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Matthew A. Garrett

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MATTHEW A. GARRETT

Light of Humanity

He was five when they took his name. They didn't steal it from him. In exchange, they gave him a number. He was 771. Like all the other children, he had been subjected to the preliminary exams given to all newborns and his neural scans and DNA had marked him as a candidate for the Academy. When he turned five he was subjected to another round of testing, the automated systems shot bright white light into his eyes, poked and prodded him with needles, swabbed and scraped at him, and fed all the information from the little round patches all over his body to the memory banks of the central computer systems. He was tested further under the guise of play, and he excelled, so much so, that that trip to the medical and research center was the last time he was allowed to see his parents.

771 did not hold it against them for long. The Academy saw to his needs every bit as efficiently as his parents would have, if not more so. Though not as warm, the faculty was always there to guide him and teach him, or lend an ear or shoulder when he was sad. He did miss when his father would tell him stories about Earth's past, the Great Wars of the twentieth century, or even older myths and legends buried in the annals of time. That longing soon faded as he entered the Academy routine. He did not have time for such things.

771 awoke each morning to the loud buzz that echoed through the speakers in every room and hallway of the dormitories, and perched atop tall concrete columns in the outer grounds. He would roll out of bed, or sit up and rub his eyes, or pull the thin pillow over his head to try and drown out the noise. But it was always there, incessant, insisting that he rise at 6 a.m. and fall in for morning PT.

771 would then dress quickly, even on the mornings he did not feel up to it, and join the other students for exercise. He didn't want the instructors to assign additional laps, squats, or pushups. 642 had done it, more than once. The instructor had made her stand there at attention and watch as 771 and the other students did pushups in the mud, ran through the snow, or lay on the grass on their backs, holding their heels exactly six inches off the ground for sixty seconds at a time for twenty minutes. 642 had later been sent away from the Academy, along with 591, 642 with her nose broken and a fractured cheek, 591 with swollen and torn knuckles. 591 hated PT.

The students would then assemble in the mess hall for first meal, always a large one, where they were provided with synthetic eggs, various cuts of cloned pork, hot or cold cereal, and fruit juices. They would then proceed to class where they were instructed in language, literacy, and the Academy's history. They were told the Academy was the finest school in the world, funded by the global government to educate select students and prepare them for military service. No one could buy their way in. You had to test in. The students were the best and brightest that Earth had to offer. 771 did not understand exactly how the selection process worked. He often wondered what made him special

enough for the Academy. Of the several hundred students he was neither the strongest, nor the smartest, nor the most studious.

Every year the lessons became more challenging. PT was longer and more intense. Math and science began to dominate lessons. After morning classes the students were allowed ninety minutes for second meal and leisure. 771 used this time to stroll about the grounds, taking in the monuments, erected to honor brave soldiers and inspiring teachers, which dotted the landscape. More often though, he used his time like the other students and gathered in one of the large video communications halls to watch the news and stay current on the happenings of the rest of the world. It was mostly dry and uninteresting – food shortages or surpluses, new construction in major cities, political discourse between the corporations, or occasionally the rare crime – but it was their only contact with the world outside the Academy. What the students waited and watched for was news of the Seerah.

771 was nine years old when he witnessed his first Seerah event. The students were all called to the central auditorium to watch a newsfeed on a theater-sized video screen. They even cancelled afternoon classes, so the students could watch the entire coverage. 771 found it terrifying, breaking into a sweat as he looked on at the immense creature that entered the screen from the shaky, mostly in-focus camera feed. There was no sound, which made the monstrosity's movements even more horrifying, like it had devoured the wind and left the miniscule humans below in a vacuum. He felt as if it were drawing him in, as if it had reached through the screen to clutch him with one of its hideous, grasping limbs.

Its bulk descended slowly out of the mountains. It was enormous, with long ropelike tentacles barbed on the underside and gaping jaws centered in the lumpy mass of gray flesh. There were no eyes to speak of as the creature continuously reached forward with pseudopod limbs and drug itself ever closer to human habitation. 771 felt his stomach lurch as the camera spun and zoomed out to show an array of military vehicles, tanks and aircraft, spread before the Seerah. Though there was no sound, he could see the artillery rocking back as it delivered its payload. Bright flashes blinded the camera as it swung back to orient on the monster, but clouds of smoke had blocked vision there as well. It moved back to the humans and the stark white and crimson colors of the Academy stood out against the yellowed grass.

