

## Beauty in the Blood

Monday. February 22nd. 1836.

Never had Small One felt more deserved of his name than when he stood amidst the trees bordering the sparkling river, with the great bruised sky above and the field of crudely shaped geometrical structures stretching out beyond. The queen had warned them it would be like this, all big and bright and new. But he could never have imagined...never have *believed*.

Dimly, he heard Swifty say in her peculiar Faulcon dialect, "We'll have to cross."

Standing straight and tall beside Small One, truly massive in this abundance of light, Triumph grunted, "This river contains foreign substance, Swifty. Have all rules of protocol left your bulbous brains?"

"Has all knowledge left yours? You were supposed to have synthesized all information deposited by the Watchers. If you had done so, you would know that we are standing in a forest of *cypress trees*, we stand before the *San Antonio River*, which contains a harmless substance called *water*, and that today's assignment is to infiltrate three citizens of *Bexar* before the next solar rotation. And if you question my judgment again, I'll have you decommissioned."

Triumph wagged his neck flaps in irritation. He tested the water by dipping a squat toe into the glistening diamond-patchwork of ripples. "It's cold," he said matter-of-factly. "Small One couldn't handle it."

Small One, who had been staring hypnotized into the water throughout the quibble, pulled his gaze away from the river. Standing a foot shorter than Triumph and a good six inches shorter than Swifty, Small One always disliked facing up to his companions, especially Triumph, who for the longest time had wanted to be known as ‘Killer with a Thousand Teeth’. But he did so now. Staring into the river had strengthened him somehow. “I can handle it, Triumph. The water can’t hurt us.”

“Of course it can’t hurt us,” Triumph said. “Now get in there and cross. That way we can jump in and haul you out when you start to sink.”

Small One was about to do just that when Swifty brushed him aside and slid into the water herself. She flailed her limbs but was able to keep her shell above water. She twisted onto her back and began kicking.

Triumph joined her, as did Small One moments later. The water felt strange against his porous skin, unnatural. Again, he withdrew Queen Oculus’s parting words of wisdom from his memory. “Your commission will take you beyond our nearly infinite experience. You ask the elders anything about the Realm of the Seeing Ones and they will tell you. But you ask them about Earth, and they will only shake their heads. The Watchers have given us glimpses of glorious things. Do not be distracted. Do not compromise your duty. The Seeing Ones know many things, but they do not know Earth. With you, that is all going to change.”

Was water one of the glorious things the queen had mentioned? Should he not be distracted by it? Lying on his back on the river, Small One watched his stubby feet scissor through the water. Droplets were flung into the air by the force of his motion. They caught the light, sparkled like the queen’s jewels, fell back into the river. A word usually reserved for the Realm’s finest spacecraft and most impressive architecture rose to his mouth. The word stuck

there for a moment, his esophagus searching for air. Then it came out as a sigh, and Small One felt something awaken inside him.

“Beauty.”

San Antonio de Bexar. A peculiar Earthling town. Small One’s first. He marveled at the quaint buildings—some half crumbled—from his position just inside the protective line of cypress trees. He remembered an image The Watchers had deposited inside his memory: A picture of a tall figure with baggy white skin and a mounded shell atop its head. A human. A *Texian*, to be precise. Where did these humans hide themselves, he wondered. Surely not in those hideous buildings that looked like something a Crab might excavate from a mine. Unsure of what to do, and with the enchanting beauty of the water already forgotten and all his courage with it, Small One looked over to where Triumph and Swifty were crouched near the base of a tree.

“The Watchers spoke of a storm,” Swifty was saying. “Look at the sky. It’s as though dark has come early.”

“Dark is good,” Triumph said. “It will keep us hidden until we infiltrate the humans.”

“Where *are* the humans?” Small One asked.

“Quiet,” Triumph muttered as was his habit whenever Small One dared to open his mouth.

“There’ll be some in the buildings down the road,” Swifty said. “They are, I think, celebrating.”

Triumph blushed with laughter. “What for?”

“I’m going to report you for preparation negligence. Today is the anniversary of one of their general’s birthdays. General George Washington. They see him as a hero.”

Triumph's blush grew deeper. "Why are they celebrating him? What did he do? He hasn't conquered any worlds, has he? He hasn't made this primitive world something to be desired! A hero...If he is a hero, then I am a god!"

"You must remember that the queen values Earth for its intangible qualities, not its tangible ones. You must contain your disgust, Triumph. Now. We will wait for the storm. Then we will go to a building and watch for humans."

Small One mumbled his agreement to the tree.

The storm brought water from the sky. Only these droplets did not catch the sunlight and sparkle and fall gently back down. The bloated clouds, dark as his shell's underside, might as well have let loose a sheet of daggers. There was the water, yes, but there was also the explosive sound of an invisible monster's roar and the bright flashes of its laser gun. Such tenacity! Such violence! It reminded Small One of when he had visited the mines. The lava spray and booms and crashes of machinery had been similarly overwhelming.

Triumph muttered to himself as they stalked down the street.

"Primitive...uncivil...vulgar...unfit for Crabs..."

His pores hopelessly clogged, Small One followed Swifty beneath an awning built into the side of the building. It appeared to be meant for humans to hang up their skins...

"Over here," Swifty said, sliding along the wall toward a window set low in the wall. There was no glass, only a brightly colored sheet of cloth that rippled in the wind. Flickering light caused the sheet's outline to take on a cheerful glow, and Small One could hear sounds of merriment between the monster's roars. A celebration no doubt. He watched in admiration as

Swiftly drew back a corner of the sheet and looked inside. Triumph craned his neck above her head. Small One rested his chin on the windowsill.

My, but humans were very odd creatures indeed. Bouncing around the floor this way and that, while a particularly hairy group of them played spastic music on their string boxes. Making raucous noises while they split their faces wide open. And Small One was beginning to think the humans' flappy white skin was something else entirely, for there were all sorts of colored layers hanging off the humans' necks and legs and heads.

Wispy clouds of smoke floated near the ceiling, making Small One shudder. He searched for the source, afraid that these strange humans may be in serious danger. Now really! Small One almost screeched aloud when he saw two large humans in an opposite corner, puffing on small sticks that emanated smoke like the volcanoes themselves.

"All in the name of a lousy general," Triumph muttered. "We never do anything of the sort, and our generals have conquered countless worlds."

"Quiet," Small One said in an unfortunate imitation of Triumph's irritated voice.

Triumph turned from the window. He reached out a massive hand and squashed it down on Small One's shell, pushing him to his knees. "You're getting too tall, *Small One*."

All Swiftly's attention was focused on the room. "See there," she said. "Those three drinking by the door. They're our targets."

Small One rose shakily so that his chin once again rested on the windowsill. The humans Swiftly had pointed out gripped tankards in their hands. Every time they took a drink some sloshed over the tankard's rim and dripped off their chins.

"Fine with me," Triumph said. "Let's go."

They paused for a moment outside the door, all three fully aware of the consequences a misstep here would wreak on their mission. A laser gun flash in the sky illuminated Swifty inching the door open. The next flash revealed an empty stoop.

Inside the hut, the light and the music and the abundance of wild things left Small One unable to do anything except stand and stare. Then Triumph was pulling his arm and they slipped into the shadows along the wall and crept behind the three drinking humans.

“You’re positive infiltration works on these creatures?” Small One was eyeing a couple—one large, one small—who were kicking their legs in their air and spinning all about.

“Why shouldn’t it?” Swifty said. Like Triumph she was standing perfectly still behind her human counterpart, masked in shadow. “It’s worked on everyone else.” She gave Small One a significant look. “This is your first infiltration, isn’t it?”

Small One nodded.

“Expect your mind to feel trapped, burdened. You’ll know things you hadn’t before. For a moment or two you may forget yourself, but it will pass. Try to keep our directive in your head and you’ll have no trouble acclimating.”

“And above all,” Triumph said coolly, “Don’t let their thoughts control you.” He took note of Small One’s orange coloring. “Of course, you...do know *how* to infiltrate.”

