing painfully, his lips cracked and dry, Yao looked across the shelter at the Mexica. He kept his gaze fixed on them, his eyes narrowed.

"Thank... thank you," Yao told Thien, when she pulled the flask away. "Where... where did you get...?"

"From Blue-green Feather," Thien said, jerking a thumb at the Mexica. "I told him that if we didn't have water to drink we were as good as dead anyway, so why didn't he just kill us now and get it over with."

"And he... didn't like that idea?"

"He didn't say much, only pulled this flask from our provisions and threw it across to me."

Yao licked his parched lips, his eyes still on the Mexica.

"So it won't... be... a slow death... by dehydration then?"

"Not until he runs out of water." Thien smiled. "Of course, by that point, I think that thirst is going to be the least of our concerns."

\* \* \* \*

It was the middle of the afternoon, and Yao's stomach growled, audibly.

"We need food," Thien said.

“We need... many things.” Yao managed a weak smile, conscious of the outline of the knife through the fabric of his suit.

Thien raised her voice and spoke a string of strange syllables to the Mexica. Then she turned and said to Yao, “I just explained to him that without a bite of food from time to time, there’s no point in giving us water either.”

The Mexica’s expression remained affectless, but he reached into a pouch attached to his surface suit’s belt and pulled out a slim package. He uttered a few short syllables, and then threw the package over to Thien.

“What is it?” Yao asked as Thien struggled to open the strange container.

“Food, I suppose,” Thien answered. “If you want to call it that.”

Thien pulled out a few pieces of flat bread, some freeze-dried strips of beef, and some sort of dried grain.

“It’s no feast,” she said, “but it beats starving.” She pulled off a piece of the bread, wrapped it around a strip of beef, and handed it to Yao. “Well, at least we’ll be well-fed when we’re sacrificed to their heathen gods, no?”

The meat was stringy and the flat bread was stale and tasteless, but with a few mouthfuls of water and a few bites of food in his stomach, Yao felt marginally better. Thien helped him reposition against the wall. With some of his weight shifted off his spine, he was able to breathe a little easier. Though he could still speak only in a whisper, it caused him less pain to do so.

When Thien and Yao finished the last of the ration package the Mexica had thrown over, the warrior spoke a few words.

Thien laughed and nodded.

“What did he say?” Yao asked.

“He said, ‘The food is horrible, isn’t it?’”

Yao tried to remain stoic, but couldn’t keep a slight smile from tugging up the corner of his mouth.

\* \* \* \*

As the shadows deepened, the Mexica shook his head sharply and muttered a few guttural syllables, his eyes on Yao, his grip tight on the fire-lance across his knees.

“He wonders why you look at him with such hatred,” Thien translated. “He says that you never stop staring at him, as though you’re calculating how much blood you could squeeze from his body.”

Yao’s lip curled in a snarl. “The Mexica are the blood-hungry ones, not me.”

The Mexica jerked his head, indicating Yao, and fired a few syllables at Thien. She nodded, glancing at Yao, and replied. Then the Mexica shook his head, a few times quickly, and began to speak.

“Blue-green Feather asked what you said,” Thien explained, “and when I translated, he said that you don’t know what you’re talking about. He says” - she paused, listening closely - “he says that everyone in the Mexic Dominion knows what became of the first Mexic expedition to the red planet, and that...”

Thien trailed off into silence, averting her eyes.

“What?” Yao asked. “What is he saying?”

Thien drew a heavy breath before continuing. “He says that the Mexica were on the surface of Fire Star before the Middle Kingdom arrived, and that when the Treasure Fleet reached the surface, the Mexica were still in radio contact with their superiors in the Place of the Stone Cactus. Those back at home were able to hear the sounds of the wanton slaughter of their countrymen.”

“Bah,” Yao spat. “I’ve heard that bit of propaganda before. It’s nonsense, and a lie. Everyone knows that the Middle Kingdom reached Fire Star before the Mexica, and that the Dominion had to manufacture some excuse to explain away their failure in the race to the red planet. Instead, they came here years after us and tried to undermine our efforts to make this a living world.”

Thien averted her eyes, refusing to meet Yao’s gaze. “No,” she finally said. “Blue-green Feather... he is right. I was there, remember.”

“What?” Yao raised his voice, and immediately regretted it.

“It’s not something that any of us in the Treasure Fleet liked to talk about in the long years that followed. But one of the first ground teams did come across a Mexic research facility and wiped them all out.” She glanced from Yao to the Mexic warrior, her expression pained. “I was brought in to review the Mexica’s research records - they were all in Nahuatl, and there were few of us in the Fleet who could read it. I saw the bodies myself, before they had been dragged out.”