The creature erupted from the smoke, drawing a collective gasp from the students. The beast looked none the worse for wear, save for a few scorch marks along its mottled grey hide. A few students, 771 among them, cried out when those long ropey tentacles lashed out, overturning tanks and portable missile platforms like an angry toddler kicking his Tonka trucks across a sandbox. 771 could hear quiet sobs coming from elsewhere in the auditorium, mixed with hushed conversations of shared concern.

The Seerah reeled back as it was struck by a barrage of gunfire. 771 could see the glow of tracer rounds as the camera shuddered and turned to focus on a new combatant. He scrubbed at his eyes. It was still there on the screen, bearing down on the Seerah. 771 heard whispers of "AOS" and "Orion" wind through the room.

The armored suit was of a size with the Seerah, only a bit shorter and not near so wide. 771 estimated its height at about seventy-five meters. It was humanoid in shape, with four limbs and a helmet-like protrusion at the top where the shoulders met. It was all gleaming metal. It clutched a spear crackling with electric energy in its right hand while its left stretched forth, unleashing round after round from the immense machine gun attached

to its forearm. 771 had heard of them of course, Orion Armored Suits, but much like with the Seerah, his knowledge was miniscule. He was enthralled. It was truly a thing of beauty to his young mind, and the courage that pilot must have!

771 watched, clutching the arms of his chair and leaning forward. The Seerah fought back, whipping its appendages forward, hammering away at the armored suit. It was the pilot's turn to be driven back as bursts of electricity and deep gouges erupted from the armor. The pilot fought back fiercely, taking the giant lance in both hands and then spinning the spear to sever the assailing tentacles as they tried to encircle him. It was like a dance where the partners swept back and forth across the terrain, full of grace and power. The Seerah lurched forward, slamming its bulk into the armored pilot. The pilot planted his spear and allowed the monster to impale itself on the tip. There was a screen-bleaching flash and the video feed cut to static.

The administrators calmed the cries of fear and outrage from the students with sharp commands that cracked like a rifle's report. In very precise language they explained that the Orion's lance had emitted an electromagnetic pulse that wiped out electronic devices in a wide radius, including the camera providing the video feed, and that surely the Seerah had been destroyed by that attack.

771 returned to his quarters that night, unable to drive off visions of the battle. Only the best of the Academy were chosen to be Orion pilots, and 771 knew then, sitting in his bunk as the lights cut out abruptly to signal sleep time, that becoming an armored suit pilot would be his only goal at the Academy.

It was the following year when 771's studies began to include the Seerah. It had been fifty years since the creatures first appeared on Earth, wreaking havoc in India until the first had been destroyed by several nuclear strikes. The collateral damage had been deemed unacceptable by both the corporations and the global government. They pooled their resources to create the Academy and develop weaponry to combat the Seerah threat while minimizing the damage. The scientists also threw themselves into researching the Seerah's origins in their efforts to combat the creatures. Humanity was still unclear though on where the Seerah came from. There was speculation that the beings were from the outer reaches of known space, different dimensions, or from beneath the Earth. Some that followed old religions claimed that the Seerah were a punishment from God sent to Earth to punish humanity for its decadence or hubris. There were three more attacks before the first Orion Armored Suit was launched, resulting in the destruction of California, a portion of South Africa, and most of Iceland.

771 devoured the knowledge, even spending his leisure time watching videos of the old attacks and whatever film he could find on the Orions. He threw himself into his studies with a new vigor, climbing his way quickly into the ninety-ninth percentile. He wanted to do battle against the Seerah, and he knew that the path started here.

On his fifteenth birthday 771 was admitted into the pilot training program. His quarters were moved with little fuss and no ceremony to a special area of the Academy. He was separated from the great mass of regular students and housed with the Academy's elite. He was no longer simply 771, he was now 771 Pilot Cadet, or 771-PC.