“I’m a Changeling like you and Swifty, aren’t I? I’ve passed the tests.”

Triumph leaned in close so that his two-inch thick shell almost grazed Small One’s half-inch one. “You might as well be a Crab for all the respect I have for you. Your job this mission is to keep your puny head down and take orders. And if I have the misfortune of serving with you again, I’ll say the exact same thing. Now be quiet.”

Small One's fear turned to resentment, and the change was broadcast on his shell as the orange deepened to red. He resented Triumph for being right, resented Swifty for giving him the chance.

"Connect yourself to the target," Swifty commanded as though no words had been spoken.

Small One copied Triumph. He withdrew his second set of arms from inside his shell. It was a little absurd to call them arms, for they were smooth and boneless, more mechanical than anything. They continued to extend from the back of his shell like the vines of an insidious plant. Instead of fingers at the end there were white bulbs meant for sucking away the victim's resistance. Make them pliable for their new host. The bulbs attached themselves to the back of the human's skull between the ears. Immediately the sounds of their slurping and giddy giggling ceased. Their tankards slipped from their fingers and fell to the wooden floor with thuds drowned out by the strings and the storm. Small One felt his normally well-organized thoughts come to an abrupt halt, as if some micro-bot had snuck inside his brain and frozen all synapses. Nothing made sense anymore. Nothing was all he knew. And now even the room's bountiful light was leaving him, slipping fast from his tunneling vision, going away, abandoning him in the horrible land of in-between.

Small One had entered the mind of Andres Esparza.

*Remember your directive. Remember your directive.* Small One floundered in his mental darkness as random thoughts and ideas entered his awareness one moment and left the next. *Green Flag Republic. Howling Wilderness. Didn't you know someone who died in Zacatecas?*

*Travis. Tell Travis. Who will go with old Ben Milam? I will...We will...I will...We will...Victory or Death. Death. Tell Travis. No more blood for the Green Flag.*

*Who am I*

*Remember your directive.*

*Remember...*

“Tell me one thing, Small One.”

“Okay.”

“Why did the queen choose you?”

Small One gripped the balcony railing tightly. “She said I was more susceptible to outside influences. Because of my inexperience.”

“And will this be an asset to your team on Earth?”

“The queen thinks so.”

From his perch on the balcony, the deck officer observed the thousands of Scorchers excavating the lava rock from inside the volcano and the thousands more Crabs pushing carts of the mined minerals inside into the loading bay. “How long have you been field overseer for Block 94, Small One?”

“Since my intelligence was approved for standard duty.”

“A long time then. Your life will change forever if your mission is a success. You’ll no doubt accompany the Chargers during the first raid. Great things are coming your way, Small One, if only you stay increasingly loyal to the Realm.”

“What about you?”

“Me?”



“Do you think of your life as a success?”

The field officer stood straight and tall. “I am a Scorcher, Small One. I have not been blessed with a name. I do not have the opportunities you do. But yes, I view my life as a success. I made field officer, didn’t I?”

“Yes.”

“Dismissed, Small One. I believe the queen wants to speak with the selected Changelings.”

Queen Oculus was entering her eightieth standard year in power. This was the tenth year she had been unable to produce offspring, which, abiding by tradition, would have made her long overdue for replacement. But the Realm respected Oculus. Like most queens she was highly intelligent, at least twice the size of any Realm species, and quite capable of issuing orders. What made Oculus different was her ambition. During her reign she had conquered more worlds than her five predecessors combined. Barren worlds, populated worlds, frozen worlds, resourceful worlds, it didn’t matter. Just the knowledge that she was expanding the Realm was enough to feed her inner fire. That was, until a scout ship halfway across the universe reported a planet unlike anything they’d ever seen.

“Earth,” Queen Oculus told the hundreds of Changelings sitting in front of her. “That is the name the Watchers have given me. The name, and a good deal more.” She eased her sectioned body off the raised platform and slithered between the rows of benches of the Scorcher’s mess hall. It was unusual for the queen to hold such an important meeting inside a mineral base so far from homeworld; but as Small One had heard from multiple sources, the planet Draxxon held the Realm’s pride and joy of interstellar navigation in its orbit. *The Oculus*

was the first of its kind—a starship capable of light speed travel. The Elite said it couldn't be done, but the Watchers had proved them wrong yet again when one of their elders picked up information that wouldn't become common knowledge for millenia. Small One had learned never to doubt what the Watchers saw.

“They say Earth contains life,” the queen said. “Intelligent life as well as an abundance of natural resources. Speckle from the Watchers' Elders League reported seeing images of fields of green and skies of blue during his daily Imaging sessions. Make no mistake, my Changelings, I could not be prouder of what we have built together. The buildings we've constructed, the minerals we've hoarded, the technologies we've developed. But when I heard the Watchers speak of a world unspoiled by the harshness of space, I thought to myself: There are trillions of worlds in this universe. Why was Earth the one chosen to be beautiful? What kind of life must it possess?” Oculus stopped in the middle of the row of benches. Her shell burned a furious gold. “I *want* this planet, my Changelings. I want to establish my legacy with Earth. I want future generations to look back at my reign and say: ‘Oculus is the one who gave us beauty’.

“In order for our invasion to be successful we must first gather intelligence about this strange new planet. I had the Watchers look deeper into Earth than any planet they've done before. Here is the pertinent information. Earth hosts an intelligent species called human beings. Despite their high powered minds they have not conquered any other worlds, nor have they even built up a fleet of starcraft to protect them from outside invasion. On the surface they appear to be incredibly vulnerable. But the Watchers saw something more, something that we don't possess. The tangible qualities that we Seeing Ones pride ourselves on, qualities like intelligence, strength, productivity, status, and the indicators of such high standing will inevitably fall short against the humans' intangible qualities.”

Confused mutterings among the Changelings halted the queen's speech. Intangible qualities? What did that even mean? Small One thought it may have something to do with appearance.

“Yes, intangible qualities,” the queen resumed. “The Watchers showed me glimpses of how humans react in volatile situations. Most do not stop and analyze as we do, my Changelings. They do not assess and carry out. They are unpredictable, wide-ranging in their responses. They are simply threatening. In his near infinite wisdom, Speckle told me humans feel emotions deeply. Fear. Joy. Sadness. Courage. And while these words may sound foreign to us, their prevalence amongst the Earthlings presents us with a challenge. We must study the humans intimately, my Changelings, learn how deep emotions can affect their resistance to invasion.

“After a great deal of thought I have discovered the best approach to this challenge. The Watchers tell me humans fight a great deal with each other. They have wars. They conquer bits and pieces of their own world before someone else comes along and conquers what they thought was theirs. Yes, I told you their ways are foreign. Now this is where I require your talents, my Changelings. With Speckle's help I have selected dozens of military conflicts throughout their history where the concept of extreme emotion is put on full display. Making good use of our time-diffusion technology, a team of three Changelings will be present at each conflict with a directive to merge into human form, observe human behavior as it pertains to decisions on the battlefield, and then report back with documented examples. Now I will call the names of those whom I have chosen to lead each mission...”

Swifty didn't look pleased when Small One was assigned to her team. Nor did Triumph. Small One didn't mind. The mere feeling of dislike shouldn't hinder the mission in any way, for

dislike was as strong an emotion as they were capable of exerting on one another. Hatred was as foreign as Earth itself. And none of them, not even Speckle the Watcher, had any idea what to do with a real emotion if ever they developed one. Small One didn't see this as a flaw, despite what the queen said about human emotions being potentially dangerous. They had the starships! They had the numbers! They had time-diffusion technology! Yes, he may be small, but Small One didn't think he was stupid. Whatever *intangibles* the humans possessed the Seeing Ones could easily squash with superior intelligence and innovation.

Small One thought these things proudly, paying little mind to Swifty's introduction speech. He was just as committed to the Realm's cause as any other Changeling. Very soon he would get the chance to prove that commitment. Soon...at the Alamo.

*The Alamo. San Antonio de Valero. We are the Greys, we Do or Die. Bring out the flag, ring the bell, this fortress is ours!*

*Who am I?*

Small One.

