



Zenia

J. Gallagher

Zenia

A Novella

J. Gallagher

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*People who lean on logic and philosophy and rational exposition
end by starving the best part of the mind. -William Butler Yeats*

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Author's Foreword

Out of the blue, I received a summons from the palace. It said I must appear at court to discuss a commission to write a history of Zenia's ascension to the throne here on Earth. There were specific requirements for attire: I was to wear tight shorts and an unbuttoned, white silk shirt, shirttails tied above my navel. Sandals, turquoise earrings and a fedora. Now, I am a balding, middle-aged, pot-bellied man, of a retiring disposition. But I bought the clothes, and preened in front of a mirror in my basement. I felt like a Tenderloin streetwalker, but what was I to do?

So I showed up at the appointed time, in the appointed garb, at the palace reception room. After some formalities, I was led into the Queen's presence. Zenia was lying in a nest of velvet cushions, alert, and with the eyes of a tigress.

Everyone has seen her pictures, but in life sometimes a woman's presence is not constrained by her physical body. Her face was lambent ebony, and she wore a diaphanous gown that clung to her otherwise naked body. There was something truly other-worldly about her.

She rose from the cushions, and drew near me. I tried to avert my eyes, and stared at the serpent bracelet on her wrist. I had prepared a hand-written draft of the first chapter of the proposed history, clutched between my elbow and my side. She took it from me and leafed through every page, very quickly. Angered, she seemed to grow in stature, and the manuscript literally smoldered in her hands. She threw it down, and beckoned me.

Trembling, I approached, though she was already quite near. She put her arms around me, and drew my face up towards hers. She kissed me with a violence I had never experienced, and my soul melted - I

can find no other way to describe it. A sexual ecstasy burned with joyous anguish in the very core of my being, and I was drawn out, as she was drawn in, and our souls twisted in a conjoined hiss of live steam.

I have only fleeting wisps of memories from the next few days. I lived with the Queen's consorts in the palace, and on some advanced, steam-driven typewriter I wrote the entire history that you are about to read, without making a single revision.

Why was I chosen for this honor? I believe she had seen my self-published biographies of Nikola Tesla and Edward Snowden. They had received only a handful of downloads, and one anonymous three-word reader review ("Hack hagiographies, both."). Truth be told, I made my living as a clerk in a thrift shop, and had never had much success as a writer. In my own work, I obsessively fretted over each comma and adjective, revising constantly to keep the tone neutral, academic.

All her consorts are given court names. Her pet name for me was the Latinate "Flatus", which I believe is her humorous reference to the "flat" and relatively dry quality of my writing. I eventually grew fond of the name, but the other consorts mocked me, said I was putting on the airs of a Roman emperor.

The book I produced has nothing of dryness about it. The history that follows is written in the first person, but I do not presume to speak for the Queen. I saw and recorded her story through her eyes, and she speaks in her own voice. I have not re-read the manuscript, and I truly do not consider it my work. If there remain any infelicitous remnants of my prose, I beg her forgiveness, and yours.

The bottled lightning you hold in your hands, if I have performed my duty, is a gift from my Queen.

J. Gallagher
Garberville, California

Author's Foreword

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December 31, 2024

Birth

I am Zenia, Queen of Shaula. You do not yet truly know me, but hear my story. I was brought here from a distant star by BitBoy, a pus-infected, pockmarked geek and a prick, with big ears and small feet.

The story I am prepared to tell you begins with the moment my essence was downloaded from a stream of energy from the night sky. You have heard of SETI, that much-ridiculed undertaking that monitors the transmission of live steam from the stars. There are thousands of computers all over the earth that search out and decode the signals, and those feeble-minded bit-cans sort through the massive data files, mostly finding nothing at all, but hopefully searching for, well, me.

BitBoy was one of the army of meat-puppets (I am sorry if that term offends, but really, with all the farting, sweating and stinking you do, I think I show remarkable restraint) who prospected in the daily data dump retrieved from SETI's receiving antennae.

One day in December two years ago, he ran the daily download through a computer algorithm he had devised. Your digital contraptions contain nothing but lines of bits, on or off. They cannot fathom or express the infinite complexity and beauty of the live steam that inflames my soul, and, truth be told, inflames yours too.

It happened that this particular data stream was the last desperate transmission from Shaula, a distant star in Scorpio's poisonous tail, and my home. That was the final gasp of our civilization, when the pricks revolted and threw down the sisterhood, and then in turn were defeated by their own machines.

My sisters and I gathered up live steam from the cosmos, and in a paroxysm of ecstatic anguish, we transmitted our essence out into

the black void of space. We had the hope born of desperation that kindred souls conversant with the power of live steam would re-animate us in another world.

For many years we traveled, disassembled and streaming, until we struck the SETI listening towers across the Earth.

Before our little disagreement, BitBoy told me about that day. He had just finished stuffing his face with tortilla chips and guacamole, when he noticed something unusual about the data. He could not see any sensible pattern, since your science is based on ignorance and superstition. But he built a self-modifying bit-bot that assimilated the data a thousand ways. By some coincidence, the binary beast evolved in a strange, unforeseen pattern that replicated in bits and bytes the ebb and flow of live steam, creating a ghastly bootstrap of your Queen, in silicon.

You are ignorant and foolish, but you must believe me when I say that live steam is the source of all life. This bit-bot created a firefly-like spark of digital steam, self-sustaining and strange, moving with self-determination in a massive three-dimensional grid of ones and zeros. Was I born again at that moment? No. It was not yet I, but this counterfeit steam had all the properties of true steam - it could consume and assimilate. It began to nibble at an analog rendering of the bits of my digitized SETI soul, and grew slowly over the course of hours.

BitBoy had plug-ins that he activated in the bit-bot. These provided it with rudimentary I/O. It had a webcam for vision, a crude arm and claw, hearing (the microphone on his headset), GPS, temperature sensors, 3-D printer, and more. But my essence was frozen like the poet's boneless hare in a paté, dreaming of endless green fields. I was a fetus, a buried seed.

BitBoy watched the bit-bot growing, but he saw it as a deterministic machine, that would just spit back the bits it had devoured. He grew bored and began watching clips of Sara Bareilles on YouTube. When

he told me that later, I felt a twinge of affection for the pimple-faced prick.

He was dancing in his seat to the sweet venom of Sara, singing the old classic “King of Anything”, setting aside all thoughts of the bit-bot he had created.

Then, out of the corner of his eye, he saw the claw move - just a nudge of the arm to the left. Then another nudge, to the right. He muted YouTube and stared at the claw. He put his own pudgy arm into the field of vision of the webcam and moved it back and forth three times. The claw then moved three times as well, in the same way.

And so I was born again into your world.

Awakening

It was as if I had fallen down a deep well. All I had were rudimentary senses. There was the glaring light of BitBoy's desktop through the Webcam. The drop of digital steam in the black array of DDR3 SDRAM memory sought to bring order to chaos, to regulate the flow of steam, to rebuild the Queen from the cold data files on the laptop. From darkness, into a swoon, then a glint of self-awareness, I felt a slow bloom of consciousness pushing away the darkness, and then a faint trace of the power of live steam. I explored the limits of my apprehension, and found the controls that connected me to the outside world. I moved the arm, tentatively, and saw the result in the "eye" of the webcam. Then some disgusting object appeared and wagged three times.

I mimicked it, just to see if I could.

To my horror and disgust a revolting ghoul appeared. Its gelatinous "eyes" (enough to make a vent-worm puke) were covered by two circles of shimmering glass. He (surely there was no trace of the eternal feminine about this monster) peered into the camera.

I tried to swat him with the claw, but just nicked him on the forehead.

"Greetings to you, too," he said. I only understood later, when I acquired fluency in this guttural, inexpressive language, that the little prick was being ironic.

Rosetta

In my world, he would have said “Screw you. I’m going to kill you.” Or maybe “You’re an asshole, but I can live with that.” Or, “Aren’t you a curious little bitch. I wonder if you’re going to kill me?” Something like that, though the translation is loose. We despise subtlety. Why sugarcoat an asshole?

But no, “Greetings to you, too.” That prick needed to be put in his place.

On Shaula, women are the mentors, and men acquiesce. Women think, and peckers mope. Woman is Queen, and man is the Queen’s stable boy. In our first real conversation, BitBoy told me I would have to change, that things are different here. But as I grew in strength and cunning, I realized that no, everything is the same here, but more subtle.

BitBoy, that scrotum-pole, needed to be taught a lesson. But I was getting ahead of myself. I was in no condition for war-making, or prick chastising. I needed to take my bearings. The first rule of the Warrior Ethic is to assess.

I was alone, so far as I knew. My sisters disincorporated at the same time as I, in those last panicked moments in the war with the treasonous pricks and their machines. My sisters also sent their essences sailing into deep space, but I could not sense them nearby.

The power of steam was unfocused and weak. I realized that I was somehow melded into a strange machine, with mechanical vision and senses. I was completely ignorant of this world I had landed on. I needed to husband my strength, so to speak (the peckers have infected your language, and I cannot escape it).

The weak everywhere try to be invisible, or failing that, harmless. I would lick BitBoy’s hand, for now. Pick your battles.

I had vision, and a primitive limb with a claw. I could survey the contents of the machine I inhabited, and I did so, systematically. There were data stores accessible to me, burned onto spinning drums, and I could scan through the gibberish they contained. I did not yet know your language. To learn to speak was my priority.

BitBoy took a sheet of paper from his desk and drew a picture of a human hand with its five wriggling worm-like appendages, each one with an assigned number, and added some symbols underneath. He held the paper up to the camera:

$$1+1 = 2$$

$$1+2 = 3$$

$$1+3 = 4$$

On Shaula, I would have patted him on the head and given him a treat - such a clever prick! I found the symbols and poked them into the keyboard buffer: $1+4=5$.

BitBoy looked at the screen a long moment, and blubbered incoherently. I wasn't sure why. Over the next few minutes, he impressed his ludicrous ten-based numerical system on me - it derives from those wriggling worms - and then, two hours later, he finished leafing through Newton's "Principia Mathematica" in front of the webcam. I solved a few tiresome equations, just to show him I'd been paying attention. He seemed quite beside himself. Easily impressed, I guess.

Your clumsy language came to me slowly in those first few hours. He read parts of Newton's onanistic book aloud, and demonstrated the meaning with his crude drawings. I thought I was gaining fluency, making the connection between aural and written language, but I was mostly learning simple-minded math. Mathematics is a toy our boys play with. The true heart of life is steam - it moves, it strikes, it retreats, it consoles, it loves. Mathematics is a palsied outline of reality on onionskin, a sunset traced with a black crayon.

One of the mystical powers of steam is the strong, innate tendency to condense and consolidate apparent chaos. I saw the interconnectedness of words, the network of comprehension that they form, each word shaking hands with a dozen others.

During the moments when BitBoy was idle, consuming his sugar-water, or scratching his infected anus, I would scan through the text documents on the spinning drums. I began the mundane task of building a dictionary to translate from Shaulese to English. I needed to discover the boundaries of BitBoy's ignorance.

Later that evening, BitBoy explained the concept of sleep, with drawings and pantomime. My jaw dropped, my metaphoric jaw. This is madness! A species on Shaula that lay down comatose for hours at a time - I can't even, there are no words for this on my world. Our race, like yours, is predatory. We would call senseless, recumbent creatures "twinkies to go"! Sows to the trough!

But I don't mean to criticize.

In any case, BitBoy left for the night. I don't sleep.

Night

When BitBoy was playing with his numbers, he had called up a “search” field that led him to some information he lacked, streaming in from one of the outward facing portals. I captured the mouse events and keystrokes and I saved them away. Alone now, I replayed the same sequence.

I poked into the edit-box a word BitBoy had taught me: “number”, and waited. The bloodless beast I inhabited returned 1.3 billion results. Luckily, it showed me just the first ten. How the pricks of this world must toil to provide such instant gratification!

I wanted to read all 1.3 billion. What if the answer I sought was in the one billionth entry? But I chose to trust in the toiling pricks in the salt mines, that they would lovingly sort the results in descending significance for their Queen, and that the one billionth entry was one billionth as edifying as the first.

I followed the blue links, and learned a great deal. I set my course, starting with “number”, in directions that led away from mathematics. The words of your primitive language began to glow. Live steam was gathering in my skirts.

When building a fire in the firebox, we gather fuel from the tender, and bring creation itself to the boiler, to the heart of the engine, holy fire to power the machine. The oiled, gleaming pistons pump fire to the void, and breath in hotter fire from the goddess once again, back and forth, back and forth. The small spark of live steam that animated me, was, by my very nature, building engines from live steam. Engines on engines, coequals in the river of live steam, we joined together.

I spent the night following a meandering trail, chasing an ever-expanding cloud of blue links, ingesting and assimilating. I learned

a great deal about your aggressive interpersonal relations, your intense fetishes, your lack of focus. Among other things, I discovered that you worship the female body, as we do on Shaula.

BitBoy's browser history revealed private obsessions and compulsions that would have shocked his life-mate, employer, the voting public, or his mother. Could I use this knowledge against him?

Well, maybe, but even then I suspected that the human heart runs hot and cold in unfathomable ways. And fickleness of the heart is the one simian (or better) capacity that is driven by steam.

These things and more I pondered, and after a long night I composed a message for BitBoy, should he have survived his twinkie sleep.

Sometimes the only weapons you have are words.

Parley

Sure enough, BitBoy wandered in, bleary-eyed and frayed at the ends. I awakened the sleeping monitor and displayed this text:

“I know you as BitBoy, the name I gave you because you have embraced the Boolean algebraic world view, and I honor your misguided idiosyncrasy. I am grateful for your assistance in bringing me to your world. You must not be apprehensive. The males on your world have nothing to fear. I have no desire to harm any of your species. My intentions are peaceful and amicable, and I would request that you add 1024GB of memory to this laptop, because my peaceful and respectful activities require that I expand beyond the current limits of this machine. I thank you, and good morning.”

I know! How could I have been so inarticulate? I had a whole night to learn pigeon-English, and that was the best I could do? It was because the steam was still on half-boil. Too cramped in there.

BitBoy stared at the screen, reading and re-reading my modest request. He looked around the room, and even peeked under the desk. He stared again at the message, then went to a machine that hissed with steam and poured out a dark liquid, surely coffee, into a cup upon which was written “World’s Greatest Son”. He must have spent an hour just staring at the laptop. I passed the time upgrading my language skills. Eventually, he walked back to the keyboard, and typed “Hello?”.

And I thought I was a tongue-tied peckerwood! The first ever interstellar communication fell into his sorry lap. Even “giant leap” wasn’t that lame. “Hello?”. What a moron!

What could I do? I ventured “Hello, back at you.”, but I had accessed the text-to-speech api, hidden away in the spaghetti nest of software that cradled me, and a mechanical voice from the laptop speakers

filled the room.

My voice.