The new dormitories were more spacious than his previous ones, complete with a personal media center, privy, and shower. He was at a loss after living so long in a comparably tiny space. What was he to do with such large quarters? The Academy, as always, helped him understand. He hardly had time to enjoy them with his new studies.

771's days were filled with a regimen vastly more intense than before. PT was beyond rigorous, leaving him with cramped, aching muscles and dripping with sweat. Classes were replaced with studies in Seerah biology and research, physics, hand-to-hand combat, and military tactics. He was provided with schematics and operation manuals for the Orion armor. There were six other cadets that entered the program with him. Two washed out by the end of the first month.

It was a full year before 771 was brought before a real Orion. It was bigger than he had imagined those ten years ago, but was still beautiful with all its gleaming metal, synthetic rubber, and specially treated plastics. It was a refurbished model, the instructors told them, brought back from the Iceland incident. 771 ran his hand along the ankle of that wonder of technology and stared up at the replica magnetic lance of polished scarlet and silver. He chuckled as the thought of old Japanese cartoons from the twenty-first century came to mind. Still, he reveled in its presence.

Another year passed before he entered into simulation training, or sims as the older cadets called it. The simulators were shaped like the head of the Orion and the crown slid back to reveal a perfect replica of the Orion cockpit. The only thing that wasn't authentic was the viewport, which had been replaced with a video screen that would provide the sights of whatever training scenario the pilot was to engage with. The simulator was uploaded with vast amounts of software to train the pilot in everything from airdrops and combat to walking and target practice.

771 found that he easily aced tactical maneuvers, but he lost his first Seerah combat – and the second. The third he fought to a draw, but the jostling of the simulator and feedback from his flight suit gave him a concussion. 771 did not despair. The instructors assured him that even the pilots that had fought the Seerah in real life had lost a few times in the sims. When he asked if the instructors had ever seen combat they replied in the negative, not outside the sims. When he asked if he would get the chance to meet any of the previous pilots they again replied in the negative. The pilots had, after all, earned well-deserved retirement and pensions from the Academy.

Sims were competitive and 771 spent his nights reviewing his failures and scouring his victories for improvements on the media center in his quarters. He increased his kill-to-death ratio over the next six months and found himself ranked first among those that had entered the program with him, but only third among the dozen pilots in the entire program. It took four years to climb to second, and that only with the promotion of 1206 to full pilot. 771 heard that 1206 went into combat a week later. 949 was promoted to pilot by the end of the month.

771 never tired of the simulator and his kill-to-death ratio was so good that no other cadet could hope to catch him. 949 was pilot now, but he would have his own chance soon. The Seerah were attacking more often. He was told that his kill-to-death was higher now than 949's when she was promoted and just a hair shy of 1206's, who had been a veritable savant in the sims. In midwinter of his twenty-seventh year, 949 fought the Seerah, and 771 received his commission within days.

He was moved again, this time to another state, Texas he thought. He was made privy now to a whole new set of information that only pilots, crew, and commanding officers had. The speed of an Orion's response time was due to its location above the Earth's atmosphere in synchronized satellite orbit. It was shuttled by remote controlled drone to the drop point where it descended to fight the Seerah. This was accompanied with

a whole new round of sims which 771 had to learn quickly. Even more astounding, the Orion's satellite was connected to the base by a space elevator. Two infinitely flexible synthesized alloy cables moved a compartment large enough for a crew of five between the satellite and the base within a matter of minutes. After he mastered the orbital drop simulation he was allowed to practice the transition with the elevator.

Pilot 771 was filled with awe and not a small amount of pride. The staff treated him with deference previously unknown. He received salutes even from higher ranking officers. His meals were real beef and organically grown grains and vegetables. He was even allowed a glass of wine with dinner from time to time.

It was only a few months later that 771 was awakened in the dead of night by the piercing cry of the base siren. He leapt from his bed and hustled out into the corridor without dressing. He wouldn't need clothes. He fell in with a group of techs and engineers who made a bubble around him, taking care not to jostle or shove him as they made their way to the hangar.