Andres Esparza.

*Who?*

Small...One.

Faint, tunneling light. Distant sounds of music and raucous voices. Small One felt the squeezing sensation that Swifty had described constricting his brain until all he could see was an ever-increasing beam of white light. Pain pulsed around the edges of his skull. As soon as the light had filled his entire field of vision it began to fade, and Small One once again saw the bright colors and the flickering lights and all the humans doing their spastic movements. It was

as if someone had rubbed a lens of soot from his eyes. Instead of the subdued colors and firm geometric outlines he was used to visualizing, Small One saw the celebration scene through Andres Esparza's eyes—one flowing array of color and smooth shapes.

“How can humans stand seeing like this?” Triumph complained. “You can't judge dimensions, measure angles. There's too much light to see by...” He picked up one of the fallen tankards and sniffed what remained of the liquid suspiciously.

“You don't need to worry about toxic substances anymore, Triumph,” Swifty said. “We're in human bodies now. Anything they do we can do without fear.”

Small One wished this were true. As far as he had been informed, Changelings in the human body were just as susceptible to fatal injuries as their counterparts. There was no Small One ghost just waiting to return to his natural form. He could only change back if the host was still intact.

Swifty suggested they stay with the celebrators to see if they could pick up any useful information, but after ten minutes of lurking in the shadows, pretending to sip their drinks, they overheard only a brief mention of the Mexican army's whereabouts before all rational conversation was lost in another bout of: “We are the boys so handy, We'll teach Santa Ana to fear...Our Yankee Doodle Dandy!” There was scarce a human in the place without a drink in their hand. The rapid movements from earlier had calmed into a more relaxed mode of jubilee.

They slipped out the door and into the storm. Swifty looked left, then right. The dark sky and tumbling water created a ubiquitous panoramic. The three of them stood against the adobe wall of the house, through which the sounds of celebration could still be heard.

“We’ll have to be at the fortress before daybreak,” Swifty said. Triumph grunted in agreement. Small One continued to stare into the downpour. He cupped his calloused hands together and watched the water pool.

So dark, he thought. So bleak. Really nothing at all like the sparkling diamond ripples of the San Antonio river. Yet it was the same substance. Small One spread his fingers, releasing the collected water. Perhaps beauty could be represented by more than just diamonds and the immediate appearance. Perhaps, like him, beauty could take many forms. He just had to find the one that struck him as most powerful, and then report to the queen any possible dangers it posed to their invasion. If he did that, he might be deemed worthy for a Renaming. ‘Small One’ need not be attached to him forever.

The storm boomed and crackled. Small One raised his head and, ever so slightly to make sure Swifty and Triumph didn’t see, used his facial muscles to pull the skin around his mouth upward. Celebration!

San Antonio de Valero, or ‘The Alamo’ as the Watchers insisted they refer to the adobe fortress as, lacked spectacle. Small One had seen a stronger, more effective design used for housing Crabs. Not that the Alamo was any different in that regard. Earthlings seemed either to be too unwilling to spoil their planet’s natural beauty by constructing half-decent infrastructure, or too unintelligent to know what made a good defense and what did not. Small One held both options as undesirable.

The storm had stopped sometime that morning just after the entire town of Bexar had been shaken awake once they heard news that the Mexican cavalry had reached a point a few hours’ west from the town on horseback. Small One knew from his training sessions that none of

the rebels expected the Mexicans' swift arrival. That would be one of the reasons for their eventual downfall.

On full alert, the rebels that had been celebrating a long-dead general's birthday the night before had rushed to their stations in the Alamo fortress, spurred forward by the urgent tolling of the church bell. Swifty, Triumph, and Small One, currently known to the world as Joseph, George, and Andres, had been among them.

They arranged themselves with the other defenders along the Alamo's west wall. From their vantage point they could see the Mexican soldiers—the *soldados*—pouring into Bexar from across the San Antonio river, flanking the church. Small One took in the *soldados*' outer skins: Covering the torso was a blue layer with red trim and white crossbelts; the legs were also furnished with blue. Small One had to appreciate the human eye. In this world, knowing the difference between colors meant knowing the difference between friend and foe. The rebel defenders that surrounded Small One were draped in quite a different fashion. The bright colors worn by the *soldados* had no place in the Alamo. Their fashion matched the dirt of the ground and the husks of corn Small One had seen littered about the fields. Faded browns and dried-out yellows. On some of them the material hung in braided stands. Most all wore bowls atop their heads.

Swifty was attempting to talk to their neighboring defender. Small One listened in, curious about how they were to conduct themselves when conversing with these aliens.

"Joseph Blair," Swifty said when the other defender asked her name. It was strange to hear Swifty's normally soft, lilting voice come out so rough and deep-throated.

"I'm Blazebly. I was born in England but have lived in the good land of Texas for the past fifteen years. Where do you call home, Blair?"

Blazeby was a Texian like Swifty and Triumph's hosts, and not a Tejano like Small One's. The Watchers had assured them that this difference played no part in the Alamo conflict, a claim Small One had difficulty believing. Weren't Crabs and Changelings different for a reason? If people treated him the same as an average mining Crab, why...that just wouldn't be right. And if he was treated the same as the queen, then *that* wouldn't be right. Small looked down at his outer layers. They were a good deal more colorful than Blazeby's earthy appearance, and might even be compared to a *soldado's* style of dress. The enemy. What, then, separated a Tejano from a *soldado* if not likeness? Why wasn't he on the other side of this wall, marching forward to obliterate the measly assembling of defenders in their shabby fortress?

"Born in Tennessee, raised in Tennessee, plan to die here in Texas," Swifty responded. This appeared to be the right thing to say because Blazeby split his face like those at last night's celebration had done and let out a roar.

"Huzza my good man! Victory or Death, to quote Commandant Travis. A Tennessee man, eh, Blair? Are you close with Davy Crockett? He was your representative for some time, wasn't he?"

Swifty was about to respond when a hush fell over the west wall. It didn't take long to spot the reason. Hoisted atop the bell tower of the San Fernando church was a banner the color of human blood. A word popped up in the back of Small One's mind, procured either from a training session with the Watchers or from Andres Esparza's suppressed memory: Degüello—no quarter. No mercy would be granted to the defenders if they chose to resist the Mexican army. The defenders' silence lingered as they observed the blood-red flag ripple in the wind, signaling their fate. But then a voice pierced the gloom, mighty as a starship engine in full thrust.

"Gunners for the free land of Texas, TO YOUR POSTS!"



Small One looked to his left near the far side of the west wall and saw a group of men scurrying around long metal tubes on wheels—*cannons*. Standing close beside the gunners was a tall man with reddish curls atop his head and a blue-eyed gaze that could cut diamonds. It was this man who had spoken. To his surprise, Small One realized that he knew this human's name. The Watchers had planted an image in his memory. "Observe this one closely," they had told him. "He speaks of strange things."

"That's William Barret Travis," Small One said softly.

"Who else would it be, my friend?" Blazeby said. "But to his face you refer to him as Lieutenant Colonel if you know what's good for you."

Travis gave another fearsome command. "LOAD!"

More scurrying amongst the gunners.

"RAM!"

"READY!"

There was another moment of brief silence.

"FIRE!"

Explosions, sharper and louder than last night's booming sky, made Small One want to burrow into his skin. The noise shook him to his core. But the blasts from the eighteen-pounders seemed to encourage the defenders a great deal. Where before there had been a dread-filled silence there was now a rousing cheer that traveled up and down the west wall, growing louder at every pass. Blazeby was wielding his arm above his head like a club, whooping with the rest of them.

"That's Travis all right, my Tejano friend. We'll defy your Santa Ana to the end, that we will."

Small One nodded and shifted away from Blazeby. He was confused by the defenders' cheering, and judging by Swifty's and Triumph's unsure movements he could tell they were as well. What had changed in these human's spirits? How could a rudimentary statement of defiance instill such passion? Their situation was exactly the same. The blood-red flag was still flying high. If Small One really was witnessing one of the humans' 'intangible' qualities that supposedly made them dangerous, then this mission was meaningless. From the amount of Mexican troops still pouring into Bexar, he could tell that the Alamo would soon fall. And that was with a few thousand *soldados*. The Realm had *millions* of Chargers at its disposal. No amount of impassioned cheering could mitigate that kind of force.