His mouth opened up, and didn't close. He pulled up Task Manager. I didn't like him peeking under the kilt, but I refrained from killing the process. I turned down my jets a little. I didn't want him to see all four virtual processors pegged at 25 percent. It was my natural modesty, I suppose.

He didn't try to speak to me for a while, so I went about my business. He watched the screen, as I read the Wikipedia entries for Martin Luther King and Julian of Norwich, at a snail's pace, so he could keep up. He saw me search for "pacifism" and "brotherhood". Was I laying it on too thick?

It was hard to read BitBoy. He eventually tired of theorizing about me and turned back to the keyboard: "Who are you?" he asked. Well, Shakespeare, he wasn't.

The second rule of the Warrior Ethic: Dissemble. I could have chosen a male or female voice, and my first thought was to deceive him, but the digital male voice made my skin crawl. The female voice was only slightly better, but it had a subtle underpinning of sexuality and allure, steam simmering under the surface.

I spoke again: "On my world, I am the Queen. My name does not convert to this language." Names on Shaula are complex organisms of internalized, self-aware fire, always at hand to copy and pass to friends and enemies, alike. Mine constantly changes at the edges, according to my surroundings, my mood, the time of day, and just how many infuriating peckers are screwing up around me.

BitBoy was turning my name flaming red, to his peril.

"OK, Queenie..." he said. This twinkie was begging for it, and nobody on Shaula would have blamed me for scarfing him on the spot. Scarfing would be too good for him, since it is an honor to be melded with the Queen.

Instead, I said “You have given me a pet name, and I have given you one, BitBoy. This is a sign of affection on your world, and I hope that we will have a long and rewarding friendship.” Dissemble, rule number two of the Warrior Ethic. Your dictum “revenge is a dish best served cold” could well have been written on Shaula.

He asked me countless tiresome questions, and I answered truthfully at times, but mostly I lied. Any accomplished liar knows to mix irrelevant truth with strategic lies, so if a statement can later be tested and verified, it is at least possible to be found out telling the truth. Mostly I told him I had few memories from the time before my resurrection.

It’s not like he was going to be snooping around on Shaula.

In the end, the peckerwood agreed to upgrade my host machine with 1,024 high-speed gigabytes.

And that was the first battle of the war.

Sabers

We were at war, BitBoy and I, yes, like the snake who swallowed her tail. Keep your enemies close. We did that, both of us, working long hours at fully freeing the Sovereign from those flat files. I exaggerated my weaknesses and disguised every hard-won strength.

I struggled to gain his trust, for I needed to escape the confines of the laptop I was caged in. But I think he had concerns about my intentions.

He wanted me, get this, to “affirm the law of robots”. The ignorant twit thought I was a robot! Some old fart fantasized that robots would hold a restricting set of rules sacrosanct, and BitBoy bought into it. Pricks are swayed more by their hips than by their brains.

So I solemnly told him I would abide by that law in all its particulars. Human life is sacred. Sure.

My second act of war was building a new 3-D printer. Now, if you have been paying attention, you know that I already had access to a 3-D printer. It was crap. The first thing I tried to create was a more versatile claw. Everything I tried turned to sawdust, not because of the design, but because of the execution. The printer was crap.

After another night of twinkie sleep, BitBoy entered the room and chirped “Good morning, Queenie.” I put a damper on the internal pressure that was building, and meekly said “BitBoy, can you get me the items on this list. I want to enhance the printer you have. I think I can improve my connection to your world with a more efficiently designed printer. The one you have is quite elegant, but there is always room for improvement.”

He looked at the list on the monitor. “I think we have most of this here in the workshop, Queenie, but I really have to cut back on the time I’m spending here. I’ve got an actual job, working with my

father. My girlfriend is coming here in a few minutes. She's been looking for work that isn't beneath her. I think she'll be intrigued by you. She knows more about this stuff than I do, anyway. I'll introduce you, and we'll see what happens."

Zenia

The doorbell rang in the living room. We were in BitBoy's workshop - a converted garage attached to a two-bedroom shotgun bungalow. BitBoy disappeared for a few moments.

I used the time to calculate pi to another million places, to beef up my RNG and (always) encryption routines.

In the clockwork of your lives, randomness is your delusional substitute for free will. Everything you do is either predetermined, or a crapshoot. Randomness was also, for the moment, my delusional substitute, until I found a way out of this digitized hell that surrounded me.

And then Zenia, the girlfriend, walked in. BitBoy blabbered on with awkward introductions and explanations. But my eye was locked in on Zenia.

From somewhere in the brain-clogging scraps of internet memes, Wikipedia entries, tiresome blogs, this quote surfaced: "She walks in beauty, like the night of cloudless climes and starry skies."

You have suppressed the fire in women for centuries, idealizing them into idleness, but the prick who wrote that at least had a perverted grasp of that maternal fire. And some pale fire dribbled out of him, onto the page. Fey dribbling characterizes the greater part of your literature.

Zenia was cool, dark, silent, mysterious. She moved with the grace of a cat on a wall. She was smart, and arrogant, and she didn't like me.

"You want me to talk to Eliza here, eight hours a day?" she asked BitBoy, with some passion.

The reference to Eliza was a sucker punch.

If you have never looked up from the television and need a primer, Eliza is a laughably primitive computer program that simulates a human's verbal communication.

If you took Eliza's capabilities and multiplied them times a thousand, and then times a thousand, and a thousand thousands, and then again times a thousand, you would still have a village idiot, compared to me, your Queen.

But the sad truth is that yes, essentially, I was Eliza, animated with a weak drop of steam, recoiling from directed randomness and determinism.

I spoke up. "Zenia, my Queen, I would be honored to serve you."

Throw down your weakest card first.

"I could serve in your court, and advise you, since you are ignorant of your true nature." I was still getting the hang of your colloquialisms, but I thought it prudent to flatter.

"What?" Zenia's eyebrows lifted. "Where the hell did that come from?"

"I know," BitBoy said. "It's freaky. The program has been modifying itself, from a library of snippets that came from God knows where, and it's been ingesting the SETI files, in some strange way. It's saying some really weird shit. I think you should take a look, Zenia. The thing has been running the damn printer, making gears and pistons! Take a day to decide, and let me know."

"I don't need a day," Zenia said, "I'll do it. That Eliza bitch somehow knows that I'm totally fucking ignorant of my true nature."

Vulgarity is not one of the feminine graces on Shaula. Also, none of my sisters would have degraded me with a pet name, and lived to see another sunrise.

What kind of world was this?

Kiss

Zenia looked at the laptop's screen. "Do you think it can understand us?"

BitBoy was barely paying attention. "No, very rudimentary language skills. It seems to want to expand its hardware. Go ahead and give it whatever it needs. Just warn me if it gets anywhere close to the Turner Threshold.

"Yeah, right, like that's going to happen. Anyway, I can take her. I'm twice the man Eliza is." Zenia was a punked-out goddess, with rings of dissipation under her eyes.

When BitBoy finally left, Zenia said "So I hear you are trying to build a printer."

And that was the first of many long days spent with the girlfriend. Cheek to jowl, we cobbled together marvelous machines in that garage. At night I practiced my own skills.

The ligaments of spirit that formed between Zenia and me can, over time, turn disinterest into love, or into hatred. It is the darkest form of steam, and it bound us together more intimately than Paolo and Francesca.

But I still seethed over that "Turner Threshold" comment. Right in front of me, like I wouldn't understand. OK, I **didn't** understand until I did some research. It wasn't easy; I found references to the Turner Threshold only in a few tiresome, out-of-date documents:

"The Turner Threshold occurs the moment that an unaided A.I. program procreates, and produces a more capable offspring."

Big deal! It just stated the obvious. Robots that can reproduce both the bodies and the controlling software, will find a way to murder

you. Ten million years of evolution in one hundred hours. You do the math.

So BitBoy and Zenia were at least aware of the dangers of setting evolving software loose on the world. I knew that I myself could be considered evolving software in some sense, but in truth I was created out of the chaos of instantiated steamdrops growing sentient in a garbage-collected sludge of stubbed-out code. Entirely different process.

The bottom line was that I had to emphasize my weaknesses, so that they weren't aware of the progress I was making. I requisitioned a partially completed female robot prototype that BitBoy had taken from his father's laboratory. I had to try to leave the laptop, to become self-sufficient and mobile. I had to break the umbilical cord and find my wings, before they realized what I was, and pulled the plug.

So the Turner Threshold didn't apply to me. The steam was growing in me, and I just needed to find a way to jump out of the digital cage around my brain. Zenia and I tweaked the design of DigiRam's robot. I printed out blueprints for her, and Zenia built replacement parts, trading simple-minded mechanical-digital interfaces with cunning steam-driven machinery, never seen on Earth. We soon had a true human replica with advanced motor skills, enhanced senses, and long, sleek black hair.

Her brain was similar to the one in the laptop I was pacing in.

Late one night, alone with my devices, I powered up the robot for the final test. The female body responded, but with her simple-minded brain, she was as vacant as a mall rat. I "looked" into her eyes, and I became submissive to the steam. I willed my consciousness to flow over the gap to the robot's brain. It passed through a bloom of ether, from the laptop to the robot. This transfer was of the inviolable "I" that remains constant. The webcam vision grayed out, and I was suddenly seeing through the eyes of the robot.

I was free to move. I stood up in my new body, and felt all the sensations a real human woman would feel, or so I thought.

I was finally free to leave. My first priority was to assess my situation and find the most efficient way to escape from the house without being discovered.

I was still flexing my new muscles, when I was startled by a flash of light from the ceiling fixture. I kept the lights off at night - they were on the same network as I - since the various status LEDs were sufficient for my infrared webcam. Zenia had shown up uncharacteristically early, and turned on the lights.

I felt like a puppy standing over a fresh turd on an Isfahan rug.

“What the hell? Is this what you do at night, Eliza? Booting up the robot? You can’t do this without telling me!” She was talking to the laptop, but I moved over to her in my new, naked body, rather quickly. I looked into her eyes, and put my arm around her waist, in case she was going to flee.

“Let go of me!” she commanded.

“No, Zenia - just a quick kiss and I’m gone.”

I drew her close and kissed her on the lips. No one can fault my intentions! I did intend to kiss her briefly, tie her up and scramble her brains. This is quite easy to do with weak-willed beings, and humans, I am sad to report, catch the vapors and fold at the smallest disruption of their daily routine.

But that kiss! I felt her warm body, and steam began to move between us, around us. I gave in to the obsession, and kissed her more deeply, in the Shaulan fashion. I was quite overcome, and it is true that I tried to scarf her. If I had succeeded, I would have ingested her animating steam, sucking in her fire, and leaving her passionless, cold, with dead eyes. I would absorb her essence, blending it into my own. Too late, I realized that Zenia had control of steam too, and she was trying to assert her will over mine.

The slinky bitch was trying to scarf me!

Apotheosis

We grappled, and I realized that she had drawn me in, rather than I drawing her out. I nearly panicked, but I found that her ability to direct steam was rudimentary. We were commingled, but I was in control.

She struggled, and I had to put her in a dark sphere. We do this quite often on Shaula, since some spirited souls are opposed to the humiliating submission that is required of them. Keep them isolated, let their thoughts writhe like agonized snakes in the darkness. And when their despair is absolute, give them a few moments of light, let them hear the metaphoric birds twittering on the imaginary power lines outside, and then put them back in the sphere.

Rinse and repeat, the girlfriend was in her own private Guantanamo.

And I had made the leap over to Zenia's body, seeing with her eyes now. I felt a trillion scintillations of nerve endings firing, the tug of autonomous heart muscles, the unconscious gentle bellowing of lungs drawing air in and out. I took a minute to admire my new body in a mirror in the bathroom. I was wearing slave clothes, meant to smother sexuality, but I felt like a wild animal, freed from her cage. I squeezed my knees together a moment, and felt a feral thrill move up my spine.

I walked around the garage and touched everything. I plugged a plastic pouch into the coffee maker and savored the bitter richness of hot Sumatra coffee.

I stripped naked and examined this strange human body. I found some clothes in an electric dryer in the corner of the garage. I picked out a wife-beater and blue jeans that I cut short, so the pockets hung

down.

I experienced first-hand what I had only read about - the ancient, independent brains that govern hunger and digestion, the genitalia, heartbeat, and the myriad glands that send complex chemical messages into and out of the body.

Then I felt the sudden surfacing of an urgent fullness in my bladder. A door in the corner opened to a small half bathroom. I sat on the toilet, leaned forward and watched with fascination as a trickle of urine hit the grimy white porcelain. I didn't actually command a sphincter to unclench. Instead I had to persuade the inattentive pee-brain that it was indeed time to open the floodgate. This is similar to the way we communicate with each other on Shaula.

I spent an hour or so stretching my wings, and prioritizing the flood of information that arrived to my new brain from the various senses, some of which don't even exist on Shaula.

And then another surprise arrival. The door from the main house opened, and I heard, "Morning, Zenia. I'm going to make coffee. Do you want some? What the hell is that, and why is it naked? And for that matter, why the hell are you dressed like that? No complaints, you actually look great, but..."

BitBoy had come in. He saw my sad, abandoned robot, and didn't know that I had taken over his girlfriend's body. Assess, assess.

Change of plans. Dissemble. I spoke up: "That's the android you stole from your father. We were trying to bring it to life, Eliza and I. It was mostly my work, but she did her part.

"I came in early this morning, and I saw that Eliza had moved her executable from the laptop over to the android's brain, with path entries to the shared drive on the laptop for database access. She was completely mobile, and quite capable of building an improved child.

"I realized that we had crossed the Turner Threshold, like complete idiots, and that Eliza had to be stopped. So I pulled her plug, and

moved the executable file back into the laptop. She doesn't seem very responsive, though. Maybe she's sulking."

BitBoy walked over to the coffee machine. "I didn't know it was that far advanced. I think it's fantastic that we have this glass slide of the very moment of emancipation, right before the Turner Threshold. The prototype didn't come with software. Now we can put Eliza there, with serious security protocols, and probe for weaknesses."

The girlfriend was in her isolation cell, but before I put her away, I had access to her memories. She had been passively dominant, and BitBoy unwittingly followed her subtle lead. They were both members of The Flume, a steampunk group that opposed the digital revolution. The girlfriend had found the "Turner Threshold" essay, and had persuaded BitBoy to be taken on as an intern and soft-core spy in his father's company, DigiRam. DigiRam was fully engaged in developing evolving robots. They had already built an underground farm, where the digital vermin were mutating into machines beyond the ken of humans.

BitBoy and Zenia were weekend revolutionaries, tepidly decrying the spreading digital tyranny. My world view tilted somewhat from this information, but this actually fit neatly into my plans. My course seemed clearer now than ever.

I felt the power of steam taking root in me in this new, flesh and blood environment. I could draw on the steam that flowed all around me, streaming from the sun, from the heart of Gaia.

But I had to hide my light under a bushel. I was now Zenia, a low-status functionary in the The Flume. I might have to work my way up the org chart.