Blue-green Feather said something, Thien replied, and the Mexica let forth another torrent of words. Yao listened as Thien translated.

“Blue-green Feather says that after the tragedy on the red planet the Mexic Dominion fell afoul of several calamities, including the meltdown of one of their atomic reactors. These setbacks, only worsened by their ongoing cold war with the Middle Kingdom, retarded the development of their space program and grounded them for more than ten terrestrial years. During that time, they watched as we continued to exploit the moon and made full use of our orbital facilities like Diamond Summit. Then we began colonizing and terraforming the red planet. When they were finally able to return to the heavens, the Mexic Dominion burned with the desire for retribution. And so they struck back at us where we were most vulnerable. Here on the red planet.”

Yao blinked, disbelieving. “Well,” he said at length, “it hardly matters. Perhaps a few Mexica did get themselves killed when we first got to Fire Star, but the first blood between our two cultures was spilled long before that day, and not by Middle Kingdom hands.”

Thien spoke to Blue-green Feather in Nahuatl, and then to Yao said, “He wants to know what you mean.”

“There’s a story that not too many people know,” Yao began, “but it’s true, nonetheless. I had it from one of my commanders when I first joined the Bannermen, and he had it from a general in his own youth, and on back to the days before the First Mexic War. Back then there hadn’t been much of any contact between the Middle Kingdom and the Mexic Empire, as it was known then. The Dragon Throne had, generations before, shelved any plans to invade Mexica, preferring instead to create loose trade ties with the fierce nation. In the days of the Guangxu emperor, though, the Dragon Throne decided to normalize relations. They wanted to establish a formal embassy in the region, and open up diplomatic channels. Before that point, there had been no formal representative from the Dragon Throne to the

Mexic nation since the last days of the Bright Dynasty. All communication had been back-channel discussion, primarily through merchants who traded with nations that dealt with both countries.

The Middle Kingdom envoy was received by the Mexic Emperor in the Place of the Stone Cactus. He was asked to indicate which of his subordinates was most beloved. It was explained to the envoy that the emperor wanted to bestow special favor on this individual as a sign of good will. The envoy indicated his nephew, the son of his sister, who was an attaché with the embassy.

The nephew was invited to arrive early at a celebration honoring the Middle Kingdom envoy. When the envoy arrived at the feast at the imperial palace, he was greeted by a barbarous priest of the Mexica wearing the flayed skin of the envoy's nephew as a suit of clothes. The envoy wanted his guards to kill the priest on the spot but his subordinates dissuaded him. They pointed out that they were in the heart of a highly militarized nation, surrounded by warriors.

The envoy stormed out, snatching the flayed skin of his nephew from off the priest's back and left the Place of the Stone Cactus that very night. The Mexic Emperor, outraged, ordered all Middle Kingdom citizens currently within the borders of the Mexic Empire or any of its satellite nations to be expelled immediately. The war with the Mexica had begun, and the Mexica had been the ones to start it."

Blue-green Feather listened dispassionately as Thien related Yao's story. When she was done, he laughed bitterly.

"What is so twice-damned funny?" Yao snarled in a harsh whisper.

"Blue-green Feather says that you carry the answer to the riddle in your story and don't realize it," Thien translated. "He says that the envoy's nephew had been sacrificed to Xipe Totec, the Flayed Lord, also known as Red Tezcatlipoca: the ruler of the east, the red mirror, the god identified with the red planet. The rite signifies that with the arrival of spring, Earth must coat itself with a new skin of vegetation and be reborn."

"So there was some insane reason behind the murderous act?" Yao spat. "What difference does that make?"

"Blue-Green Feather says that the Mexica are taught that unless lives are sacrificed to the gods who create and sustain the universe, all that lives will suffer and the world will end. Is it not worth the loss of a select few lives

for the benefit of the rest?"

Yao tightened his hands into white-knuckled fists. "They are bloodthirsty savages."

"Perhaps," Thien said. "But I think it is their religion that has kept them primitive and unsophisticated."

Yao said nothing further, nor did the Mexica warrior. Instead they eyed one another, unblinking, across the shelter.

\* \* \* \*

Night approached. As the illumination from the skylight dimmed, the Mexica repeated his prayer of the previous evening. When he was through he was silent for a time, and then began again to speak.

Thien originally thought that the Mexica was talking to himself. Then she thought he was talking to her, and then she was not sure whether the Mexica knew himself. She translated for Yao, as best she could.