"And there's the white flag," Blazeby said dismissively, referring to the *soldado* on horseback who had ridden across the footbridge to the outskirts of Bexar, bearing a white flag.

Twenty minutes later, a Texian horseman (a fellow named Jameson according to Blazeby) met the *soldado* by the footbridge for parley. The meeting was brief; the talking appeared heated; and when it was over Jameson turned his horse swiftly around and galloped back to the Alamo. The defenders leaned over the ramparts to watch his passage through the front gates. Travis would meet the man on the Plaza. Travis would know what to do.

No sooner had Blazeby engaged Swifty in a friendly banter concerning the validity of Crockett's various escapades, a young Texian lad appeared on the top step of the staircase leading down to the Plaza. Drops of moisture were rolling down his face.

"The Lieutenant Colonel commands all volunteers to gather on the Plaza! He wishes to speak."

Small One was pleased by this news. Not only did their directive state that Travis was an important human to follow, but he was personally curious what made these people speak so highly of someone who hadn't conquered any land or built any towers.

They gathered by the infantry barracks under the evening sky—a deep blue tinged with red and yellows. Small One counted two hundred soldiers, which matched the number the Watchers had given him.

Lieutenant Colonel Travis was marginally taller than many of them, but besides that innate quality Small One didn't see anything about the human's appearance markedly different than the two hundred others. He factored that into his analyses: Physical traits do not determine an Earthling's prestige.

“Soldiers for the free land of Texas,” Travis began in the same strong voice as before, “hear what Santa Ana has to say of us. Hear what he would bid us do.” Travis withdrew a sheet of paper and read from it in an even louder voice.

“The Mexican army cannot come to terms with rebellious foreigners to whom there is no other recourse left, if they wish to save their lives, than to place themselves immediately at the disposal of the Supreme Government from whom alone they may expect clemency after some considerations are taken up.

“Do you hear these words, gentlemen? They damn us with the title of rebellious as if rebellion has no honor. Did not our forefathers rebel against the king of England after deeming the mother country to be tyrannical? Did not our forefathers gain honor for that endeavor?

“They accuse us all of being foreigners when there are many among us who have dwelt under Santa Ana's ‘Supreme Government’ and found it intolerable. The Alamo holds Tejanos as well as Americans with roots spanning many miles, all united in the fight to make Texas free.

“They expect our instinct of self-preservation to overcome our desire for freedom. But, gentlemen, they are mistaken. Huzza for Texas, Huzza for liberty and the rights of man! God grant that all Texas may stand as firm as Harrisburg in the ‘hour that will try men’s souls.’ ...I feel the triumph we have gained and I glory in it. Let Texas stand firm and be true to hers and we will have nothing to fear.”

Another seismic roar followed the end of Travis’s speech. The defenders slapped their removable shells against their knees, threw back their heads, stamped their feet. All were in full agreement with the Lieutenant Colonel, a human Small One suspected was used to getting his own way and was not yet beaten down by innumerable failures.

Small One sidled up to Swifty and Triumph. “What do you think?”

“Why don’t you tell us?” Triumph said gracelessly. He remained focused on the fervent crowd.

“They’re obviously displaying symptoms of deep emotion,” Swifty said. “A kind of reckless confidence that disregards common sense. In other words...a terminal weakness.”

“Terminal weakness indeed,” Triumph said. “Look at them! Their pitiful fortress is besieged and they’re jumping around like—”

“A group of intoxicated Crabs,” Small One supplied.

Triumph glowered at him. “This is an intelligent species, *Small One*. They’re not *supposed* to be this blind. Swifty, I propose we call this mission complete and return to the portal. It is apparent that deep emotion is in no way a threat to us and is, in fact, detrimental to their ability to defend. Do I have your support?”

Swifty’s answer was immediate. “We must stay the duration of our mission, Triumph. Our directive states we arrive sundown February 22nd and depart the morning of March 6th. The

Watchers know the Alamo will lose the battle, so for us to judge the defenders with that foreknowledge would be foolish. We cannot immediately correlate strong emotions to blunders on the battlefield. We must stay the duration.”

Subdued and visibly uncomfortable at being talked down to in front of Small One, Triumph shuffled away.

“Stay the course, Small One,” Swifty said as she too returned to the crowd. “Do not confuse power with confidence.”

That night, bundled up in two layers of outer skins (his old hide suited him better, for this human skin did a miserable job keeping out the cold), and listening to the defenders bustle around the fort, storing supplies and provisions, Small One wondered what would happen if he did more than simply ‘stay the course’. Staying the course was just another phrase for doing the bare minimum. And doing the bare minimum would get him nowhere.

So where to start.

Talk to people, of course. Talk to the humans, see how their emotive little minds worked so he could begin deciphering the potentially destructive power of beauty. Because Small One didn’t think the defender’s gaudy display of passion earlier that day was an accurate representation of what Earthlings were capable of. A world that boasted rivers of shimmering diamonds and skies that cycled through a collage of colors spoke of greater things. Beautiful things.

Small One snuggled deeper into his cocoon of leather. He would start with Blazeby. He would ask him why he moved from England to America. He would ask him why he believed in a free Texas. He would ask him why he was prepared to die at the Alamo.

Besieged. It was a term Small One was familiar with. All Seeing Ones—with the exception of Crabs—were fed stories from their inception of the Realm’s glorious military achievements. Small One remembered a retired Charger blessed with the name ‘Masher’, who had told him the tale of a world with intelligent life. The inhabitants had resisted integration into the Realm by hiding in their caves—an elaborate series of rock structures that looked like the spine of some gigantic creature. The entrances were hidden. No Changeling or Charger could enter. So, the Seeing Ones surrounded the caves and waited. The Watchers had told them the cave dwellers required a certain fungi that grew only on the surface. It was only a matter of time before they died in their own defense. Small One still felt uneasy whenever he remembered how Masher’s face had contorted with vicious pleasure as he recalled how the cave dwellers had stumbled out in twos and threes in search of the life-giving fungi only to be swiftly dispatched by the awaiting Chargers.

Small One looked over the west wall parapets at the Mexican battalions—fifteen hundred soldiers if what the Watchers said was true—and by Small One’s approximate count it was. Fifteen hundred to two hundred. Small One tried to draw upon his conqueror’s pride that all Seeing Ones possessed. But all he could see in his mind’s eye was Masher’s leering face.

The afternoon of the twenty-fourth gave Small One his first opportunity to speak to Blazeby. The Mexicans had commenced a steady bombardment, and the defenders that weren’t helping Green Jameson shore up the north wall took cover inside the closest building or against the wall whenever they heard the explosion. On one of these occasions, Small One ducked into an animal pen to find Blazeby feeding one of the horses some food from the palm of his hand.

“Tejano...” Blazeby said, and the rest of his greeting was drowned out in mortar fire.

“My name is Andres,” Small One said, letting his host's instincts take over just enough to allow recognizable speech.

Blazeby let the animal lick his palm before turning to face Small One. “Are you afraid these walls are going to come down, Andres?”

“Eventually they will.”

“Hah! Everything comes down eventually. As for us, we give Fanin another three, four days. Then, with four hundred men added to our ranks, we send Santa Ana running back to Mexico City. It also wouldn't be foolish to assume that Sam Houston is gathering an army as we speak. Perhaps he is already on the move.”

“Is that why you're staying?”

“Sorry?”

“Are you staying because you have hope?”

Blazeby gave Small One a curious look. “What kind of soldier would I be if I didn't? If you believe our cause here to be worthless, why don't you slip away during the night? You'd be the first, but not the last, I can guarantee that. When the mortars start flying like tankards in a bar fight, if one of our walls is breached, men will lose hope and flee. But that's not the kind of man Travis is. Nor Bowie, nor Crockett neither. I look up to all of 'em, see. I want the same thing they want—a free Texas.”