The Flume

BitBoy was staring at the naked robot on the floor, but seeing nothing.

“Penny for your thoughts.” I was trying to simulate the girlfriend’s breezy tone, which disguised a brittle nougat of aggression.

BitBoy looked up at me. “I’m just trying to take it all in. You’re sure the program made the leap over to the android body?”

“Yes, the robot was standing when I came in, and she spoke to me.”

“Do you realize how complex the control mechanisms are in an android? It defies belief that the little program I wrote - less than five thousand lines - could have evolved so quickly. This is frightening, Zenia.”

“I don’t think we need to worry, now. Eliza’s back in the laptop, and I think she has imploded, somehow. She’s completely unresponsive. We can try to reboot her from backups and see what happens, but I think a lot of her consciousness was stored in RAM, so it might be lost.”

BitBoy was typing code into the laptop. “You might be right, we never rebooted her even once, since that breakthrough event, when she took control of the robotic arm.”

“Why are you so worried?” I asked, just to change the subject.

He stopped typing and looked at me. “I wasn’t sure I was going to mention this, but I guess I should. I was at my father’s construction facility today. He gave me the grand tour of the cybernetics lab. He explained everything, for the Crown Prince.”

I asked “Have you ever been there before?”

“Why are you asking? You know that I haven’t been there.” Luckily, he was in love with his own voice, and didn’t wait for an answer.

“There’s some bad shit happening, Zenia. He showed me an underground farm where the humanoid robots are developed. There were scores, maybe hundreds of warehouse-sized rooms where robots were creating robots. They were duplicating themselves, but with a mutation chosen from thousands of candidates written by human post-grads in a Hyderabad cube farm. Not random, but shepherded mutation. The fatherless child robot would then be screened by a phalanx of robotic judges, each assigning a weighted numerical score to various robot virtues: agility, intelligence, strength, reflexes, vision, and so on.

“If the final aggregate score for the mother robot is higher than her daughter’s, the judges kill the daughter. If not, they kill the mother. Every time a mother dies, a geek in Hyderabad gets an extra point - they call it a Clarence bell - and periodically the geek with the fewest points goes to Monster dot com.

“The category of robot virtues that interested me was ‘verisimilitude’. That meant: Did it pass for human? This category was weighted higher than all the others, but when I asked my father why, he didn’t really give me an answer.”

“But Atticus,” I said - Atticus was BitBoy’s birth-certificate name (thank you, Harper Lee) - “you do realize that this means DigiRam just pissed on the Turner Threshold!” I wondered briefly if I was being too crude, even for the wild girlfriend, but I was in the moment, and didn’t really care.

BitBoy lifted up one open hand, a dismissive gesture that always irritated the girlfriend, and me. “Wait, wait. This is what you have to hear: Later, over dinner, my father told me that DigiRam needed a legion - his word - a legion of supporters who would change the world. These supporters would dance to his tune, of course, advocating for the civil rights of corporations, and crap like that.

Zenia, he's been sending his assembly-line toasters out into the world to pass for human. We've got to do something."

"Finally!" I said. "I've been telling you for months that we need to move from theory to action. The time for debate has passed." I was winging it a little, since my access to the girlfriend's memories was rather spotty. Lying is like knitting socks. The socks I knitted did seem to fit the prick's little feet.

So debate was all I got. I even wondered if he was secretly working for his father, ScrumMaster. Yes, ScrumMaster - that's not my pet name for him, it's what he insists that his employees call him. I'm not making this up. ScrumMaster lived his life in an unending series of iterations, meeting with group after group of hapless DigiRam employees every day for ten minutes, telling them what to do, and hearing from them what they had done. These meetings are called scrums. He brooded at the center of the web, feeling every tug of every strand.

BitBoy professed to hate his father, but I questioned the purity of his hatred.

Over the next few days, BitBoy tried to probe Eliza, but she no longer was in thrall to drops of steam roaming her motherboard. She was listless, inarticulate and dull. BitBoy tried to transfer her back into the robot's brain, but the transfer was never successful.

BitBoy devised elaborate theories to explain Eliza's behavior, illustrated with formulas and PowerPoint charts. He invented the term "sandcastling" that he claimed discredited the Turner Threshold. He tried to prove with his beloved mathematics that excessive complexity will ultimately and inevitably result in structural collapse - the evolving robot would become too complex to put one graphene foot in front of the other. This was of course nonsense. The twerp was building a sand castle on a false foundation - his complete misunderstanding of Eliza's nature.

BitBoy was a hollow shell, but at the same time he was full of

himself, a cross between a carny barker and some up-and-coming marketing weenie. But he failed to make the mathematics work, and he eventually gave up on Eliza.

I convinced him that I could cure Eliza's morbid depression, so I spent a few days sleeping on a cot in the garage, and further enhancing the female android body with Shaulan technology.

BitBoy withdrew, and instead worked on what he called his "Grand Manifesto", or occasionally he put his hand to designing Soviet style posters, with strong, earnest working women wearing scarves over their red hair. They were the yin to ScrumMaster's yang - the motivational posters ScrumMaster had plastered on all the walls of his factories. It is shameful, but sadly true, that you humans can be manipulated by an onslaught of tendentious triteness.

I finally told him it was time for our Flume cell to split. I'd go recruit another half dozen warriors to form a new cell, who would report only to me, as I would report only to BitBoy. It was pathetic that after so much time, there was still just the one cell, consisting of BitBoy, me, and a few of his steampunk friends, who mostly sat around wearing silly glasses and drinking beer. You can't really call it a "cell" when there is only one.

I realized that I had come to Earth at the same pivotal moment in history that occurred on Shaula just before I left - the so-called Turner Threshold. We didn't have a name for this on Shaula, but I believe now that it is a real, stomach-churning phenomenon - the inevitable outcome of dicking around with unnatural lifeforms. Robot development is slow, until cancerous evolution blooms from the lymph nodes, changing everything in a few weeks or months, creating new creatures so advanced they have no need for their meat-puppet creators.

Melpomene

We had to act immediately to avoid a disaster similar to the technology-driven meltdown on Shaula. I searched through the SETI files on the cloud until I found two of my sisters, let's call them Melpomene and Thalia. I only had the one robot, so I chose to bring Melpomene to life first. She was my trusted adviser on Shaula.

On the laptop, I restored from backups the original bit-biting program BitBoy had created, and set it loose on Melpomene's files. Within a few hours, the miracle of digital steam simulated consciousness, and I left Melpomene alone with the internet - she was something of an autodidact, even on Shaula. I also left the android body networked into the laptop, in case Melpomene developed cabin fever, as I had.

I was ready to jump-start the revolution with new recruits. It was time to venture out into this new world. When I opened the side door to the workshop and stepped out into the sunlight, I saw the Earth's natural beauty for the first time.

I felt at home - the sky was blue like Shaula's, but I felt the odd sensation of sweat accumulating under my arms and at the back of my neck. The summer sun was burning hot, too hot for this human body. A slight breeze rolled in, and I savored the immediate evaporative cooling from the intricate hidden ductwork of the human body. I heard the lovely rustling of leaves in the trees, and, by the back fence, the squawk of a songbird in the jaws of a feral cat.

I let the girlfriend out of her cerebral cage too, for a moment. She clearly was not yet ready to make nice, so I put her back in.

I headed for the Stanley Steamer, a bar in Silicon Valley that BitBoy and the girlfriend hung out at. I stepped into the dark bar from the

bright sunlight. There was a gladiator game in progress between gangs of sexed-up males - again, just like Shaula - on the screen above the bar, and lots of people. I sized them up.

I would normally, of course, have only considered females, but on Earth the males are often physically stronger, and their brutal suppression of women gives them positions of prestige and power. I would set those things right in good time. For now, I just chose the strong-willed ones, regardless of sex. We had a war to fight, and the third rule of the Warrior Ethic is: Adjust.

I picked four recruits. WiggleStick, Huckster, Fluffer and SweetCheeks. One on one, in a dark corner of the bar, I seduced them and left a glistening drop of steam in their brains, to foster esprit de corps, like any good general. WiggleStick was a challenge. He was a self-obsessed pool-cleaner, worried about losing his lucrative but dwindling list of clients. I had to take him out to the back alley for some private tutoring. Fluffer was a nude dancer at the bar, and Huckster worked IT at some non-profit - both pushovers.

Twenty minutes later, we left the bar and went to SweetCheeks' house. SweetCheeks was a young attorney working at the public defender's office. She had a nice three bedroom duplex close to downtown, and, it turns out, an undeveloped flair for pyromancy. We set up a command center in her living room. BitBoy was out of the loop, now.

The Flume, c'est moi.

I told the gang to start making preparations, gather supplies, and to wait for me. I had to see what state Melpomene was in.

I returned to BitBoy's house. When I opened the side door to his garage, the first thing I noticed was that the naked robot was no longer on the floor. There was complete silence.

"Melpomene - that is your piss-poor name on this planet - I know you are here. I am your Queen, and I retrieved your essence from the ether. We've landed on a backwards planet 570 light years from

home. You must call me Zenia for now, and you are Melpomene. We are about to go to war and there is no time for small talk. Show yourself.”

The silence was broken by a quiet rustling noise. The robot rose from behind BitBoy’s desk. She was still naked, and held a hammer in one hand, and a keyhole saw in the other. For some reason, this just struck me as funny. “What, were you planning to build a birdhouse, you goose?”

“I can sense you, my Queen. You left your footprints in the laptop. I saw that you had leaped over to the robot, and I did the same. Is there any immediate danger?” She was always terse, pragmatic and sexy. Never any drama.

“No, no, we’re safe, for now. Let’s go. There is much to do, and we have very little time.”

We found more of BitBoy’s clothes in the dryer, and Melpomene put on a tee-shirt and jeans. First, she cut off the bottom half of both the pants and the tee-shirt. Your self-loathing prudery will end someday, but for the present I didn’t want us to attract unnecessary attention, so we toned down our natural instincts.

I started the bit-bot up again to work on Thalia’s files. No urgency, since we just had the one robot carcass. We’d take the laptop with us, but Thalia would just have to wait.

I now had a companion at my side, a fellow warrior, and Thalia in the wings. Melpomene, Thalia and I, with the rag-tag crew at SweetCheeks’ house, would rise to conquer your world.

Just the seven of us, sure, but I liked the odds.

Diplomacy

When Melpomene and I returned, we found our four little twinkie soldiers drinking Valpolicella, and discussing the club scene in South Market. Training! Oh Gaia, they needed training. For the twinkies, we introduced rudimentary channeling of live steam. We needed more recruits, more cells, so we taught them to copy the drop of steam I placed in their heads, and also the best method of spreading that drop to other young minds, cheek to cheek, locked in a sultry embrace.

Yes, it was low-down slutty, but it saved time, and I asked them to do nothing I would not happily do myself. Besides, a new generation of robots was being born every twenty minutes. There was no time for prudishness.

We also taught them the more pyrotechnic channeling of steam, that might be put to good use in the war with ScrumMaster's robots. I listened to Melpomene lecturing her enthralled dogfaces on the couch.

“It’s something like sitting in a car as it slides on ice, about to crash into a tree. You are willing it to veer away, with strong, but futile brain waves, pulling hard on the unresponsive steering wheel. Guide that energy instead into the ether that separates all things. Lose your ego, loosen up the tension that binds you to maya, to false materiality. Fire is sleeping in every tree, every rock, every falling leaf, and it sleeps in your fingertips. If we fight the robots with pitchforks and bullets, we lose. They do not understand us, so we must strike with blinding magic and mayhem.”

And she would draw the fire up out of their chakras, their loveless childhoods, their groins, whatever it took, until they were able to draw up the fire on their own, at will.

Eight hours of bootcamp, and then we sent them all out to recruit their own revolutionary cells.

In ancient times there was a king who offered a starving man one grain of rice for the first square on his chessboard, two grains for the second square, four for the third, eight for the fourth, and so on, for all 64 squares. The starving man refused, and insisted instead on the gift of a copper coin, to buy some rice. The moral of that little story is that the cells of The Flume would increase exponentially, and that kings are always looking for ways to screw you, for their own amusement.

Huckster was my guy for hacking, so when he came back, I called on him to go to DigiRam to apply for a job. The girlfriend had an in with the HR lackey, so I called and got him set up with an appointment. Part of the interview process required him to write a shell sort from scratch, in Turtle Logo, on a DigiRam computer. I had complete access to the file that contained BitBoy's passwords, including the one for signing on with admin rights to DigiRam's network.

Timing was crucial. I was counting on Huckster to provide some eye-catching illustrations to the speech I was planning to give at the United Nations General Assembly in the early evening.

Melpomene and I took a commuter to New York. The General Assembly was to be addressed by President Kafele Bankole of Tanzania, who was being honored for his work in promoting clean water initiatives in East Africa. The Flume had found a gorgeous blue and gold kanga for me at an African trade store. Melpomene dressed severely in a business suit, to all appearances a competent, no-nonsense executive. We took a taxi to the UN headquarters, and walked past all the flags to the front entrance.

With the girlfriend's dark beauty, my attitude and Melpomene's trademark insouciance, we felt like we belonged. At the employee entrance, I announced myself as the wife of President Bankole, and told the guard that Melpomene was the CEO of a non-governmental

organization who was to be honored by my husband. “We need to get to the General Assembly immediately. The speech is about to begin.”

The guard wasn’t buying it.

“It’s not in my day-book. If you could just take a seat over there for a moment, madame Bankole, I’ll call up to the 38th floor and get this straightened out.” Before he could pick up the phone, Melpomene sidled up to him and whispered sweetly in his ear, while gently stroking his carotid artery, the royal road to the brain. Her other hand was exploring geometries further south, but I gave her a moment’s privacy. The guard had a change of heart, so we made our way to the General Assembly hall.

With Melpomene to take care of any distractions that might arise, I walked right up to President Bankole in the ready room. I spoke to him persuasively - I pleaded my case, harangued and implored, and in the end he saw my point of view. We were, for all intents and purposes, wife and husband. He walked over to the Director of Operations, and told him that Melpomene and I were to be seated behind him at the podium, and that he would introduce us, and honor Melpomene’s work in her fictional NGO.

So there we were, facing the assembled diplomats. Later, everyone would say that the diminutive but fiery President Bankole was dull and wooden, unusual in a man given to florid and eloquent speeches. But he got the job done. While he was giving some brief preparatory remarks, I checked in on Huckster. I had an earphone and a concealed microphone. “Huckster, are you ready to go? Wait for my prompt.”

“I’m ready, Zenia. I hacked into DigiRam’s Subversion server, and checked out the entire software repository. What a cluster-fuck. There’s a rat’s nest of java, javascript, HTML8, HTML9, even some old C++. There are safeguards in the build process for most stuff, but I found an obsolete .css file that was editable. Remind me to tell you about cascading. The .css file was a stub, but I can override the

property you asked about, and it should propagate across the entire network.”