"Blue-green Feather says that he has taken four live prisoners to date - the number required to earn membership in the Order of the Jaguar Knights - and executed them himself to the glory of Left-handed Hummingbird before the eyes of his commander, Chief of the House of Darts. But now, after spending some years at battle on the red planet, Blue-green Feather has begun to question the Rightness of their war with the Middle Kingdom."

"Oh, has he?" Yao's voice dripped with sarcasm.

"So he says," Thien answered. "He says that, when slaves of the Mexica are sacrificed to the gods, they know that they serve a larger purpose and go willingly to their deaths with – usually - a smile in their hearts. They call their captor 'father,' as he calls them 'son.' But prisoners from among the Middle Kingdom do not know anything of the gods of the Mexica. They go to their deaths stoic and stone-faced, with hatred in their eyes" - at this point in his speech, the Mexica indicated Yao - "or pleading for mercy with tears streaming down their faces" - he then indicated Thien. "He wonders, do such sacrifices honor the gods?"

"As I said," Yao curled his lip distastefully. "Bloodthirsty savages who wage war only for the sake of taking lives."

“But Yao? Weren’t soldiers in the armies of the Dragon Throne traditionally encouraged to fight by a system of rewards determined by the number of enemy heads taken in battle?”

“Yes,” Yao answered reluctantly, “in previous generations, maybe, but the practice has long since been abandoned.”

“And are the soldiers in the Green Standard and the troops of the Eight Banners not given bonus payments when they are particularly successful in combat? When they kill more of the enemy than is typical?”

Yao drew a ragged breath, the right side of his chest throbbing with pain. “Yes, I suppose,” he said at length.

“If that is true,” Thien said sadly, “then at least Blue-green Feather’s people kill to honor their gods, who they believe sustain the world, and not just for a larger payment.”

\* \* \* \*

Later, in the middle hours of the night, Yao could scarcely see the Mexica warrior in the gloaming, only a few meters away.

Thien leaned in close, her tone eager. “I think we might have made a real connection with Blue-green Feather. The Mexica is questioning what he has been taught about the Middle Kingdom, and wondering openly about the Rightness of the current war. Perhaps this is a turning point. If Blue-green Feather were to return to his people, this pointless conflict might be brought to a close. I’m positive that, should the Mexica find us, that Blue-green Feather will argue for us to be spared. I just know it. If the Middle Kingdom find us, you and I will have to do the same for him.”

Yao said nothing. He kept his eyes on the dim outline of the Mexica in the darkness.

\* \* \* \*

The sun rose, and the chamber filled slowly with faint light. Thien drowsed at his side, but Yao sat alert with eyes open and watchful, like the Mexica opposite them.

Suddenly, the silence of the shelter was divided by the grinding sound of the airlock’s outer hatch being opened.



“Hey!” Thien said, coming wide awake and climbing unsteadily to her feet. “Someone’s coming.”

Thien began to hobble towards the door.

“I wish there was a viewport in these old lock hatches.” She glanced back over her shoulder at Yao. The bannerman’s eyes did not leave the Mexica, who tightened his grip on the fire-lance.

“Could be anyone,” Yao said simply.

The Mexica’s eyes followed Thien’s slow progress across the floor. They could hear the sound of air flowing as the lock slowly cycled. His dark eyes flicked expectantly towards the door.

Yao didn’t wait another instant. Rolling to the right, ignoring the pain from his side, he snatched the knife from beneath his left leg. He rocked back to the left, flipping the knife backhanded and sending it sailing end over end across the room. With a high whistling nose, the knife buried itself in the Mexica’s right eye, sinking deep with a sickening squelch.

Thien turned around, wheeling on her splinted leg. She stared with horror at the red ruin of Blue-green Feather’s face.

“What... ?!” she shouted, gasping for air.

“I had no choice,” Yao fell back against the cold wall, gritting his teeth against the pain in his chest. “I am a soldier of the Dragon Throne. I could not have done otherwise.”

They could hear the airlock filling with air. Any moment now the hatch would swing open, and there would stand revealed either Middle Kingdom soldiers or Mexic warriors waiting beyond.

“Look, Yao,” Thien said angrily, advancing on him, “even if our countrymen rescue us, we are only granted a reprieve for a short while. If this war continues, there will always be another like Blue-green Feather to take up arms against us.”

“Perhaps,” Yao said unrepentantly. “But if you are right, then all that is required for the Dragon Throne to prevail is for there always to be men like me, to stand in the enemy’s way.”

The hatch began slowly swinging open.

“But what about peace?” Thien pleaded.

“A soldier’s only peace is that of the grave,” Yao said.

Thien shook herself, exasperated.

They fell silent, both of them watching the door. In a matter of heartbeats, it would be open, and all questions would be answered.