“Free Texas...” Small One repeated. A response was not rising readily to his host's lips. Small One opened his mental valve and allowed more of his own consciousness to slip in. “What is... a free Texas. What does it mean?”

Blazeby stared at him blankly for a second, then expelled a great burst of air from his nose that made his shoulders twitch and his head rock back. “You’re either the next John Locke or dumb as dirt. Stay at the Alamo and the answer to your question will make itself abundantly clear.” Blazeby gave the penned animal an affectionate pat on the head before walking out through the open stable door.

Small One stood in the middle of the floor, listening to the cannon fire. He looked left, at the animal in the pen. It was chewing lazily, swishing its tail, and every now and again stamping a sinewy leg.

Small One looked again at the open doorway where Blazeby had walked through. He looked at the animal stamping around in its pen. Drawing close to the wooden enclosure, Small One reached and lifted the metal latch that secured the pen’s gate. He pushed the gate open and stepped back, looking expectantly at the animal.

“Go on,” he said, waving an arm at the open door. “You’re free.” The animal continued to chew, not appearing to be the least bit disturbed by his wild gesticulating. When it became clear the animal was completely satisfied with staying in its six-foot pen with flies buzzing around its ears, Small One gave up and left the stable.

Freedom, he had learned, could be deceptive.

The four days that followed the Mexican’s initial bombardment introduced little change to the defenders’ lives. Every morning they woke up shivering. Every morning they ate their gritty cornmeal as the bombardment that wouldn’t stop until late that evening began anew.



Half those nights, Small One, Swifty, and Triumph had been assigned to help Green Jameson bolster the barricades behind the battered north wall with dirt and timbers. The workers achieved a near-frenzied level of motion as both fear and desperation trumped their exhaustion.

No more than five hundred yards away, the Mexican sappers were also hard at work, each night methodically moving their trenches closer and closer to the Alamo fort. Often, Small One would spot moonlight glinting off the sappers' metal tools as they dug. Each time this happened a hollow feeling of emptiness would tug at his heart. One side wanted something the other wasn't willing to give up, and each side would continue doing what they were doing until they either won or lost.

Small One shivered and bent down to help move a log. He didn't belong on Earth. He could draw comfort from that thought. What upset was the notion that his home might not be any different.

His second night as part of Jameson's repair crew yielded an unexpected conversation. While Swifty and Triumph were sawing the timber to usable dimensions, Small One was shoring up cracks in the wall with buckets of mud with two others on either side. Their appearances were stolen by the dark, so they worked in silence without exchanging so much as their names.

A voice on Small One's left made him twitch. To hear a noise amidst the monotonous sounds of repair was jarring.

"I'm scared, sir."

Small One looked to his right to make sure the voice wasn't addressing their fellow worker. The large man on his right continued to work as if no words had been spoken.

"I am also," Small One said, already fearful he was going to say the wrong thing.

“You?” The worker on his left spoke and worked at the same time. Small One copied him.

“Is there a reason I shouldn’t be?”

“I reckon you’re twenty years older than I am.”

“How old are you?”

“Fifteen, sir.”

Small One paused, uncertain how to proceed.

“Did you want to go fight when you were my age?” the youngling asked.

“A fighter wasn’t who I was meant to be,” Small One said carefully.

“But you’re here, aren’t you?” A beat of silence. “My daddy fought at New Orleans when he was my age. That’s why I asked if you fought. Maybe you knew him.”

“I don’t know...”

“My granddaddy fought in the war for independence. Crossed the Delaware with Mr. Washington.”

“Washington? The man you celebrated?”

“Oh. You’re a Tejano, aren’t you? Your accent. You wouldn’t have known my daddy.”

The youngling fell silent.

Remembering the promise he had made to himself to talk to humans, Small One pursued the conversation. “Why are you scared?”

“You wouldn’t know what it’s like. You’ve never fought like my daddy and granddaddy have.”

“Maybe not, but I have had my fair share of adventures.” Small One began to relay tales from distant worlds he had heard from Chargers like Masher, only switching the names of the worlds to Earthly lands he remembered from the Watchers’ general memory drop.

“Deep in the mountains of the East Indies there existed a series of caves that, from above, looked like the spine of a godly beast...the inhabitants could not resist the awe-inspiring power of our armies...

“Stranded in the scorched earth of Russia’s minefields we tracked down the last of the camp’s warriors...the inhabitants marveled at our military skill...

“Deployed east of Paris’s nomad trails, we waited for the chieftain's arrival with a legion of our expert fighters...the inhabitants spread word of our fearsome cunning...”

The youngling did not interrupt throughout Small One’s retellings, but when the air between was silent once more, he said quiet and fierce, “History’s full of stories of conquest like yours. And I know my history. My mama made sure I learned to read and write when I was real young. She says the two most important books in the world are the Bible and Homer’s Odyssey, and both of ‘em have stories like the ones you told me...’cept they didn’t take place in Russia or Paris. But my daddy and granddaddy, they were part of a *different* story, a story no one in the world’s ever witnessed before. Though you being a Tejano I doubt you know what I’m speaking of.”

“Then make me understand if it’s so important to you.” Small One was excited despite himself. This conversation might tell him what he needed to know about beauty.

“I’m speaking of liberty, sir. I’m speaking of an uprising with principles so just and honorable, with actions so admirable, that it made the whole world turn its head to look at us. America. The land of liberty. My granddaddy died at Trenton. My daddy went to war in his

honor. He was a hero in New Orleans. He died five years ago, hunting bear. And now here I am, at the Alamo facing another dictatorial leader, another threat of military occupation, fighting to keep my family's land...A man without land is nobody."

"Do you sometimes feel you're nobody?" Small One asked.

The youngling's voice dropped another decibel. "Yes, sir."

They continued work until dawn's first blush colored the sky.

The morning of March 1<sup>st</sup> brought, what many defenders called, 'a reason for celebration'. Small One was awakened from his slumber by joyous shouts. Stiff and cold as usual, he stumbled out of the barracks to see a large crowd mingling about the plaza. He spotted Swifty and walked up to her.

"Why the crowd?"

"Thirty-two soldiers from a town called Gonzales have arrived to serve as reinforcements. The Watchers did not tell us of this occurrence."

"The defenders are obviously glad to see them," Small One said, watching the humans embrace.

"Of course. They know they will die without more soldiers. Thirty-two will not be enough, however. The Watchers say Fanin and Houston will both fail to arrive at the Alamo in time. The Gonzales reinforcements must be insignificant." Swifty continued to talk, but Small One was distracted by a small group of people congregating around the plaza well. One of them held a device similar to ones he had seen in the Bexar house and was playing the device's strings with his fingers, emitting an oddly lovely flurry of sound. Another held a larger device with pipes protruding from a brightly colored sack. The fellow was blowing into one of the pipes,

which also emitted a rich sound. The surrounding fellows were clapping their hands and encouraging the players. Small One heard two names being tossed around.

“Play that fiddle, Crockett! Keep those fingers moving!”

“Don’t stop, McGregor, though your face is looking as red as a tomato!”

They were having a contest, Small One realized. Whoever could maintain their sound long enough would be the winner. Small One was intrigued. He knew he shouldn’t be, knew this was just some silly human game, but he found himself fascinated by how much joy such a simple concept could bring. He was tempted to join in the cheer himself.

“Small One?” Swifty was staring at him.

“Listen to those sounds, Swifty. Aren’t they beautiful?”

To his surprise, Swifty paused to consider the two humans working themselves into a frenzy on their devices. A look Small One liked to interpret as wistful passed over her face. Then it was gone, and Swifty the unit leader had returned. “Not our directive,” she stated. “The Watchers didn’t advise us to pay attention to sweet sounds as well as the arrival of thirty-two soldiers from Gonzales. Stay the course, Small One.”

“Where’s Triumph?”

“Still resting from working all night. I’m quite displeased. I should talk to him about it when he returns to his senses.”

“Let him have it,” Small One said in a joking manner.