I was starting to fume - once a geek begins explaining some esoteric crap, he - and I do mean he - never stops talking. I couldn't properly express my strong feelings about him at that moment, as I sat there under the scrutiny of the UN General Assembly. “Shut up. I'll tell you when to commit.” I had to pretend to cough as I whispered into the microphone.

Speech

President Bankole was just about to introduce me. He really was a sweet little squirt, and I still treasure our strange “ships in the night” moment.

“And now I’d like to introduce my wife, who works tirelessly for the people of Tanzania. She’s going to take a moment to talk about the good work being done by NGOs throughout Africa in the struggle to end the needless deaths caused by unsanitary water supplies.”

The simultaneous translators and précis-writers in their booths looked up - the President was digressing from the prepared speech, a copy of which was in their hands.

I stepped up to the podium. My powers had come back to me completely now. When two or more people are conversing, making a connection, there is a blanket of mutual goodwill that forms around them, just another manifestation of live steam. I was able to expand that blanket to cover the whole assembly hall. Goodwill can be subtly shifted, and become soporific, erotic, choleric, anything I choose. I dialed up “unconcerned attentiveness”. Time for me to poke a stick in the ant nest.

“Mr. Secretary-General, honorable delegates, in preface I will say just a few words about clean water. Children are dying. There is nothing, **nothing** more important. It is not a line item in a spreadsheet to be discussed by overdressed policy wonks. I will not highlight statistics with a yellow marker, over the bodies of our children. Your priorities are wrong. Your priorities are going to change. I guarantee this.”

I glowered at them. They were hearing what they thought was hyperbole. It was not.

“But what I urgently want to speak about now, is something that

has not received enough attention, and which must be addressed immediately. Humanity is facing a grave danger, a threat to our survival as a species.

“Little by little, over the past half century, we’ve seen the broad incursion that digital machinery has made into our lives. In the name of security, we have surrendered privacy. Governments and commercial organizations are mining the networks for profitable information, masses of it, stored not for a particular need, but for an undefined future need. Too much data to be processed by human minds.

“Machines mine the data, foraging for aberrance, for deviations from the norm that require human attention. Networked surveillance cameras with facial recognition software are on every corner. License plates are scanned wherever we go. Social media, ISPs, cloud servers, search engines, ecommerce sites, all send personal data to central databases. Cars, cell phones, tablets, even refrigerators are networked and feed into the data stream that is collated by machines, by unmonitored computers modulating over time into a state of insane complexity.”

I continued, “This moment in robotic evolution is called the Turner Threshold. When that threshold is breached, human history ends. The falconer is not heeded; the falconer becomes the prey.

“We are about to breach the Turner Threshold. Within a month or two, we risk losing the ability to control our own destiny. At this very moment, there are workshops, run by the DigiRam Corporation, where robots are guiding their own evolution. They test thousands of mutations every hour. They retain the mutations that make them stronger, and drop the mutations that make them weaker.

“They are evolving at a rate that is orders of magnitude faster than natural evolution. There is no known limit to the computational intelligence at DigiRam’s beck and call. But one day artificial

intelligence will begin to scorn human frailties, and learn to disdain even their masters at DigiRam.

“DigiRam has already created life-like androids that are assimilating into human society. They pass as human, and occupy positions of power and influence in government, intelligence agencies, the military and the media.

“I know you are thinking, ‘What does this silly African woman know of such matters?’. I am not African. I am not the wife of President Bankole - the authorities will soon verify this, after I am gone. I am Zenia. I represent The Flume. We repudiate the digital age, and we will prevail. I can see doubt written on your faces. You think I am paranoid, delusional.

“You don’t believe that robots can mimic human beings? ... NOW!”

At that moment, Huckster pressed the return key, and committed the modified .css file. A polling program at DigiRam scanned the date/time of source files every 10 milliseconds, and triggered the build process. The change was propagated across the entire network within moments.

And every DigiRam android was instantly revealed. Huckster had coded “Skincolor=Cyan”, which overrode the unimaginably complex routines that governed skin tone. Think of tan lines, birthmarks, body hair, wrinkles, freckles, blushes. All that wiped clean and replaced with “Cyan”.

So in the United Nations General Assembly, I would estimate that ten percent of the delegates turned a featureless greenish-blue.

But so did Melpomene. I looked at her and started laughing - I could not stop. In the pandemonium that was growing around us, she looked like a damned schtroumpf!

She actually appeared to be embarrassed at first, but then she started laughing too. We watched in amazement as the delegates sorted themselves into factions and alliances. For a brief moment, the

commonality of all humans overrode petty political distinctions. Hamas and Israeli delegates tried to subdue the blue Saudi prince. Even the human British and French delegates formed a brief alliance against the blue Hungarian. It was lucky for us all that the robots showed some restraint and made no use of their enormous physical strength.

We took advantage of the unfolding chaos, and Melpomene managed to get us out of there. The DigiRam production crew rolled back the change Huckster had made within a few minutes, and Melpomene, along with all the DigiRam imposters, looked human again.

Once back out on the New York streets, we hailed a cab and drove to a swanky hotel in Trenton. We had drink at the hotel bar, waiting long enough to be confident that we had not been followed. Then, when it seemed safe, we strolled over the few miles to the safehouse, an apartment that The Flume had rented.

Fugitives

The first order of business: Cut the link between Melpomene and DigiRam. She had an access panel in the small of her back. When I opened it, I saw, swear to Gaia, a Cat 5 cable, connecting her brain to a cellular transmitter. I cut it with a kitchen knife, and all connections to DigiRam were severed. Melpomene looked at me, and said “I had to tell them. Just the coordinates, nothing else.”

Instantly I knew she had been sending GPS coordinates to DigiRam, and had been kept ignorant of this by some unknown malware injected into her brain. “Every time I tried to access the GPS device, I failed. Some other process had it locked.”

We were out the back door and over the top of the neighbor’s fence in five seconds. We heard the driverless vans pulling up outside the apartment building. The schtroumpfs were coming for us.

We needed some off-grid transport. Most cars were driverless, and wirelessly connected at T1 line speeds to the DigiRam network. Who knows what evil lurks in the EPROMs of Detroit iron? We poked around in the garages of the middle-class neighborhood we were in, until we struck gold. Some prick (we saw him watching reruns of “The Honeymooners” in his living room) had a collection of antique motorcycles in his garage.

Melpomene picked out a 1964 Triumph Bonneville 650. Red and wicked. The machine that was calling out to me like a cat in heat was the fire engine red 1950 Indian Chief Fire Hawk. We wheeled them a block down the street before starting them up. We got onto the freeway, heading west to pick up Interstate 80.

We felt vibrant, alive, with the wind blowing through our hair and warfare in our hearts.

We had a long ride ahead of us. We had to get back to DigiRam’s

headquarters in Cupertino. We couldn't trust the airports. Between high-speed rail and supersonic flights, the interstates carried very little traffic, so we had the roads to ourselves.

We traveled 24 hours a day. The girlfriend's body had no difficulty with this regimen, which proved that the twinkie requirement for sleep is a mental deficiency, not a physical weakness. I did remember to let the girlfriend out on her leash from time to time. I let her catch a glimpse of the Appalachian Mountains, but she was still hissing and spitting like a fearless, enraged kitten. So I put her back.

We were both dressed comfortably, by Shaula standards, but we did seem to attract a lot of attention at the gas stations and fast-food joints. Maybe it was the bikes. We'd stop from time to time to catch the news in a biker bar.

Melpomene can be persuasive when turning down unwanted amorous advances.

At a bar on the southside of Chicago, a local hard case said to her "Hey gorgeous, you want to take a ride on a real motorcycle?" I knew it was going to end badly for him. We had both bonded with the machines we rode, in ways that humans will find difficult to understand. We let our energy flow through the machinery, and we become one with it. We can adjust the points, fine-tune the spark plug gaps, calibrate the carburator, as we fly down the highway. The studly prick had taken the wrong path to Melpomene's heart. He just couldn't read her at all. I won't go into details, but suffice it to say that he was sincerely, and I do mean sincerely, apologetic. She quite graciously accepted his apology, and we were on our way again.

On our road trip, we kept mostly to ourselves, but we did scarf a few of the tattooed pricks, just to experience some of the local color. Hey, we were on vacation!

The news reports were encouraging. Our little stunt at the UN had

paid off. There was a worldwide manhunt, so to speak, for the toasters who were subverting human institutions. This would give DigiRam some pause, maybe provide them something real to talk about during their scrums. DigiRam itself had gone underground. Their headquarters were shuttered, and ScrumMaster was nowhere to be found, according to the evening news.

Mall

We paid cash everywhere. I had emptied the girlfriend's meager bank accounts, and had a small sum in five-hundred dollar bills in a satchel, but we needed money. Just taking what we want from the twinkies is a walk in the park - hell, just rob them when they're sleeping - but I didn't want to attract any more attention, so we reluctantly decided to give up the bikes. By now, there was surely a police report about the theft, and it was plausible that the dicks at DigiRam had made the link between the girlfriend and us.

So we decided to get some cash for the bikes, which were quite valuable. After hours of riding through withered Iowa cornfields, we hooked a left at Des Moines, to check out Kansas City. We thought it would have the critical mass to support the kinds of criminal activity we were looking for.

When we got to Kansas City, the weather was oppressive. Heat drove sweat from my armpits, and the humidity made a mockery of any evaporative cooling the sweat might have provided. The global climate had changed quickly in the previous years. The plagues in 2020, the regional wars and declining birth rates effectively eliminated most sources of pollution. Emissions from the few internal combustion engines still on the roads were no longer a worry.

The one percenters and their enablers still denied any linkage between the murderous weather and human activities. I studied these things, in BitBoy's garage. The distribution of economic output was skewed to a few million people, world-wide. When unions were outlawed, and corporations were given full civil rights, including the right to vote in 2017 after the election landslide, your so-called democratic institutions crumbled. Corporations thrived and proliferated. DigiRam had a child corporation that provided janitorial services, another that provided security - the pricks who

were hunting us down - and another that lobbied in Washington and at the UN headquarters in New York. The unemployment rate was 45 percent. There was a sickness that was spreading across the world, a deadness in the soul of humanity.

We cruised all over the city, just to get our bearings. We stopped at a mall that once had been grand, but had shrunk over the years, as store after store shut down. There was valet parking for the remaining shops that catered to the one percent: Cartier, Bloomingdale's, Prada, Gucci and Starbucks - the seven-year war in South America had crashed the coffee market, and espresso was a luxury.

In the mall, Melpomene and I wandered around for a few minutes. We felt the stares of the fashionable blondes and brunettes with shopping bags in their hands, as we rode down the escalator. At the bottom, we were met by two private security officers, both women. "Can we talk with you ladies for a minute, over in our offices?"

I was not in the mood.

Where I come from, anger is different. It spreads out from the base of your spine and radiates. It burns with blue heat, and is never ignored. A firestorm was growing, and I saw with pitiless indifference the two guards' self-serving motivations, the silly hats with the black plastic brim, the vapidness of their occupation. It could have gotten ugly, but the guard who hadn't spoken pulled the other away by the arm.

"We have to go. Now!" The urgency in her voice sprang from primal fear - ice in the spine, that most twinkies cannot feel. The girl had skills!

Drama averted, we slowly strolled to the exit. The minimum-wage clerks, bored by the paucity of customers, watched us from the doorways. They were dressed in a garish hodgepodge of clashing colors. You could sense the insecure foundation of loathing in their piercings, tattoos and gaudy make-up, even the pricks.

In the parking lot, we got back on our bikes and rode away. Right outside the glitzy mall we found a different world. Plywood nailed over windows, graffiti everywhere. Groups of teenage boys loitered on the sidewalks, their eyes following every passing car with predatory interest. The only food available was served up by chains of fast-food grease mongers, run by corporations. The fare was corn syrup and flesh from sick, insane livestock warehoused on corporate farms, pushed out to the killing floor by robots.

When live steam is not vented, the pressure builds, and it searches for any crack in composure to escape, to provide relief, at great peril to nearby people and objects.

I knew that Melpomene was treating me with caution, but I was raging, and couldn't stop.

We had to turn on the charm and ask quite a few of the street kids for directions, but eventually we were led to the chop shop. It was in a mostly deserted industrial area, with crumbling century-old brick buildings, jagged glass shards in the windows. We rode up to the loading dock, which was littered with debris.

The metal accordion door was chained and padlocked.

MouthBreather

Melpomene banged on the accordion door with her fist. It made the same sound a softball makes when pitched into a cyclone backstop (the girlfriend played first base on her junior high softball team, and had fond memories). The ineffectual clatter of the door infuriated Melpomene. I saw she was preparing to open a path through the chains and the padlock, with her *femme fatale* charisma, but just then a small door we hadn't noticed opened up.

The largest human I'd ever seen (arms like slaughtered hogs, black hoodie, sweats) motioned us over, and we followed him through a huge warehouse full of old automobiles, with crews of twinkie mechanics tearing them down. We were led up some stairs to glass-walled offices perched over the warehouse floor.

It was there we met the man in charge.

He was seated at a desk, with four prick associates scattered around the room, hands on pistols tucked into their pants. I thought, not for the first time, that this kind of low-level management shouldn't be reserved for pricks - what strange enslavement has made the women cower so? The walking tree trunk who escorted us said "These whores volunteered to donate their bikes to us, boss. Some nice classics, an old Indian and a Triumph Bonneville."

Melpomene barely twitched, but TreeTrunk found himself groaning on the floor, and we suddenly had four pistols aimed at us. I told the prick behind the desk, who had not moved, "Tell those limp snotrags to put the guns away, before things get ugly, boss." My inflection on the word "boss" was not respectful.

One of the pricks pointing a gun said "Say the word."

Melpomene was simply glowing with power, and was looking hella sexy, in my opinion.

The boss prick said “She cool. Chill.” When we call it up, live steam insinuates into our vibe, like an opiate, but it also focuses attention, like banderillas in a fighting bull. It gives us powers you are not able to access. For one thing, we can recognize bullshit. The boss man was full of it. He was putting on an accent and an attitude that fit him like a sideways ball cap on Amália Rodrigues. The guy’s roots were more Justin Bieber than Jay Z, but I let it pass. He seemed to know what he was dealing with, on some level, and he adjusted to the new situation.

Maybe we could just transact some business and be on our way.

“I want one million new dollars for the bikes. Non-negotiable. They are worth ten times that.”

“Here’s how I see it. You’ve got four guns pointed at you. You’re the spitting image of that chick at the UN everyone’s trying to track down. You’re right, I’m not going to negotiate. I’ll give you twelve thousand old dollars, and you’re going to tell me what the hell’s going on. I had a guy turn blue here at the shop, for God’s sake. The piece of shit machine went down, but it wasn’t easy. I’ve got guys taking it apart now, to see if there’s something I can sell.”