He dashed up the platform as soon as he entered, then skid to a halt, stripping off his undergarments with quick, precise movements. 771 stood there nude, waiting for the flight suit. A mechanical arm speared down from the ceiling and sprayed him with a fine mist. The millions of nanocomputers that made up the Orion flight suit went to work, congealing and forming around him to create a second skin. They were crimson in hue and he felt tiny pinpricks as the nanocomputers connected his neural pathways with the Orion orbiting in space above, waiting for him to take control. It was always a strange experience, as if his mind were in two places at once.

Officers shouted orders as 771 entered the elevator alone. He strapped himself into the central seat and soon found himself looking down at the base in a matter of seconds. Base turned to Texas as he rocketed up the cables, and he lost his sense of boundaries in the land below. He could clearly see the lights of North America. 771 had ridden the space elevator a half dozen times, two of those at night, and yet the sight still stole his breath. Millions and millions of lights spread across the continents, reaching out like warm campfires from the mother nodes of Earth's major cities. The light of humanity, he thought. The light he would fight for.

The elevator came to a halt and artificial gravity was released. The ceiling of the elevator slid aside and 771 unbuckled himself and pushed off to enter the satellite corridor. The hall was perfectly rounded and would lead him to the Orion. He passed several hatches as he kept up his momentum by pulling himself along the evenly spaced grab bars. Upon reaching the end he issued a series of commands to the final bulkhead as his suit sent verification to the satellite's computers. The bulkhead slid open and 771 swung into the Orion's cockpit and strapped in. Screens and lights flashed to life and he could feel the armor hum with power. The viewport shield would remain shut until after reentry. A voice crackled through the cockpit, staccato but intelligible. 771 was headed for Hong Kong.

He felt the Orion release, already grasping the shuttle drone with one massive hand, gritting his teeth as they shot forward. A countdown appeared on his left-hand vid screen. When it reached zero he shifted his left hand lever, releasing from the shuttle and plummeting towards earth. It was unsettling to fall from space to earth with no window or viewport to gauge your descent. He could feel the thrusters activating through his suit, evening the Orion out and slowing momentum. He checked his instrument panels, he was

almost there. Daylight washed over him as the viewport shield slid back and he felt the impact as he crashed into the South China Sea.

He dropped in feet first, throwing up a great plume of water and displacing much more in a series of great waves that overturned ships in the harbor. Before the displaced liquid could rush back in, the Orion leaped, coming ashore, spear at the ready. He saw the Seerah then in all its horrifying bulk. The creature was exactly like the one he had watched when he was ten, exactly like the hundreds he had destroyed in the sims. The monster turned to face him, tentacles waving, laying buildings low in the process. It lurched forward faster than he would have thought. In response, 771 lifted the Orion's left hand and unleashed a burst from the 50 mm machine gun attached to the underside of that arm.

The Seerah jerked upright as the rounds struck home and 771 allowed himself a smile. Just like the sims, he thought. He clicked a button on his right-hand control and he felt the pulse of the magnetic lance charging. A new countdown began on the right-hand vid screen. Let it get close, he reminded himself, then he would put both hands on the lance and with a single, straight thrust through the mouth and up into the brainstem, 771 would be victorious. 771 leapt backwards, smashing several suburban homes while the Seerah resumed its charge. He narrowly avoided its reaching tentacles. Those damnable bumpy ropes of flesh seemed to grow as they tried to get a hold on the Orion.

The Seerah was fast. Faster than the sims. 771's thoughts raced back to that first simulation, where he couldn't react fast enough to save his own life. He shrugged it away. He couldn't lose. He had trained hard to get here and he wouldn't let himself. He would protect humanity. One of the tentacles struck home, its barbs like those of an arctic squid, and it tore at his armor plating on the left leg. The nanomachines of his flight suit let him know the level of damage by activating the pain receptors of his brain, albeit mildly. It was more akin to his foot falling asleep than anything else.

771 chose to roll with the blow and let its momentum carry him out wide rather than risk getting into a grapple. He glanced at the timer. Five seconds and the lance would be ready. He let loose another blast from the 50 mm, but another tentacle knocked his arm out of alignment, causing the Orion to rake the Hong Kong neighborhood with gunfire. Tenement buildings crumbled, giving rise to a cloud of smoke and debris that darkened the sky. He hoped the people had been evacuated.