Swifty tilted her head. “Triumph’s shortcomings don’t concern you. What should concern you is logging all relevant observations into our databooks. Have you been doing that every night?”

“I’ve missed the last two nights because of work crew.”

“Work on it now.”

Small One turned to go.

“There’s something else I should tell you.”

Small One stopped, looked back.

“If I catch you involving yourself further in events that are not explicitly mentioned in our directive, I will report you to the queen. She’ll have you discharged and denamed. Is that clear, Small One?”

“Yes.”

Small One did not update his databooks that day or any day leading up to March 5th. He spent his free time alone on his pile of skins inside the barracks, thinking of ways to enrich his experience on Earth. Swifty’s warning did not bother him. Discharged? At this point that would feel like a reward. Denedamed? No name was better than being addressed as ‘Small One’. From this moment onward, Small One promised himself, he was no longer the third cog in Swifty’s wheel. He was striking out on his own. He was willing to explore beyond the Watchers’ foggy vision and discover for himself what Earthly beauty could do. That was the intention. In reality, all Small One’s thinking sessions produced no course of action that would satisfy his resolve.

And so, he would remain, rebellious only in heart, until Blazeby started talking about eggnog.

“...can hardly recall the taste of it,” Blazeby complained while Small One and a group of five others sat around a small fire outside the staircase to the artillery command post. “Was it cinnomany? Eh, Floyd? Do you think?”

“Ay, it was cinomany,” Floyd said. “Sweet too. Made of eggs, you know.”

The other soldiers guffawed.

Floyd shuffled the coals around with a stick, producing little in the way of flames. “Have you forgotten the taste of coffee as well, Blazeby? The word is out that the coffee beans are locked in a prison cell and only Travis has the key.”

“I hear he’s taking bribes, though,” one of Floyd’s companions said heartily. “Want to round up the cash, Blazeby?”

Blazeby waved a hand dismissively. “I only meant to say it’s hard to keep folks’ spirits up without any spirits! Or eggnog...or even coffee. You think the damn Mexicans would be content to dig their trenches night after night without a proper drink?”

“Yes, and you should be too.” Floyd’s playful attitude had turned serious. “This isn’t a damn game we’re playing, Blazeby. We’re fighting for a good deal more than a pint of eggnog.”

“Now don’t come down on me like that, lads. I’m fighting for liberty like the rest—”

“No, you’re fighting to keep your crooked business. We’ve heard some things about you, Blazeby. Nothing but a conniving filibuster you are. You jump at the chance to stake out land that isn’t yours, then sell it at inflated prices to hardworking American families who want a fresh start. Do you know what natives here call you?”

Blazeby looked stonily at Floyd. “A freedom fighter.”

“A rabble-rouser. That’s what they call you. I’ll venture further and call you a crook.”

Blazeby’s wind-lashed cheeks turned a deeper shade of red. “What if I call what you’re doing here a rebellion, eh? That’s what the natives here call it.”

“Their rebellion? I say it’s our revolution. If you’re suggesting otherwise, you may as well climb over the wall and run to your friends.”

“All I’m saying,” Blazeby said, rubbing his hands together in a deliberate manner, “is that people see things differently. *Nations* see things differently. You accuse me of fighting for personal gain, and I will not deny it. But if you insist on adhering to the native’s take on me, I pray you be consistent. If we lose this battle, Mr. Floyd, how will the Mexicans remember this conflict, I wonder. A squashed rebellion, hmm. The victors write the history, and they will not be kind to your so-called revolution.”

Sitting just outside the ring of the light the smoldering fire provided, Small One remained fixated on Blazeby’s earlier words. *Nations see things differently*. Hadn’t he witnessed that idea played out during the nights he spent working on the barricades? The Mexican scabbers working to advance their trenches, the Alamo soldiers working to strengthen their defense. One side seeing the Alamo as a threat to their nation’s stability, the other seeing the Alamo as an act of righteous defiance.

Perhaps the key to understanding the defenders’ actions lay in the idea that he must first uncover the desires of the enemy, desires that may prove deeper than a conquering spirit.

Small One was curious, and for the first time in his life, he decided to act upon it.

It was not difficult to exit the fort undetected. Small One had taken careful notice of the path Commandant Travis’s couriers took and understood that there were significant gaps in the Mexican’s blockade where one could simply slip away into the surrounding hills.

Small One had a messenger’s bag looped across one shoulder in hopes that if an alert Alamo defender spotted him, they would think him only a courier sneaking into Bexar. A courier without a horse, true, but Small One was many leaps in courage away from mounting one of those exotic creatures. He needed to preserve every ounce of human courage available to him



just to enact what was sure to be a foolhardy quest. No, not foolhardy. Illuminating. Thrusting his hips back and raising his chin like he was one of the Realm's Elite, Small One entered Bexar's town limits.

The evidence of Mexican takeover was everywhere he looked. The quiet family town that he had arrived in eleven days earlier had transformed into a rowdy residence for thousands of restless Mexican *soldados*. There were small campfires at every corner, where groups of four or five would be nursing numb fingers or frying meat and corn in metal skillets. As Small One walked down the street he couldn't help but notice family belongings scattered about the cobblestones. Wooden clocks half-smashed lying in the gutters; bundles of human skins of varying sizes left to soak up the morning dew and be starched of color by the afternoon sun; shards of dishware sparkled like distant stars.

Small was certain that, as a Tejano, he would not be immediately questioned for wandering down Bexar's streets; but he thought an added layer of protection would be wise. He saw precisely what he was looking for hanging on a wooden rack outside a hut. Small One glanced around, making sure the surrounding *soldados* were occupied with their drink and the smoke, then stripped the skins from the rack and raced behind the hut to change.

Now comes the tricky part, Small One thought, looking up and down the street in his newly acquired skin. Where was this Santa Ana?

Small One avoided asking for as long as he could. He strolled down streets and glanced in windows; he observed the comings and goings of the *soldados*; he mumbled and grumbled and searched on. He was afraid his ignorance of Earthly matters would burst his cover, and he was adverse to even the slightest interaction. But as the hours slipped past, Small One knew he had no other choice.

He decided to approach an aging human who was rocking in a chair outside his home. A flappy bowl sat just above his eyes. A flow of gray curls rested on his shoulders. His skins matched Small One's, though they were more pristine. In other words, a passive *soldado*. One who wouldn't shout or try to throttle.

"I'm looking for Santa Ana," Small One said in the native's language.

The *soldado* stopped rocking. His eyes slid across the hat's brim. "What's your name?"  
*Andres Esparza.*

"Small One."

The *soldado* exhaled through his squat nose and slowly lifted his head. "Small One. *El Pequeño*." The human looked him up and down. "You don't look small."

"I'm small in spirit," Small One said, shifting from foot to foot. "I...fight on the front lines. I wish for Santa Ana to give me his blessing before I wage war."

"*El Pequeño*..." The aging human rose from his chair. "My name is General Ramirez. I will take you to the Yturri house. You will remain outdoors until our business there is finished. Then you will receive your blessing."

Small One nodded promptly. "Thank you."

The general stared at him wearily for a moment, then sighed and took a heavy skin from the back of his rocking chair. "Follow me."

The Yturri house was nothing grand—one story, sloped roof, long porch, a few trees here and there. Surely not the place where Small One had expected a respected warlord to reside.

"You will wait here," The general said, motioning to one of the narrow, green trees that bordered the house's miniature courtyard. "If you're bored, share your woes with Napoleon."

Small One must have let his confusion to manifest itself, because the general said, “The dog, *El Pequeño*.”

Small One cast his gaze. A large black animal, a *dog*, Small One supposed, stood by the trunk of the tree the general had designated. Its ears were pointed straight in the air, its tongue was hanging over its yellowed teeth, and its eyes—twin pools of amber—surveyed Small One with a predatory gleam.

“A Calupoh,” the general said with some pride. “A rare dog. Mystical. One of Santa Ana’s favorites.”

Small One started. “This is Santa Ana’s dog?”

The general grinned for the first time. The expression did nothing to brighten his features. “I would speak to it nicely if I were you.”