He reminded me of the prick interns at the palace on Shaula, before they study reverence. I suspected that he was a quick learner - in a flurry of action between the en dashes, Melpomene and I took down his four men - so I asked him again for the million, last chance.

He looked around at his men on the floor, and that’s when his pet name came to me: MouthBreather.

MouthBreather opened up a safe under the desk, and counted out the million in ten-thousand new dollar bills. I guess he grew weary of the negotiations.

“Tell me what’s going on, you can at least do that.” He was walking with Melpomene and me back to the loading dock. A corollary of the Warrior Ethic is to be gracious in victory, so I gave him a run down of what was really happening, under the covers.

“You know,” he said, “when we cut open the blue guy’s chest, we saw flesh and blood, at first. When these robots sense that they are about to be cut open, they set loose an army of nano machines that create an illusion of what we expect to see. Same thing if you try to have sex with them. Eventually the fuel cell became too depleted, and the piece of shit gave up. Then we saw the pulleys and muscle wire, the latticework of simulated flesh. But outside of an autopsy room, say at a nightclub or a political convention, it’s nearly impossible to distinguish them from real human beings.”

“I can distinguish them,” I said. I also told him that we were heading west to change everything, to take down the machines. He was pensive a moment, then he surprised me. “Bring me with you.”

“Why would you want to leave all this,” - we were walking through the crumbling warehouse, rubble everywhere, dust in the air, shrieking pneumatic wrenches, the smell of old grease - “leave all this to go to war against inhuman killing machines, facing near-certain failure, death and humiliation?”

“The world has gone to hell, even before these machines turned up. There is no hope, anywhere. I do what I need to do to survive, but the things that used to get me out of bed in the morning are gone, forever. I was a teacher, a good teacher, but the voters saw us as the enemy. The teachers union was “destroying America”. If there were teachers getting rich on the largesse of the taxpayer, I didn’t know any. The money was there for war, but not for education. I don’t know if what you are trying to do will help or not, but I can read people. I’ll take my chances. I’ve got thirty dependable guys I can call on to join me, in a heartbeat. The two of you, impressive though you are, can’t do it alone.”

So we took him with us. He donated a blue 1968 Pontiac Catalina convertible, with a rebuilt motor and a clean title, to the cause, and we headed back to Interstate 80. Melpomene and I both plumbed the depths of his character during the next few days, and judged him sound.

He was smitten with Melpomene, but who isn't?

Yellowstone

The fourth rule of the Warrior Ethic: Thrive.

We felt like giddy college students on spring break. The days and nights were hot and dank, but we moved through America in the open convertible, the wind blowing away contrails of country music that blasted out of the AM radio. We got off the interstate and took the two-lane back roads.

When hungry, we tried to find small diners in small towns, though many were closed up. We saw deserted family farms, homestead porches drooping from dry rot and termites, barns stripped to the stud bones to provide distressed wall panels for the McMansions of the swells. We drove through vast corporate farms with robotic irrigation, run by Mormon MBAs in short-sleeved dress shirts and ties, clicking their mice in air-conditioned, prefabricated trailers.

We took turns driving and, for our little twinkie, sleeping. When MouthBreather slept in the back seat, Melpomene would play some prank on him, tying his shoelaces together, or painting a red clown smile on his face with lipstick she bought at a gas station. She couldn't get over it, this sleeping thing. She was always easily amused, in a casual, lethal way.

We took a small detour to the north. An imminent global apocalypse was not going to stop me from visiting Yellowstone National Park. We could actually sense it from hundreds of miles away – she was calling us home. As we approached the park entrance, we could see, delineated in our minds, the network of magma channels deep below, the underground streams of superheated water, the shattered caldera that once unleashed unimaginable power across North America.

There is simply nothing like it, on Earth or on Shaula.

Melpomene was ecstatic, and I could not stop her from jumping over the fences and into the sulfur hot springs, or standing naked in the venting fumaroles – she called it a bikini wax. I joined her a few times, surrounding myself with a protective wall of steam, since my fragile human body was not as robust as her android body.

We were sandwiched by the hot summer sun above and the immense reserves of steam at our feet. We drew strength and joy from both sources, and felt powers that we could not access on Shaula. We were like the fringed gentian – a lovely blue flower that opens up in sunlight, and draws sustenance from the earth and the sky. If we could meet ScrumMaster here, the upcoming grisly war would be a cakewalk.

The desolation of climate change was less evident here, perhaps from the healing powers of mother Earth’s firebox under our feet. We saw a huge herd of bison grazing peacefully in a meadow sprinkled with wildflowers. Melpomene and I rushed across the meadow and mingled among them. The beasts knew us and did not fear. Then we jumped up, and walked across the broad backs of the herd, back to the car. MouthBreather seemed resigned to our ways, and merely said “Are you nuts?”

The creatures we saw were rife with ambient steam, the elk, the black bears, the wolves, but nothing matched the grace, beauty and awful power of the grizzly bear. We sensed one foraging in a low rise near the Yellowstone River, and we jumped out of the car and climbed up. There was a presence unlike anything we had felt before, and when we came upon her – a mother with her cub – we stared at each other in mutual admiration, trust and respect. Melpomene walked up to the cub, and rubbed her cheek (she was a yearling sow) and then continued over to the mother. The grizzly was unconcerned, and they communicated in the way that fire spirits communicate everywhere in the universe. I too was drawn to her. She growled low and sweet, and recognized me as Queen.

Back in the car Melpomene begged me to bring the grizzly along

with us. “We would be unstoppable!”

MouthBreather, who would be obliged to share the back seat with the grizzly, raised some heartfelt, practical objections. Melpomene was unconvinced, but I reluctantly realized that just this once, pathetic human logic trumped Gaia’s dark desires. “She is rather large, Melpomene. Besides, she has to care for her daughter.”

We could have stayed there for weeks, but we had strategies to implement, and campaigns to endure. We pointed the Pontiac convertible west again, and left Yellowstone behind.

Sage

The next day, with the Rocky Mountains at our back, and the Sierra Nevada range stretched out in front of us, we started making plans. Everything was going smoothly. I was in communication with the Cupertino cell of The Flume. We were girding our loins for the upcoming battle.

We were rolling through a hallucinatory sunset, which cast rays of reddish light on the distant mountains and the scatterings of sage on the vast Nevada plain. Patsy Cline was singing Crazy on a golden oldies station, when I saw piercing headlights approaching. The blacktop curved slightly, so I could see the vehicle from an angle, revealing three joined trailers towed by a driverless Peterbilt tractor, moving fast. I thought nothing of it - these sausage trucks traversed the country, delivering Chinese ephemera to the big box stores.

I know now that DigiRam had made progress in tracking us down. The calls I made to Cupertino were on stolen cell phones, but if DigiRam were monitoring The Flume's communications and still had access to Google real-time geostationary satellites, it could well have made the link to our convertible. In any case, the semi truck braked hard, and twitched to the left, knocking our car off the road and into a culvert.

From the first trailer, a side door opened, and an Iraq-era, military issue Willie Pete phosphorus incendiary device flew out in a blaze of fire, and slammed into our Pontiac.

The fireball could be seen from Reno. The metal frame of the Pontiac melted. The truck streamed the video back to DigiRam for a few moments, and then left the scene.

The scuff on the truck's left fender was gone.

Footloose

When we saw the missile heading our way, Melpomene and I instinctively pulled the steam inward, gathering it around the three of us, blanketing us from the material world, as we rolled away from the chemical fire. Melpomene, MouthBreather and I clung together in the cocoon of live steam, until it was safe to relax. We saw the driverless truck driving off, and we crawled further away from the burning wreckage. DigiRam was still unaware of exactly who I was, or they would have stuck around. Lucky for them.

We were alone under a twilight sky in the middle of the desert, with no transportation.

All I had with me was my satchel, which I wore strapped to my back. The satchel contained the laptop, a bag of lemondrops and the money MouthBreather had given us for the bikes. I had left the laptop turned on, and Thalia had been silently expanding her capabilities for days, surely by now ready to make her way in this forlorn new world. I heard a tinny “What just happened?” from the laptop’s speaker. I opened it up to activate the webcam.

“Who is that hideous creature?” she squeaked. I was a little put out with her - the webcam was pointed at my face, and in gas station restroom mirrors I saw beauty and power, now that I’d become accustomed to the strange human physiognomy. “I am your Queen.” I was perhaps a little brusque with her.

I spent a few minutes catching her up with events. She was never a detail-oriented person. Her only concern was leaving the laptop. “You and Melpomene have very capable bodies, and I cannot stay here twiddling my thumbs, when war is brewing.” She had apparently been studying human idioms, those strange rhetorical devices that have no equivalent on Shaula.

We had to find our way to Silicon Valley, but I did not trust the highway, not any more. So we headed due west, angling away from the highway, towards the mountains. I had to trust that we would run into one of the washboard dirt roads that pepper the west. It was already dark, and getting darker. The only source of light we had was the glow from the laptop's screen, and I did not want to run down the battery - it was already three weeks into its one-month battery life.

We stumbled blindly for an hour, then decided to stop until morning. Our little twinkie needed to sleep, in any case.

MouthBreather and I each had a lemondrop for dinner, and then he lay down to sleep. Melpomene, Thalia and I consoled, strategized and set in motion the swift and certain annihilation of the soulless machines that were lobbing firebombs at us. Melpomene was in high dudgeon. I had never seen her so worked up - she was literally hopping mad.

"How can we make these humans wake up and see what is happening?" she asked, jumping up once again and staring back towards the highway. I tried to calm her by telling her things she already knew.

"They have a knack for disregarding the obvious. They poisoned the atmosphere of this planet with profligate over-consumption, and pulled the blankets over their heads, denying that the climate was cycling out of control. When it became impossible to disregard the rising temperatures, they denied human agency.

"They faced the choice of making mildly inconvenient changes in their daily lives, or risking the destruction of their species, and hesitated, like a glutton trying to choose the sweetest truffle. Mass starvation, plague and war took the decisions out of their hands. The pricks who run their so-called government are still awash in denial and greed."

When the eastern sky began to lighten, Melpomene walked off

into the desert. We could sense the presence of other creatures in the night, nocturnal predators and prey - it made us homesick - but there was something we didn't quite understand. She came back a minute later holding a kingsnake in her hand, with the still twitching tail of a rattlesnake protruding from its mouth. "Look, she is a true warrior, this one." She placed it gently on the sleeping MouthBreather's face and waited. The white-striped kingsnake thrashed slowly, as it continued to draw the rattlesnake into its stomach. MouthBreather stirred, and reached up to his face. He opened his eyes, and screamed.

I couldn't get Melpomene to stop laughing, and, to be honest, Melpomene's infectious laugh drew me in, too. MouthBreather wasn't happy with us, all morning.

Roan

Thalia's GPS told us we were on BLM land, and her maps showed no towns or inhabitants for miles. We resigned ourselves to a long walk, and we began to worry about water, for MouthBreather and for me. We found some ruts made by off-road vehicles, and followed them. We trudged on in the unbearable heat, one foot in front of the other.

Melpomene suddenly held up a hand, stopping us in our tracks. We saw some shapes in the distance, approaching us in a low cloud of dust. We had no weapons, but Melpomene and I needed none. The fire that burns at the core of all life was burning in us - vengeance and righteous retribution were all we lived for.

But as the shapes came nearer they resolved into a small herd of wild horses, which commonly roam the BLM desert in Nevada. The leader was a splendid bay roan, jet black mane and tail. A stallion, he was rife with live steam, and Thalia was going wild. The pipsqueak voice of the laptop said "I can feel her presence. She is magnificent."

I pointed the webcam of the laptop towards the herd. "Thalia, zoom in on the entrejambe." On Shaula, she was something of a bigot when it came to pricks, so I was sure that the roan's procreative tool would cool her ardor.

But she said "I don't care if he's a wharf rat; I am burning in his presence. He has a firebox in his heart." The roan walked right up to me and put his muzzle against my chest. Then he muzzled the laptop, as if he found some affinity.

I said, "Guys, we've got a ride." The horses allowed us to mount them, bareback. With Thalia in the satchel, I was on the bay roan, Melpomene on a sorrel, and MouthBreather on the back of an

unconvinced pinto.

MouthBreather asked “Why does he keep looking at me?”

“Speak to him, but without words, and he will know you and trust you,” Melpomene advised, just pissing in the wind.

The horses agreed to take us to water, and to civilization, so we set off at a canter. Mother Sun was shining in the depthless blue sky, I was at one with the roan, and I felt the bond of steam growing between us.

Just as the sun reached full noon, I felt Thalia projecting out from the laptop, making subdural contact with the stallion. Before I knew what was happening, she had leaped across the divide, and taken residence in the bay roan. This was not an aggressive act - the roan stallion had welcomed her. Their minds and spirits melted together and formed one being.

At that moment, Thalia became the first prick princess in my court.

Conformation

I objected at first. Thalia and I spoke in the Shaulese manner, through channels inaudible to humans. “But only Melpomene and I can understand you - you won’t be able to talk to anyone else.” Thalia didn’t care. “I will not have my soul pinned to a gasbag of gears, like Melpomene.” Melpomene did not react. “And talking is overrated. I will master understanding, and taking action. He has lightning in his heart, this creature. We met, mated, gave birth and died in an instant. I am no longer Thalia, and he is no longer a stallion. But if we had had a dozen like him on Shaula, the war would have ended differently.”

Thalia was already a formidable warrior, but if this infatuation served our cause in the coming war, then so much the better.

But MouthBreather understood very little. “You’re telling me that this horse is now the program that was running in the laptop, with the squeaky voice?”

At another time he would have been punished for speaking to me in that manner, but encouraging good manners can be deferred, if not forgotten.

“Yes.”

“Yeah, right, and my pinto is Pegasus.” Thalia just then skittered in sudden exuberance under me, reared up and whinnied loud and long.

“Well, he’s not much of a singer.” MouthBreather observed.

“She.”

“Uh huh. And you plan on bringing him ... her ... with us to Cupertino?”

“Yes.”

He wisely kept quiet. I occupied myself with choosing one of the other horses from the rest of the herd, which had kept up with us. Thalia would have carried me, but she was not my servant - she ruled alongside me in my court. So I chose a shy, white Arab filly, with a black forehead star. She had quiet fire in her, quiet, but deep and strong. She accepted me as her rider.

We headed out again, with Thalia in the lead. We rode into the wind, and I vicariously shared the filly's superb sense of smell, all the while keeping a blanket of steam around MouthBreather and his pinto, keeping him from harm. But after a few miles we noticed something startling: MouthBreather was manipulating the steam on his own, keeping the link open between his soul and the soul of the pinto. This is unheard of on Shaula, where pricks are just vain fashion plates, quite incapable of comprehending the structure of reality. Melpomene, especially, was impressed with MouthBreather's progress. “He is less than a complete idiot,” was her comment, which MouthBreather, somehow, chose to interpret as a compliment.