Three seconds.

Two blows struck him on the chest plate, scouring the scarlet paint and revealing the silver metal beneath. He stumbled backward, crushing another tenement.

Two seconds.

771 shifted the controls wildly, sending the Orion into a spin to dodge yet another incoming blow, one that would have took the Orion's head and 771 along with it. Instead he got by with a spider-webbed crack on the viewport and a slight headache.

One second.

He drove forward, using the lance's haft to bat aside reaching tentacles. The Seerah's mouth was open wide, viscous fluid running down too many meter-long fangs. 771 shivered at the utter darkness within that gaping hole. The alarm blared in his ear. The lance was ready. 771 shifted the left-hand lever controls and slammed both it and the right forward with all his strength, thumbing down the large button on the right hand.

The Orion shuddered to a halt, spear outthrust, several feet short of the Seerah's drooling maw. A cry of anguish tore from deep in 771's chest. He didn't understand. Had

the rents in his armor broken the insulation and subjected him to the EMP? Had it fired off too early?

No.

That thought was not his own. His mouth fell open as something moved behind the Seerah's monstrous teeth, a twisting, rolling motion. 771 found himself staring into a great, shining black eye like that of some huge prehistoric shark. He screamed.

He slammed his fist into the console, "This is Orion 771. Control, all systems have failed. Repeat, Orion 771's systems have failed."

They cannot hear you. They do not want to. The dance is over. You have succeeded.

"Who are you?" he asked aloud.

There was no noise, just a deep voice, thick with age, echoing in his head, *I am Seerah.*

"One of the Seerah?" 771 repeated.

No. The Seerah.

771 considered that. Every attack from this one creature?

"Impossible, the Orion pilots have killed almost forty of your kind."

No.

The weight of that thought struck 771 like a blow. There had only ever been one Seerah.

"The other pilots then?" he asked, wanting and not wanting the answer.

Long gone, the voice replied. Offerings.

That thought made 771 go cold. "Why?" he whispered.

I would have thought your quick mind would grasp that. Like the others, I chose you.

Your people wish to appease me, so that I do not destroy them in the hunt.

It chose him? Impossible.

He knew it was the truth.

I felt you watching me, those years ago. I made my will known to your leaders, much as I speak with you now.

"But – the Orion, the battles. It makes no sense."

He felt amusement transfer with the next thoughts, *Long ago sacrifices were performed with great pageantry. It allows your people to retain hope, to remain calm, that they do not tear each other and this world apart. In truth, the dance amuses me, but I grow weary of this, mortal. Are you ready?*

The Orion's helmet opened exposing 771 to Seerah's odor. It smelled of putrid fish and burned hair. It swirled and mixed with the smells of the crumbling buildings and pulverized concrete. 771 gagged. He was sent to a battle he could not win. He would have gladly gone down with this entity on the end of his spear, but this just seemed so wrong. 771 felt himself filling with anger. He had been chosen not for his skill and his hard work, but because this thing desired him for its own alien reasons. All to maintain a ruse that would keep humanity in the dark, blind to the truth.

If you are unwilling, I could always sate my hunger elsewhere.

A choice? He had never been given a choice in his life. He felt the urge to climb from the cockpit, to warn the world. Would it matter if he did? That made no sense. If this beast wasn't lying, 771 could simply walk away. Could he really though? He wanted to save people, to protect them. He had been taken from his family, made himself into a weapon. For what? If he died here they would go on as if he had saved the day just like all the

others, grooming another sacrifice for this thing that would consume more and more innocents.

The choice is yours.

771 unbuckled his harness and stood. The nanocomputers responded to his will and peeled away, the flight suit congealing into a pool at his feet. He stood there, nude, revealed fully before the Seerah.

There was no choice. Slowly, 771 raised his arms as the mottled gray tentacle encircled his chest. He was drawn towards the tooth-rimmed eye. It was like warm bath water as the Seerah's flesh embraced him. Darkness closed until only a pinpoint of light remained. 771 gazed upon the ruins of Hong Kong, the desolate landscape, and his final view of the light of humanity. He closed his eyes and the people of earth cheered his reported victory.