Still grinning, the general walked stiffly down the path toward the Yturri house.

Small One stepped off the path and approached the tree. He had no intention of staying outside while Mexican high command conducted their meeting inside the house, but he thought it best to remain inconspicuous while Mexican officers were still in sight, either milling around on the grass or congregating on the porch. Backing up against the tree trunk, Small One eyed the dog curiously. Its head had followed his every movement, though its body remained sitting.

“Greetings,” Small One said, bending at the knee so that he looked the dog straight in the eye. “Can you hurt me, I wonder...” The answer was probably yes. Though Small One was captivated by the animal’s luscious black fur and primordial gaze, he had been through enough scares from foreign creatures to know that any living thing had the potential to kill.

“I’m going to disobey General Ramierz,” Small One told the dog with utmost sincerity. “You won’t chase me down, will you?”

The dog, breathing heavily, did not say a word. Not that he expected it to. Small One reached out and held his hand flat six inches from the dog's nose. When the dog didn't react, he made contact with the silky fur between its large ears. He ran the hand down the length of the dog's body, feeling for microchips, or any sort of implant that might impede his mission. Nothing. Like the rest of this beautiful world, the dog was completely natural and completely vulnerable. Small One withdrew his hand and sat back on his heels. "Extraordinary."

Ten minutes after the last Mexican officer had entered the Yturri house, Small One made his advance. Leaving the dog standing motionless beside the tree, he snuck through the grasses until he was crouched against the adobe wall just below the windowsill near the back of the house. Slowly, he rose. The view through the panes was murky, but he was able to make out two dozen or so Mexican officers gathered around a large table. Like General Ramierz, they were all layered in fine skins and stood very straight and tall as they conversed. Powerful people, Small One thought. Their deportment reminded him strongly of how the Elite conducted themselves—with a flair of superiority. After a minute of uncomfortable surveillance, Small One realized he had to tempt fate a little further. The voices coming from inside were muffled beyond comprehension, and the view wasn't much better. Sitting on the grass, he raised his arms and pressed his hands against the window's bottom frame and pushed. It slid upwards half an inch. Small One pushed harder. A pinched squeal made him freeze and hold his breath. The inside voices continued without pause however, so he resumed his careful pushing, a centimeter at a time, until he deemed the gap big enough to rest his head in.

Small One placed his chin on the windowsill and saw Santa Ana's impressive figure at the head of the table. He was standing over a map spread upon the table and was talking with a natural exuberance.

“...not the way I command my army, Romero. Gaona and the twelve pounders are three days away. Three days! Do you not think that the rebels will have received reinforcements by that time? *Now* they are vulnerable, *now* they are simply a rabble of criminals, frontiersmen, and young boys. If we assault now, they wouldn't last an hour.”

“But Your Excellency,” one of the officers—possibly Romero—said. “As you are well aware we have but one twelve-pounder cannon. We could lose many soldiers in the time it takes our smaller guns to breach the Alamo.”

Santa Ana straightened and stepped back from the table. “Napoleon Bonaparte was the finest military leader in the history of the world. He conquered practically all of Europe in fifteen years. How did he do this? By taking risks and being willing to suffer great losses.” Santa Ana nodded, seemingly pleased with his answer. He placed his hands on the table and practically shouted, “My first duty as general is to maintain the honor and glory of Mexico. When the Texians took Zacatecas, our honor was threatened. So, I attacked the town. I killed the settlers. I restored our honor. Now, the rebels have dared to take the Alamo. The losses this army bears will be of no consequence so long as Mexico emerges victorious.”

Back and forth they went, half of the gathered officers respectfully disagreeing with the general, the other half supporting.

Small One remained motionless in his position against the windowsill. He couldn't help but draw comparisons. How many times had he heard the Realm's Elite give speeches like the one Santa Ana just gave? How many stories from retired Chargers had he listened to as a youngling that placed victory on a pedestal above life?

Wait, Small One told himself. There was one irrefutable difference between the Mexican *soldados* and the Realm's Seeing Ones.

*We've never lost a single Charger or Changeling in a military conflict.*

There had always been difficulties along their road of conquest; always difficulties, but never any that consisted of direct head to head conflict with a species that matched their military capabilities. Their enemies either didn't possess the intelligence to establish an effective defense or were of such a small number that any modicum of intellectual ability was rendered useless.

Both the Alamo and the Mexicans were willing to sacrifice lives for victory. A choice the Realm never had to make.

Blazeby's words echoed in Small One's head. *When the mortars start flying like tankards in a bar fight, if one of our walls is breached, men will lose hope and flee.*

Will that be us, I wonder, Small One thought. Was the Realm so conditioned to painless victories that any substantial resistance would shake their confidence? Small One thought about this. He supposed a nation could only grow so powerful before the slightest incompetence could bring about disaster. Like a spacecraft whose navigation ports are off course by the slightest degree; ten minutes later its flight path is unrecognizable.

Small One returned his attention to the war room. The discussion had turned toward the heated subject of prisoners.

"No prisoners," Santa Ana said. "The rebels lost our mercy the moment they turned down our white flag and fired their cannons. They are an embarrassment to the mother country."

"Your Excellency, remember what happened to General Arredondo..."

"An example is necessary," Santa Ana roared, "in order that those adventurers who cross the border be duly warned. These rebels are pirates. They will be treated as such." He made eye contact with each officer gathered around the table. "They will be executed."

Small One remained by the windowsill for the next hour, listening to the Mexicans debate further the intricacies of war. It was near sunfall when they called an end to the meeting, and although no official decision regarding the date of the assault had been declared, Small One could sense Santa Ana hadn't changed his position in the slightest. The assault would take place on March 6th like the Watchers had told him.

Small One closed the sliding window and hurried across the grass, eager to escape into the dark before the officers left the house. A pair of glowing amber eyes stopped him mid-way. It was the dog, he realized. The dog was still there, by the tree.

"Why don't you run at me," Small One said softly into the dark. "Why don't you chase me down?"

Napoleon refused to engage.

"Come," Small One hissed. "Run at me." He took a step forward, threatening.

The amber eyes moved. So did the dog. Small One tensed, commanding himself to run and to not run at equal volumes. He felt something brush past his leg, and he sank into a crouch, his head jerking back and forth like a piece of broken machinery. And there were the eyes, right in front of him, no more than arm's length away. The dog was standing directly in front of him. But even as Small One began to compute the implications of this action, the dog flopped onto the grass at his feet and looked up at him serenely.

That night, Small One transcribed in his journal how wise the dog looked at that moment.

*I like to believe the dog displayed a universal emotion. One that Seeing Ones and Earthlings feel alike. An innocent wonder. Maybe it sensed who I really was and was curious. I hope it was. I would have named the dog Curiosity instead of Napoleon. That way it could be a reminder not to immediately fight what we don't understand, but to learn about it before*

*deciding it to be friend or foe. Because that's my job as a Changeling. To study what the Realm doesn't understand. But our kind has never looked at a foreign world and declared it friendly. There's always been only one outcome. Conquer and subjugate.*

*The dog showed me harmony. It is an experience to remember.*

Small One kept his distance from Swifty and Triumph over throughout the morning and afternoon of March 5th. He didn't want to approach them until he was certain he had the courage to defend his decision. Small One contemplated what it would take to reach such emotional heights. All he knew of courage was the Alamo defenders dismissing their chance of surrender and safety with cannonfire. He was Small One, *El Pequeño*, the third cog in Swifty's wheel. What did he know of courage?

Neither did he have much inspiration to draw from. The defenders watched from the palisades with sullen expressions as the Mexican army, almost doubled from the original number after the steady arrival of reinforcements, advanced boldly within two hundred yards of the chapel. This sight, along with the constant cannon fire on the north wall and the construction of siege ladders, were sure signs that an assault was coming. Sick and hungry and tired, the defenders could only wait for the inevitable.

When Commandant Travis called all defenders to the plaza at twilight, Small One realized he couldn't put off announcing his decision any further. He located Swifty and Triumph in the gathering crowd and made his way to them. Triumph caught sight of him immediately and raised his head.