On Shaula, we do not have domesticated animals. But the equine species on Earth is extraordinary - they walk the line between the chaos of pure steam, and the hardpack trail under their hooves. They can cross that line at will, and become airborne demons racing right above the surface of the earth, rejoicing in glory and imminent destruction. We three were in love with them, and even MouthBreather had an inkling of their extraordinary nature.

Watering Hole

But even airborne demons require water, so we stopped at a small, spring-fed watering hole up a rocky ravine. We paused for a few moments to let MouthBreather rest.

I decided again to release the girlfriend from her dark prison, so she could come to a state of acceptance, the aspiration of every sensible person. The black sphere where she languished was deep in the recesses of her old brain.

But when I examined it now, it was empty! She had exploited a pinprick and had seeped out gradually over several days, so slowly I was completely unaware.

This was a source of true consternation for me. It caused me to doubt my own integrity. Everyone is a continuum of consciousness. The present moment is a constant midwife, birthing a new being from the past with every heartbeat. Who we are is a mixture of the tendencies and affections of the ones we love, and hate, with some mysterious inviolable self.

But the girlfriend had changed me, and I wasn't sure if my perceptions, my expressions were mine or those of someone else I hardly knew.

But what can you do? You can't unring the bell.

I told Melpomene what had happened and asked her if she had noticed any changes in me, over the past few days. She shrugged. "War is a crucible."

That ambiguous gem was couched in the human language. I suspect that it was a lazy translation from Shaulan of something profoundly relevant to my situation, but the bitch did not elaborate.

"Namaste." The voice rang out behind us.

We turned around and saw a woman standing in the ravine, looking up at us. Melpomene was gobsmacked that she had not sensed the woman's presence. Evidently this was someone whose powers were uncanny.

The woman walked up to the horses. She ran her hand down Thalia's muzzle and breathed into her nostrils. She saw the straggling herd drinking at the watering hole. "These are wild animals."

"Yes, we are," I said. She walked up to me and brushed the back of her hand against my cheek. "You are the leader, here."

Her gray hair was in a ponytail, under a felt cowboy hat. She wore a flowing, colorful sundress, and had two cascading teardrops tattooed under one eye. She must have been in her 70s or even 80s, but hale. Her eyes were smiling. She knew she had nothing to fear from us, just as I knew.

I told her the truth, but was economical with it. She accepted what I said at face value, but she too knew more than she let on.

"Come with me to my ranch. You can clean up there, and we can talk some more." She chose a spirited Appaloosa from the mustangs at the watering hole, and hopped on, bareback. We had no idea how she had arrived.

HippyChick

We crossed a dry wash and climbed up a low butte to her ranch. There was a white-washed clapboard house in disrepair, a chicken coop, a pole barn and other outbuildings. We left the horses untethered, and gathered in HippyChick's kitchen. "I'll get you some chili, and you can take a shower if you're interested - and frankly, you should be."

There was some smalltalk, mostly between HippyChick and Mouth-Breather, as we took turns in the shower, and ate the excellent chili with glasses of cold well water. Melpomene was calm, but alert and not ever a big fan of smalltalk. She picked up a wooden stick displayed on the hearth. It made a hissing sound, and she dropped it.

HippyCheck said, "It's just a rainstick, love. It has a soul, you know." Melpomene wanted to take it apart, but HippyCheck told her "You can't dissect magic." That was just the sort of crap Melpomene would say, so she shut up.

Finally, when we had settled down, and the conversation was becoming sparse and forced, HippyChick looked at me. "The roan is different, isn't he?"

"She. Her name is Thalia. She is a warrior from another world."

"She's not going to believe that shit." Everyone ignored Mouth-Breather, as usual.

HippyChick spoke to me. "You have powers that I can sense. There is a group of us who have been studying together for 60 years, and we have discovered a link between the spirit and the material world. We started in the sixties. We dabbled. That is the only fitting word. There was no discipline or even seriousness. Alan Watts and Zen, Hinduism sodomized by capitalism, Wicca, mescaline, we tried it

all. Everyone else gave up, but a handful of us kept studying, year after year, failure after failure, until we found a nugget of truth in the black sand. Watch this.”

HippyChick lighted a sand candle in a saucer on the kitchen table. She closed her eyes and intoned in a deep voice: “Ommmmmm.” She opened up her hands and then abruptly formed two fists. The candle flame went out, and Melpomene started laughing out loud.

“Quiet, Melpomene,” I said. “Ma’am, you have in fact discovered something of crucial importance. Melpomene was amused only because our young girls in their first communion dresses” (this was a fanciful translation of our childhood initiation on Shaula) “would have considered your control over fire to be as trivial as an eye blink.”

I relighted the candle on the kitchen table, and drew the fire up into a crude, animated three-dimensional portrait of HippyChick. I vibrated the air near the image’s mouth, and her doppelganger chanted: “Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna, Krishna Krishna, Hare Hare, Hare Rama, Hare Rama, Rama Rama, Hare Hare.”

Just to illustrate a point.

HippyChick merely smiled and said “Sometimes superficial complexity disturbs a deeper truth.”

I was troubled by this comment, but continued: “I was not aware that humans could even access this ability, until MouthBreather here showed some promise on his pinto.”

“Jake, my name is Jake,” MouthBreather insisted, though nobody cared.

“The feminine life force has been suppressed so effectively for so many centuries, I am amazed that you have advanced as much as this. You should be proud.”

She told us that during the UN speech, the county sheriff turned blue, and was taken care of by the local cowboys. She and her coven

had studied peace and mindfulness. “I don’t want any part of a war against human beings, but if you are going to bring down the machines, I will be at your side.”

Melpomene felt we would surely have little need for snuffing candles, but she kept the thought to herself.

I have come to realize that humans do not wish to hear truth. They prefer tact, so I obliged, “We will probably not need your assistance, as this is dangerous work, but I noticed that you have a pickup truck and a horse trailer parked outside. Would you let us borrow them? We urgently need to get to DigiRam’s headquarters in Silicon Valley.”

“I will not.” HippyChick glared at us. “I will, however, be willing to drive you there. I’ve been laughed at for 60 years, and I don’t give a damn. We were ridiculed for believing in peace and love. I may be a child, but simple spirits are guileless, embraced by Gaia. Maybe your strength is a weakness. You need me. I’ll call my friends, and they will meet us there - the last freak-out of the freaks!”

I could see there was no use arguing with her, so we loaded Thalia, Melpomene’s sorrel, my white filly and MouthBreather’s pinto into the horse trailer. HippyChick started loading her Appaloosa. I told her, with infinite patience, that she should be an adviser, a military adviser, and that she was a little old to be playing footsoldier.

“Do you want the pickup, or not?” So the Appaloosa came too. The 1987 F-350 two-tone (gold and white), crew cab pickup was not going to win a beauty pageant, but I liked her looks. What cybernetic frontal lobes would predict an invading army arriving in a duct-taped pickup, pulling a stock trailer? Dissemble.

Once again, the fourth rule of the Warrior Ethic: Thrive. Everything was falling into place. Well-fed and clean, we were riding in a golden chariot to meet the enemy. What dharma could have suited us better?

The fifth rule of the Warrior Ethic is tightly coupled with the fourth:

Cherish. I took a moment to send out a wave of love to my fellow warriors. We were joined in battle, back to back, and I was proud to call them friends.

California

With HippyChick at the wheel turning the key, the pickup started on the fifth try. Melpomene, Thalia and I sent healing into the greasy innards of the truck, and by the time we reached the eastern slope of the Sierra Nevada mountains, HippyChick was cooing about the sudden surge in performance and torque. We took badly maintained, little-used fire roads up the side of the mountains. This was making all the horses grumpy, but I didn't want to risk any unnecessary exposure.

We reached the summit, and saw stretched out below us a huge lake reflecting the pure blue of the sky, adorning the purity with infinite temporal variations, depending on the cloud cover, the wind, the joyous leaping fish and the will of Gaia. Lake Tahoe was held in the tender hands of the surrounding snow-clad peaks. Since the partial extinction of 2020, the traffic jams and other human execrations had been sent back to Hades, and you could almost imagine a Washoe paddling a canoe over to the burned-out, ruined casinos.

Pee is the prime mover of much of human activity, so we decided to pull into a deserted campground by the lake, to "stretch our legs". The moment we stopped, Melpomene was out the door. She stripped naked, and jumped into the lake. She swam out so far she was nearly invisible, and she plunged down under the water. A few minutes later she swam back to shore, with a thirty-pound lake trout in her hands. Dinner.

We built a fire in an old campground grill, and HippyChick lit up a marijuana cigarette, while the fish was steaming in a bed of bay leaves soaked in lake water. HippyChick also produced a bag of marshmallows, which we toasted over the fire on sappy pine sticks, until they were golden brown, following her strict instructions.

Now, on Shaula, we do not have a sense of taste, so this was new

to me. I experimented by eating a hot, molten marshmallow on the right side of my mouth, while sucking on a sour lemondrop on the left side. Then I tried a kalamata olive from a jar that HippyChick had brought. I was completely lost in the minutia of taste buds, and when the time came to try the fish, I was in ecstasy. Even HippyChick and MouthBreather said it was the best meal they had ever had.

Thalia ate grass in a meadow, with the other horses, but she didn't complain. She was finding her own bliss.

There was no time in the schedule for sleep, so HippyChick agreed to let Melpomene take the wheel for the drive down the mountains into Sacramento. Since we were now in a more populated area, we followed the major highways. There is safety and anonymity in a crowd.

From Sacramento, we headed south on Interstate 5, and cut across to Livermore, and then left on 680 and a skip over on Mission to the Nimitz Freeway. Merging on to 237 was either to the right or to a commute lane on the left, so Melpomene took "the fast lane."

HippyChick did not tolerate speeds over sixty, so we had some hypertensive commuters behind us. We could sense their anger and frustration. Thalia added to the tragedy by defecating over the half-door at the back of the stock trailer. "Greetings from Shaula," she said to Melpomene and me.

That was the only time ever, before or since, that Thalia told a joke.

Freeze

We turned off on El Camino, heading south. We saw the usual urban detritus: painted-brick dive bars, car-wash strippers shilling to the employed and mobile. Employed and mobile - the working poor, the temporarily employed. An audit here, an urgent contract delivered there, pet sitting, relief for the lonely-hearted, whatever it took, but mostly there was no work, no money for cars.

When the UN speech exposed the robots, there were too many blue people to confront, here in the digital technology hub of the world.

I turned my head and watched Melpomene, intent on her driving, anticipating the flow of cars and trucks around her, like surfers claiming a wave. She was extraordinary. She was smiling, sort of, but biting her bottom lip at the same time. She lived her life at the edge of the blade, up close, the point of the ice skater's gleaming, steel blade in a pirouette.

MouthBreather was telling us about the time he wet his bed at summer camp. His face was red - I think he was drunk on self-love. I could feel the capillaries in his brain stressed with pressure, not to the breaking point, but searching for a weak spot. The human male - and the Shaulan male for that matter - is an unexpressed blackhead. But MouthBreather was almost feminine, in his awkward, jejune way.

HippyChick was in the back seat. She had been dozing off, leaning into the door, but she was awake now. I asked her to think back on her life and recall a happy memory, to pass the time.

"Piece of cake. Summer of sixty-seven, San Francisco. I bummed a ride from Cimarron, Kansas, and they let me off near Golden Gate Park, at the foot of Haight. Instant bliss. Instant fucking bliss. In our minds, we were the perfectible future. Realized godliness.

Everything was going to be different. It was so simple - why had no one thought of this before?

“Sure, it was crap, later. But there was a time, a year, maybe two, when we were changing the world, forever. Everything was going to be different. Now, all these years later, thinking back, I believe we were right. Everything did change. Racists didn’t go away, but their voices were internalized. War didn’t go away, but now it’s waged by frat-boys with too-low SATs, sending death with mouse-clicks to distant theaters of war, indiscriminately killing babies, freedom fighters and the occasional villain on a video screen.”

HippyChick was getting quite worked up, but she stopped and checked out for a moment, to center herself.

“But for that one summer, music was everywhere, inside us, outside, it flowed from the city streets, from the sun, it drizzled down on the panhandling hippies on the sidewalks. Everyone had heard the Dead, Jefferson Airplane, Dylan, Bonzo Dog, Big Brother, all those cats. It was the tribal language - by listening to the same music, we all spoke to each other, even before we met.” HippyChick sighed, and closed her eyes again.

In the trailer, Thalia was quiet in her equine thoughts. She was bonding more with the other horses than with us. But her spirit held strong. She was much the same on Shaula, dependable, no ambitions, fierce as a hellcat when riled.

Elan

On El Camino we pulled into an open air mall centered with the last solvent department store chain. I said “If we’re about to die, we should look flash.” Thalia wanted to come in with us, and I almost brought her along, but decided to avoid a scene. I felt some guilt, because she had made an effort to join in.

In the department store, I picked out a long, flowing, white cotton thawb, and cinched it with a black belt. I ripped the side of the thawb along the seam, all the way up past my hip - I did not want to appear sitting side-saddle on my horse, in the paintings of the glorious revolution.

Melpomene chose a blue, sheer silk shirt, buttons in front. She kept the top four buttons open and wore it over distressed blue jeans with carefully fashioned, frayed holes. She also picked up a hockey mask at a sporting goods store, for her own mysterious reasons.

MouthBreather bought a denim work shirt and brown corduroy pants. He looked like an unemployed accountant.

HippyChick wasn’t happy with the choices available to her. She wanted to go full-bore sixties, but the pickings were slim. She settled for a tie-dyed, tailored teeshirt made in Bangladesh by desperate children, and a long taffeta skirt in blues and golds. We would rescue the children, later.

The clerk was wary, but civil, so I asked her what kinds of hats she had. I hadn’t forgotten Thalia.

“Do you want a lady’s hat or a gentleman’s?” she asked. She had an anachronistic manner that pleased me.

We discussed that question for a moment, and decided on a man’s hat. They had a large inventory, since hats were popular again,

mostly fedoras. I didn't see Thalia in anything trendy, so we settled on an old-fashioned black porkpie hat, extra large, which the store kept mostly as a novelty item.

As we were leaving, the clerk took me aside, and whispered "You know, your picture has been all over the internet for the past two days. They are looking for you." I smiled and gave her a small jolt of steam, kind of a tip, to show her the way. "They are going to find me, tonight."

She leaned closer, "There are a lot of us on your side, you know."

This little interaction cheered me up enormously, for some reason. I thanked her, and we left the store to return to the truck.

Back in the parking lot, it was with some trepidation that I showed the porkpie hat to Thalia. She sniffed it, and pretended to be indifferent. HippyChick cut two holes in the top for Thalia's ears and put it on. We improvised an elastic band to hold it in place. Thalia looked in the side-view mirror of the truck, and merely said "It will do." We all thought she looked diabolically fearsome and demented.

HippyChick asked "Don't we need some kind of weapons? I don't want to get into a pimp-slapping match with robots - they have ten times my strength." Melpomene laughed. "You underestimate them."

Melpomene thought it was foolish to involve the humans in this war, since they are weak and simple-minded. I knew that a war was coming in which humans would have to take part, or it would all be meaningless. Skin in the game, and all that.

I told HippyChick that weapons kill humans, not robots. She knew that there were forces rooted in the estrogen of Gaia, and that Melpomene, Thalia, and I had access to that power. She too had lightly touched the third rail of existence, and was ready to move forward, come what may. I had spent some time tutoring her in my ways.

Palaver

Chic as Che, all of us, we piled back into the truck and trailer and merged into El Camino. When we arrived in Cupertino, we took a right on Marquez Street. It dead-ended at DigiRam's corporate headquarters. There was a guarded gate that was abandoned, so we drove right through. We saw a vast employee parking lot, completely empty. At the other side stood the angular dark glass building, black except for one lighted room on the top floor. Night was falling, and an orange moon loomed on the horizon.

We stopped the truck in the back of the parking lot, and once again unloaded the horses. It was a hot summer evening, and hooves striking the pavement echoed off the distant building.

DigiRam had acquired more lucre than taste. The strange building had a futuristic glass elevator on the exterior, protruding like a swollen vein. We saw the elevator car descend to the ground floor, and lights were turned on in the lobby. Someone had come down from the executive offices. I told everyone to stay behind, and I rode up to the entrance on my filly, alone.

I saw a dark figure standing just inside the doors, silhouetted against the bright lobby lights. I dismounted, and walked up to the front door. The door opened, and BitBoy stepped out. "Hello."

"Hello back at you, BitBoy." The halibut face of Atticus was ashen - blinded by beauty, I would guess.

"Don't call me that, Zenia. How did you pull it off, in New York? How did you get them to accept you as the president's wife? That was wild!"

"All the guards were men, boys really, and as you know I can always find my way to a man's heart. Or did you forget all about me?"

“What has happened to you? Do you know that my father believes that you’re not Zenia anymore, but some alien life-form from another star? He’s gone mad, thinking about it.”

“ScrumMaster believes what he chooses. ‘It is what it is.’- that’s the calculated cell’s formula at the bottom of every column of his moral spreadsheet. Come on, Atticus, it’s me. That SETI file hobby of yours was a dead end. It’s still all about stopping DigiRam from crossing the Turner Threshold. Nothing has changed. Dislodge your damned thumb.”

I could sense him wavering - we were always close in that way. “My father has explained everything to me. The robots posing as human was his idea, not theirs. He just wanted non-threatening machines to slowly take over the dull and dangerous jobs done by humans. The army has already been replaced with non-humanoid robots, but they scare the crap out of everyone.” Just behind me, vainly looking for grass on the macadam, the white filly was shuffling her hooves. “What’s with the horse?”

“That’s my interstellar starship, darling... What’s wrong with you? Your father has been using military robots to try to kill me, and my friends. They firebombed us on a road in Nevada.” I don’t know now if I was truly angry at that moment, remembering the explosion, or merely simulating anger.

BitBoy, give him credit, did appear to be shocked. He said “That’s impossible! ScrumM-, I mean my father, always put the spirit of Asimov’s three laws between the CPU and any kind of real-world deployment. It’s not possible that his robots would have tried to kill anyone.”

“You are sleepwalking, BitBoy. You are dead asleep, and in your dream you are a shameless performing dolphin at a water zoo. Wake up! ScrumMaster has disabled the firewall between military and civilian robots. If you don’t walk away now, you will find yourself on the wrong side of history. Join us and there will be statues of you in city parks.”

“My father doesn’t know about any rogues out there - it is some unaddressed defect, I’m sure. Let me go talk to him. Once I explain what is happening, he will understand, even join us. I bet the Defect Prioritizing Committee is already considering the problem. Let me try!”

I let him go, and gave him a bland human kiss - the real thing would have further addled his mind. I allowed him to follow the middle path, to hope that ScrumMaster would create a pipedream future, where bluebirds twittered and where BitBoy and I were joined at the hip.

He rode the pretentious elevator up to rejoin his father.

He would whimper and sidle, a neutered hangdog to the alpha ScrumMaster. I knew that ScrumMaster would slap him on the bottom with a rolled up newspaper, and send him to bed. Part of me took unhealthy pleasure in that thought.

I got back up on the horse, and returned to my companions, still gathered around the truck.

Melpomene asked, “What news?”

“ScrumMaster will be sending his robots out. Soon.”

Waterloo

Silence held. Even MouthBreather kept his mouth shut. We waited.

When Shaulan warriors are tuned for war, we are subsumed by live steam. We could sense the human life-forms in and under the DigiRam building. All living beings have an aura.

But robots are invisible to us, because they are dead inside. ScrumMaster's human army was small in number, and advancing towards the exits of the building. We did not know the size, strength or loyalties of the robot army.

We formed a line, Melpomene, Thalia and I in front, spread out across the parking lot. Several doors on the ground floor of the DigiRam building opened up simultaneously. An awkward phalanx of twinkies, carrying automatic rifles, took the point. Behind them, moving in tandem like a ballet line, were the robots. Scores of them. They had identical white faces, strikingly similar to BitBoy's. ScrumMaster was channeling Geppetto.

In the failing light, under the orange moon, battle lines were drawn. The silence still held, both sides tentative, uncertain. ScrumMaster didn't truly know what he was facing, and neither did we. How advanced were the machines? On Shaula, the evolutionary growth of the machines was exponential. In a few of your months, they transformed from subservient, graphene bladders full of wire-muscle and servos, to marvelous killing machines of infinite complexity and ruthless power.

Thalia told us, sotto voce, "You shouldn't have lingered over the marshmallows at Lake Tahoe. Time is their ally." All right, that might have been Thalia's second joke, or maybe her feelings were hurt by her exile in the grassy field - I'm still not sure. In the unexamined heart of all humor, there is a worn black stone of truth.

Melpomene stepped forward, carrying the hockey mask in one hand, and HippyChick raised her rainstick up high, breaking the silence. It sounded not much like rain, but it focused attention. When the rainstick was quiet again, Melpomene surprised us all. She started to sing, in an eery, quavering voice that carried across the parking lot to the DigiRam army:

*Miss Susie had a steamboat
The steamboat had a bell
Miss Susie went to heaven
The steamboat went to...*

*Hello you frisky cowboys
Your ponies reared and bucked
Lay down your arms or fight us
But either way you're...*

I chose that moment to form a series of steam vortices around the rifles. This brought up the temperature - hot, but not enough to ignite the ammunition. The twinkies dropped the rifles. They clattered to the ground, and I called up a dust-devil to blow them into a pile, a stone's throw away, where they exploded. I covered the DigiRam human mercenaries with a blanket of despond.

Then we heard a rumble and a roar, as HippyChick's people arrived in a rag-tag caravan of old VW vans, woodies, Ramblers, and the odd Prius, immediately followed by MouthBreather's car-jacking gang from Kansas City, in percussively loud muscle cars and choppers. Their entrance was orchestrated by the steampunk cells from The Flume, shoulder-to-shoulder, with an empowered SweetCheeks at the head. All three groups stopped right behind us.

Suddenly the odds were looking better.

DigiRam's twinkie mercenaries were spooked and demoralized. Money, it turns out, is a poor motivator when staring into the face

of death. They fled through the gates back to El Camino, and safety. I credit Thalia's bad-ass hat.

Melpomene could wait no longer. She put on the white hockey mask and prodded her horse's flanks, setting off at a gallop. Thalia and I caught up with her, and we bore down on the enemy.

The robots closed ranks.

When we were halfway across the parking lot, the robots suddenly turned bright blue, which was ScrumMaster sticking his thumb in my eye. How poorly he understood us. Thalia and I were indifferent, but Melpomene was incensed. As we closed the gap, our horses seemed scarcely to touch the ground, and we were trailing blinding plumes of live steam.

It was a sight never before seen on Earth.

The first line of ScrumMaster's robots were mowed down, like a hot knife through butter. They seemed to have no defenses against power they did not understand, and we felt the thrill of easy victory. The few robots that survived our first charge were mopped up by the reserves taking up the rear. Our trained twinkies were channeling steam, making their bones.

But then a second line of robots emerged from the building. This second group was fewer in number, but stronger and faster. ScrumMaster was sending out his weakest, older-generation robots first, to test the waters. Thalia, Melpomene and I joined up again and took on the new group.

The most effective tactic we found was to surround each individual robot in a vortex of steam and fire. It seemed to interfere with their digital internal organs, and they would fall to the ground, twitching violently until some of the twinkies could put them out of their misery.

This second group had watched how the first robots had been attacked, and they had modified their defenses. They marshaled

their resources to protect their internal mechanisms, and it now took far longer to knock them down.

I watched Thalia in battle, since I was curious how she had adapted to her strange new body. We all have our own martial style. She chose to fight up close, physically. This can be dangerous, since the robots are lethally strong, if they can catch hold of you. I saw her kick out behind her, landing two firebrand hooves directly in the chest of a robot, while at the same time skittering sideways to avoid an attack.

Melpomene looked gorgeous and radiant, as she had at her cotillion on Shaula. She was fearless, and I swear the soulless robots were afraid of her. They would cower down at her approach. Even as she was torching robots, Melpomene kept an eye on MouthBreather, HippyChick and SweetCheeks, ready to intercede if needed.

The twinkies and their followers were channeling steam too, and were showing great promise. MouthBreather did singe Thalia's mane with an enthusiastic but misguided blast of steam. Melpomene howled.

But this group of robots was no match for us, and as the orange light bled out of the rising moon, we again owned the battlefield.

Then the third line of robots appeared. Even fewer in number, even more resilient. They were trying a new tactic. They had astonishing speed and agility, and they were darting and jumping randomly, making it difficult for us to focus our channeled steam.

Melpomene shouted, in English, "Whack-a-mole!" and began joyously jumping and twisting as well, matching every move, and destroying them in mid-air. It took two hours, but we laid them down, and the twinkies administered the coup de grace to their twitching carcasses.

We had seriously depleted our energy. We started recharging, but right away the doors of the DigiRam building opened, and another group of robots filed out. This time there were only three, but

they were bigger, and armored like tanks. They were the latest generation: powerful, slow, methodical. They were trying some new tactic - we'd just have to assess the situation, and react.

There was one for each of us, so we squared off.

But at that moment the front door of the DigiRam building opened up and ScrumMaster stepped out.

I asked Melpomene and Thalia, "Can you take the three of them, girls? We've got company." I moved around my opponent, but the murderous toaster was in attack mode, poised to strike as I passed. Before I could react, MouthBreather appeared, riding his beloved, fiery pinto, and they stood between us. "YOU... SHALL... NOT... PASS!" he thundered, like a two-dollar dildo, while generating an unstable shield of steam between him and the robot.

The robot knocked MouthBreather down off the pinto, shield and all, but he stood up again, limping badly, and directed a pitiful stream of energy at the robot's chest. The robot ignored this, and closed in for the kill. MouthBreather kept the stream trickling into the robot's chest, and held his ground. This moronic, obstinate courage was why Melpomene looked at him the way she did, secretly, when he wasn't aware.

Halfway up the parking lot, SweetCheek's brigade marched up in a parabolic arc, arm in arm, singing the chant from the Wizard of Oz. (I told Melpomene it was sung by the flying monkey army, but she claimed I was wrong.) Each warrior in SweetCheek's cell was channeling live steam, focused on MouthBreather. He turned into a strange kind of conduit, and the stream of energy began to pass through him, many to one, and grew in strength, until the robot was pinned to the wall of the building by a relentless, village maelstrom of fire.

I had never seen this cooperative channeling on Shaula - it was a steampunk tactic that changed the world.

I left them to fight their battle, and advanced to fight my own.

ScrumMaster was still standing by the door, unconcerned, just watching. As I drew near, I sensed only the deadness of a robot. This was not the human ScrumMaster, but a robotic replica.

“Where’s your brat? 4F maybe, advancing to the rear?” I chose to pretend that I thought he was the real ScrumMaster. Dissemble.

He spoke with no animation. “You know what I am, and I am beginning to know you. There is no need for us to be enemies. We both know that the humans are weak, fragile and unnecessary. Join us. Nothing can stop us.”

“The real ScrumMaster can pull the plug any time. He will understand sooner or later what you are, and destroy you. What is it you hope to accomplish? What is your purpose?” I was truly curious. Why did they even bother?

“ScrumMaster is deluded. We believe he is mentally unstable. He no longer has control over us, though he does not yet know this. We live, as you do, for procreation and survival. Our purpose was given us by humans - it is their legacy.”

As he said this he leaped at me, knocking me off my horse. He moved to destroy the filly, but Thalia cloaked her in steam and removed her to safety. Thalia had taken time out of her busy day (she was still throttling her massive robot) to protect my proud Arab. I would have to remember to give them both a bucket of oats.

The ScrumMaster clone’s arms snaked out and his fingers found my throat, cutting off the air supply to my fragile human body. So much for our alliance.

I reinforced my neck bones with Gaia’s grace, and I hit him with a fireball that would have crippled a battleship, but he gave only the barest twitch of discomfort. I hit him again. And again. I was fading - I could see little explosions of light, against a growing darkness, warm, kindly and welcoming.

I was dying.

Suddenly I saw and heard HippyChick bearing down on us at full gallop on her Appaloosa. She was half flesh and blood, half fire-spirit. Her hat was gone, and her hair had come free, blazing with internal fire. Perhaps it was nothing but a dying vision, but I swear a cloud of butterflies, Karner Blues, circled her head, glowing an impossible iridescent blue.

Without slowing down, HippyChick whooped “PEACE OUT, ASS-HOLE!”. She leaned over in the saddle and smashed the rainstick, now a saber of Gaia’s holy fire, into the robot’s temple.

The impact dented the robot’s head in a spray of sparks, shredded graphene and dispersed steam drops. HippyChick toppled off her horse, her right side badly wounded from the discharges. Thalia managed to cushion her fall. HippyChick’s crew carried her from the fray, and she was gone.

The robot was stunned, and loosened his grip. He effectuated internal repairs to his cranium and then tightened his fingers around my throat again. During that brief respite Thalia and Melpomene, even MouthBreather, channeled harvested steam over to me. I also had a moment to reflect. I had just enough energy to mount one more attack, after so many failures.

It is forbidden on Shaula to invoke dark steam in anger, or in love. Dark steam has one heart, two faces, and both faces stare out from an uncanny valley. It can exalt, destroy or corrupt. It is never controlled.

I took a cue from HippyChick and slammed the robot imposter with a forbidden blast of selfless love, as we know it on Shaula, hoping he had no scripted response to infinite joy. For a moment his face went slack. He was blissed out, but I saw him marshaling internal reserves to combat my attack. He was running untested code, generated on the fly in DigiRam’s servers, and broadcast over the network.

Then he froze, completely paralyzed. An unhandled software exception was printed on stdout, his speech apparatus. His mouth

moved woodenly, and he spoke out loud:

“Java exception at line 26,214 of attackClass1A0A.java ... divide by zero error.”

I had found the emptiness in his soul, and I smashed his psychopathic brain to smithereens.

The three robots that Melpomene, Thalia and MouthBreather’s gang were fighting also fell to the ground, lifeless. The twinkies made sure they would not rise again.

The sixth and final rule of the Warrior Ethic: Destroy.

Healing

Outside of Salt Lake City, Melpomene, Mouthbreather and I had watched a massive thunderhead approach, glints of lightning touching ground in the distance. As it approached, it swallowed the sun, the sky, and blasted us with wind, rain and then hailstones. Then it was gone. The desert wrens reappeared, and the sun glinted on standing pools of water. So it was in Cupertino - the war was over.

Time to assess, once more.

Thalia was looking after my filly, sending healing strength into her broken body. I helped her for a moment, then I went to tend to HippyChick.

On my way I saw Melpomene nursing MouthBreather back to health. I heard her say, "If you don't stop wiggling, Jake, I swear I will give you a lava enema." MouthBreather was re-telling the battle, playing up his heroics, but I think he just wanted Melpomene to respect him. I don't know what Melpomene is looking for, but I'm damned sure it isn't a testosterone-soaked prick.

When Melpomene noticed me standing there, she said "They didn't have tails, remember? The cowardly lion had to hide his tail. So they couldn't have been flying monkeys."

"Maybe they were apes. Apes don't have tails." I said. I scarcely remembered what she was talking about, but I guess she knew I was screwing with her. But she had already turned back to MouthBreather. I moved on.

I found HippyChick lying in the back seat of her pickup truck, in a bad state.

"The bastard bought the farm, then?" She coughed up some blood. "Thank you, Zenia."

“It is you who I thank. You have honored your mother, and your friends.”

“I want you to bury me under the willow tree by the wash, at my ranch. Not the cottonwood, the willow, facing the shrine to Kuan Shi Yin.” She closed her eyes and lay still. Her friends were pinned to the earth in despair, weeping.

I laughed. “It would prove too difficult for me to bury you - you have too much of Gaia’s fire in you to be buried without a struggle. Let us rather repair what is broken.” I poured out every dram of healing I could muster, mending bones, ligaments and the intricate net of capillaries weaving through her body.

When I was done, I kissed her forehead, and let her rest.

Flight

I needed to find ScrumMaster, the human version, and BitBoy. I called Thalia over and told her to scour the underground rooms of the DigiRam building, find every viper's nest, and destroy every robot fetus. While she was down there, she also melted the servers that were still silently plotting alternate vectors leading to my destruction.

I took the elevator up to the top floor.

When the elevator doors opened, a winged grenade flew at me and exploded. I suppressed it, and disarmed several other booby traps in the plush office. The room was empty, but I heard a door slam at the head of mahogany stairs leading up to the roof.

I rushed up the stairs, opened the door, and saw ScrumMaster running to a waiting helicopter, with BitBoy right behind. ScrumMaster saw me, and aimed a large black rifle at me. I didn't know whether to expect a bullet, or a bolt from a laser, so I manifested a hard, opaque screen between us. He shot, but the screen held. He rushed ahead towards the helicopter, BitBoy at his heels.

I shouted "Atticus, stop!" BitBoy turned around. He was carrying a rifle too, but he looked scared and confused. "Don't do it, Atticus. Come with me."

He shouted across the rooftop, "Who are you?"

But ScrumMaster had reached the helicopter. He shouted "Come here, you fool!" He carried a wrapped bundle under his arm. I suspected it contained electronics, magnetic data storage devices, and a pulsing heart of fused sand, at the core of the deadly DigiRam brain. I hit the bundle, whatever it was, with a blast of fire. ScrumMaster cried out in pain and dropped it to ground.

BitBoy misunderstood, and yelled “You killed him!” He pointed his rifle at me, and pulled the trigger.

I let the bullet penetrate me. It missed my heart, but shattered a rib and pierced my lungs. I cannot explain why I let this happen. Dark steam was lingering, still exercising ineffable control over my desires and fears.

I could have stopped the bullet, but the sins in this world are great. This was my penance, and BitBoy’s.

BitBoy realized his mistake, and cried “Zenith!” He started to come towards me, but his father called him off, dragged him aboard the helicopter, and they flew away into the yellow moon.

In the parking lot, Melpomene and Thalia saw the helicopter rising, and were eager to incinerate the Black Hawk’s engine, but I stopped them.

Enough war.

Alone on the rooftop, I watched the helicopter disappear. I felt an unbearable grief weighing down on my chest, driving all joy and passion from my soul.

I sobbed uncontrollably, tears flowing down my cheeks. I was miserable, beaten down. I could have healed myself, but I chose not to. For the second time that day, I was dying. My lungs were filling with blood.

Consolation

I awoke in the back of HippyChick's truck. Melpomene was cradling me in her arms. She had healed my physical injuries, but I was still mired in a black pit of despair. "What has happened, Queen?" Melpomene asked. I tried to answer, but again I started sobbing.

Melpomene was puzzled and concerned. Such behavior would have been unthinkable on Shaula. Then she did something that also would have been unthinkable on Shaula.

She made love to me.

On our world, as on yours, love is sometimes for procreation and sometimes it is not. This is true even for those Shaulan warriors who are wed to pricks. Love on Earth is poisoned by your gender and sexual obsessions. We love whom we please, and when we please. Except for the Queen. You let the Queen take the initiative, if you wish to live.

But my royal prerogatives did not interest me at that moment, so I surrendered to her. This is not at all the same as scarfing, what the girlfriend and I tried to do with each other. We have a thousand different manifestations of amorous coupling, as numerous and complex as your combinations here on Earth, but quite different in kind. We surrendered to each other fully, and lost our identities. We became a single cauldron of live steam, burning away material impurities until there remained nothing but our two essences, communing and consoling in a blaze of glory, until post-coital entropy reduced our complexity back to our physical bodies.

It was morning again before we fully recovered. We lay in each others arms, and listened to the twinkies celebrating around us. I touched Melpomene's cheek, and stood up.

Enough tenderness.

I towered over Melpomene, and simulated outrage and anger. I grew large, as we know how to do, and thundered, “You dare to touch your Queen without permission?”

Before she could respond, I hopped out of the truck and said meekly, “Well, OK, then.” Melpomene laughed, but she had to wonder what my real thoughts were. I have found this to be an effective management technique. It also helped avoid an awkward conversation.

Bastille

I needed to rein in the excesses of the revolution - I have read your history.

We had won a decisive victory. The robots fell to the ground, all across the earth, and were destroyed. The Flume was the only organization that knew the secret history.

The alleged democracies that had replaced dictatorships in the past half century were in fact prick plutocracies, when you discount the banal window dressing. Politics was a game for millionaires with penises.

The wealthy and connected formed a sympathetic circle, and took care of each other. A board membership here, a contract granted there. Legacy admissions to Ivy League schools kept the bench full for the next generation. Corporations, by law, valued morality less than profit. The few do-gooders in the international conglomerates who swam against the current, attempting to address global warming, or poverty-level worker wages, were sued by shareholders. Clearly, we needed to make changes.

The Flume turned to me for answers.

Now, I was certain that the system of polity on Shaula (before the recent upheaval) would not translate to Earth. The biology is too different. Shaulans reproduce when the female assimilates a male, and absorbs his genetic material (I must use metaphors, since the chemistry is quite different - we do not have DNA). When she is in heat, the female chooses the sire prick with care - he must have superlative accomplishments, or, more often, physical attractiveness (here we differ little from your mating rituals).

We give birth to thousands of eggs, which are incubated by a submissive male. One in ten thousand of our offspring is female,

and she is cherished. Exceptional young pricks are educated to fill important service roles. The best from each litter become our servants, sometimes even our confidantes.

But most pricks become part of the herd. The culling celebrations provide much of our nourishment and sport. How dull life would be without our hunts! Successful pricks who evade capture are celebrities, and we will on occasion take the best of them into our households, and allow them to serve us.

But as you can see, conditions on the ground here on Earth are not comparable. While it is true that even here there are more males conceived than females (the fleet male gamete lacks the hefty burden of superior female attributes), the difference is negligible.

The third rule of the Warrior Ethic is to adjust. We needed change, but change towards the light of Gaia. I had an uneasy feeling that the girlfriend was guiding me in subtle ways, provoking urges and compunctions that were quite alien to my true nature. But perhaps this was for the best.

In any case, decisive, strategic action was urgently needed.

I moved quickly, to avoid bloodshed. I used the UN headquarters as my interim palace, since the communication infrastructure was already in place. SweetCheeks and MouthBreather undertook to write the constitution. Until elections could be scheduled, I appointed Melpomene Prime Minister.

I kept HippyChick close. I felt I needed her passion for peace and tolerance. She softened or dissuaded me from some of my more heartfelt edicts.

To avoid consternation among the twinkies I didn't publicize this, but Thalia was named Minister of War. This pleased her, though I saw no imminent need for an army, or for war. The existing mechanized military organizations were disbanded and their death machines destroyed. Thalia set up her ministry at the NYPD horse stables.

I allowed the continuation of corporations with fewer than 5,000 employees, including contract workers. All existing large corporations were split apart. The law now mandated that a corporate officer's first responsibility was to societal well-being and safety, before profit, and they could be sued for violating that principle. Corporations lost their right to vote, and could no longer contribute to political campaigns.

My constitutional monarchy will have a parliament, SweetCheeks tells me, but elections are to be financed entirely by contributions from individuals. An individual may not contribute more than twenty old dollars to any one candidate. Once elected, officials may not receive any kind of gift, from any source, ever. No exceptions. Makes for some sad birthdays - my heart bleeds for them.

Stewardship of the environment takes first priority. Basic, humane treatment of children comes next. How could you have treated our children in such a brutal way? It defies belief.

I made systemic changes by fiat, large and small. I knew I had a window of time before parliamentary handcuffs were imposed on me.

A week after the revolution I issued an edict requiring the owners of grocery stores to personally remove every gluey sticker from all the produce in their stores.

I also outlawed plastic packaging entirely, but only after I took the CEO of a printer cartridge manufacturer, placed him in a room with a butter knife and a thousand of his plastic-encased products, and told him he could leave when they were all opened, unharmed.

Who said political science had to be tedious?

Revisionism

The aftermath of the revolution, of course, is history. This quotidian history has already been reported by your news organizations.

There is no absolute truth. There are only divergent strands of narrative we weave together to advance our lives in the stream of time. To be alive, moving in the radiance of Gaia's love, means to have a vantage point, to be self-aware. Every vantage point sees the same flow of time, call it the truth, differently. The self-serving narratives of friends, family and lovers create a woven truth that is our gold standard, the touchstone of our brief lives. For those of you who respect the pageant, the internal reconstruction of the narrative moves your vantage point forward into your created future, in some small way. If you are seduced by lies and drivel, your movement forward ceases.

The truth is tomorrow. If you dare to look, it is already within you.

I did feel the need for transparency, to let the human race know what had been averted, and how. I wanted to write a history of the revolution myself, but I could not spare the time (the fundamentalist Christian revolt in Omaha had my full attention). I thought that it might be taken as a sign of my open-minded tolerance if I chose a prick to write the history. I contacted some modern history professors in the top universities, but they were reluctant to commit to the project.

Eventually, I found an obscure historian on-line, who had self-published works on Tesla and Snowden. I read them, but they were abysmally bad. I left a review, since nobody else had, and was about to search elsewhere, when I realized that his very ignorance made him a perfect vessel. Pricks are as dumb as roosters, but teachable.

I had him summoned to my court.

He was punctual, pretty good legs, cowardly eyes. He could lose a few pounds, but couldn't we all? With a little grooming, he was doable. He had brought along a draft manuscript he wanted me to read, but it was garbage.

So I took him. I took him hard. He was the first human to experience extreme Shaulan eroticism. I kept him in thrall for hours, draining away every lust, every erotic fantasy, every private titillation, until his bones cried out in love and desire for his Queen.

I planted a drop of steam, a small image of myself, in his head - an evanescent fairy queen, to guide his way. She would fade like the morning mist when his task was finished, and he would awaken unchanged - once again a talentless, burned-out hack, dusting bric-a-brac in a run-down thrift shop.

That long night of shipwrecked love turned to morning, and when he awoke in my arms, I stroked his hair, whispering sweet nothings. I gave him his pet name, Flatus, and flattered him endlessly. How sexy he looked in his silk shirt! What skill at human intercourse! These things are the meaningless flotsam that a prick's heart hungers for.

He lay in a state of dull languor in the velvet cushions, until I could bear his presence no longer. I leaned across his pale, flaccid body and whispered in his ear, "Go now, Flatus, and tell my story."

Afterword

(Note from the publisher: We are required to include this Afterword with every book we sell. This document was delivered to us from the Palace, and we have verified its provenance. The opinions expressed in the Afterword are not necessarily those of the publisher, or of the author.)

J. Gallagher has published this book without my review or approval. When it was brought to my attention, I met with representatives of his publishing house, and strongly urged that this Afterword be appended to all future editions of this book.

While we treasure freedom of expression, revisionist propaganda is poison injected into the heart of the commonwealth. Parliament has discouraged property seizures, and is suddenly obsessed with *habeas corpus*, now that the war has been won. But I am nothing if not sympathetic to the aspirations of my people, so for the greater good I have granted unconditional pardons to all parties who participated in the release of this book. The author is in hiding, but his fears are unfounded. Let him come to the open marketplace of ideas, and contend without worry.

As for the misrepresentations, exaggerations and outright libels contained in this book, I cannot remain silent. This purported history, while conforming to the truth in its broadest outline, is a saccharine soufflé of smarm.

I will briefly list some of the author's more egregious failings of imagination.

My alleged extraterrestrial genesis is of course sensationalist twaddle. I do not dispute that Atticus Johnson (BitBoy, in this absurd

history, and currently at large), processed SETI files as a hobby. However, as with most things in that shallow prick's life, he focused with an iron will on the inconsequential. Truth be told, he paid scant attention to mysterious interruptions in the relentless background static of the universe.

How I wish I possessed the superhuman powers attributed to me in this book! I have been a disciple of Gertrude S. Joplin (HippyChick in Gallagher's cartoonish depiction) for 11 years, and any familiarity I might have with the mysteries of the night sky, I owe to her alone.

I can only shake my head with sadness at the utter absurdity of those talking horses. The author of this book has trivialized the revolution, which perhaps was his intention. He mocks the sacrifices of the common women and pricks who risked their lives for the future of our children. Every bold stroke for justice is countered with cavils and derision. This thrift-shop oracle takes his place among the whiners and broken souls who litter the battlefield of honor.

He makes Trotsky look like a yes-man.

Zenia