"Where have you been hiding yourself, Small One? Swifty and I thought you must have run off. Were the cannons too much for you?"



Small One ignored Triumph and turned to Swifty. “We’re done here. There’s no reason for us to spend another minute on Earth.”

Swifty opened and closed her mouth soundlessly. Triumph stuck out his neck and squinted at Small One like the two of them were a mile apart.

“I’m sorry you feel so strongly, Small One, but I believe I’m the unit leader, not you. We stay the—”

“Stay the course, I know.” Small looked back and forth between Swifty’s regal composure and Triumph’s blatant befuddlement. These were the reactions he had expected. “You were right about me running off. I went into Bexar and overheard Santa Ana’s war meeting. They’re like the Realm in many ways, Swifty. They conquer for honor and glory. They have numbers enough to trounce any army. They don’t know harmony. Neither do the Alamo defenders. No one knows harmony. And since that’s the only human emotion that could be of some use to us, and Earth doesn’t possess it, there’s no reason for us to be here.”

“We’re not here to learn how to feel emotions from Earthlings, Small One. We’re here to learn if they possess a significant threat to the Realm’s expansion. We cannot give a definitive answer until we stay through the course of our directive.”

“Why must that be our directive?”

“To disobey it would mean disobeying the queen. You have already violated the directive by leaving the Alamo and following your own agenda. For that, I will have you discharged and denamed upon our return.”

“Changeling,” Triumph said. He turned his scrutiny on Travis, who had mounted himself upon a stack of crates to be seen.

Small One likewise diverted his attention, but not before Swifty whispered, “We may inhabit human bodies, Changeling, but our minds should never waver in our commitment to the Realm’s expansion. We’re paving the way for the future of our species. I’m sorry you refuse to celebrate that.” She walked away from him before Small One could respond.

An exalted Commandant Travis took on the two hundred gazes and began to speak—plainly and without his usual gusto, though there was an underlying tone of passion. “From the observations witnessed by many of us today it would be foolish to deny that our time of reckoning has arrived. Santa Ana will assault the Alamo with nearly two thousand men. We will be outnumbered ten to one.

“I wish to express my grave disappointment that we have received no reinforcements beyond that of the men from Gonzalez, for which I am grateful. I have sent out several couriers over the previous days with letters of urgency, but the effort was, as you see, without reward, despite repeated assurances that I would receive reinforcement in a timely manner. I feel obligated to tell you of the minimal likelihood of the arrival of any force before the Mexican assault. I am speaking candidly.

“Do not, however, let our dire situation drain the passion for revolution from your hearts. Our fight is a noble one. Our deaths will be honorable. I would die one hundred times over for my country. I would die a thousand more to see my own land set free.”

The crowd was silent as Travis dismounted his tower of crates. It grew quieter still when the commandant drew his sword from his scabbard, so that the only sounds reaching Small One’s ears were the chirping of crickets and faint voices of the Mexicans two hundred yards over the wall.

The scraping of Travis's sword across the plaza's pebble-strew ground made them all jump. He was tracing a line through the dirt. When it was ten feet long, Travis sheathed his sword and said, "However strongly I myself believe in our cause I will not condemn another man's life by forcing him to follow me. The decision is yours. All those who wish to stay and die with me step across the line."

Travis's words were met with initial silence. The wild cheering and impassioned bravado from the siege's early days had mellowed into an emotion Small One could relate to. Commitment. The defenders had chosen a path the moment they had first set foot in the Alamo. There was no going back. Small One felt the muscles tighten in his legs; his feet ground into the dirt.

There arose a united shout as one of the Alamo gunners became the first to cross the line. Travis shook his hand firmly on the other side. Others followed the young man. Even the sick and the wounded had struggled down from the hospital and dragged themselves across. One man lay rasping on a cot held steadily by four others. They carried the diseased man across the line where he was received with jubilant cheers. Small One caught Swifty's gaze. She and Triumph were about to cross, along with Blazeby, who looked pale. Small One made no move to join them. His feet were set in the dirt. He was committed. Swifty and Triumph held his gaze for a moment longer, then turned away, their expressions neutral, and stepped over the line.

Small One was free.

Only one other refused to cross the line—a swarthy oldster named Louis Rose who scaled the wall of the cattle pen as soon as darkness fell. Small One watched him disappear from his hiding place in one of the animal stalls. Escape was certainly an option, but Small One knew he

would never survive. Even if he hopped around from host to host, garnering little bits of information at a time, it would take him years of humiliation before he could assimilate harmoniously with an Earthling community. Not to mention he had to return to the Realm as soon as possible. And the area displacement portal would only open across the river after their directive was completed.

*I need to be the only one in that portal*, Small One thought. As the only surviving member of the team, he would inherit Swifty's power as unit leader. His voice would be heard. In the meantime, he would remain in this foul-smelling pen with an animal who also appreciated the virtue of willingly imprisoning oneself to serve a higher duty. From his corner of the pen, Small One watched the animal's tail swish back and forth and listened to the preparations of the defenders as they worked through their final night alive.

The bugle sounded. The bugle call of death. It was five thirty in the morning and still dark. Soldiers poured out of the barracks; gunners readied the cannons; officers screamed orders above the ominous rumble of thousands of marching feet accompanied by the strings of the Mexican band.

Small One burst out of the animal stall, ready for anything. He knew Swifty and Triumph had been working as night watchmen the night before. But which side? He contemplated, standing like a tree in the middle of the plaza while humans charged past him on either side. Most of the runners were heading one direction, impelled by the officers' shouts. The North wall. Small One had just turned his head to gaze upon the northern palisades when three rockets were shot into the sky above Bexar, sizzling red arcs that cut open the night sky. Small One lurched forward. He overtook his fellow defenders and clambered up the steps to join the officers and

watchmen atop the palisades. The sight that greeted him was almost enough to make him wish he had followed Louis Rose's example. The Mexicans were so close to the wall that Small One could see their teeth clamped together in a determined grimace. Flashes of musket fire illuminated the extent to which the Alamo was outnumbered. From this, there was no escape. Fight or die standing were the only two options.

A few defenders across from him stood Commandant Travis. He was standing behind one of the gunners and had his sword raised to the setting moon. He let loose an animalistic cry of fervor. "Come on, boys, the Mexicans are upon us, and we'll give them hell!"

A salvo of musket fire and the ear-shattering booms of eight pounder cannons approved Travis's words. Small One grabbed a nearby musket and ran along the palisade. Someone yelled, "Gunner, back to your post!" Small One ignored the command. He located Swifty and Triumph a couple cannons down, standing almost flush against the far wall while four other defenders worked their cannon. Triumph made a move toward the stairway. Swifty was edging along the wall, having almost made it to the first step...when Small One grabbed her arm.

"Stop."

The look of surprise Small One had expected flickered over Swifty's face. "Release me, Changeling. You are no longer a member of my squad, which makes you a foreigner. Release me or I will harm you."

"I want to see how strong a hold I can get," Small One said, and he excised himself from his loyal host, Andres Esparza. It felt like squeezing himself through a tight cave tunnel lined with silk, and when he was free, he felt empty, hollow, void of life. For a second he was disoriented to the point of stumbling, but one look at Swifty shaking her head in acted pity refocused him. He let his second pair of the limbs, the vine-like extremities that snuck out from

either side of his shell with a mind of their own, snake through the air until they curved around Swifty's skull and planted their suckered ends at its base. Triumph, who had been hovering over the steps during their little exchange, charged forward with his arms outstretched, as if he was about to grab Small One's tubes and rip them off Swifty's skull. Small One felt his thoughts freeze; his vision began to tunnel. In his last seconds of awareness before the Change, he saw Triumph take hold of his tubes to disastrous effect. The suction between his tubes and Swifty's skull was comparable to steel beams drilled into the ground. One of the ripples passing through Small One's tubes shocked Triumph's hands before circulating throughout his entire body. He emitted a strangled cry before crumpling to the ground. By then, Small One had entered the tunnel, where his thoughts were no longer solely his own, where memories were shared and fates intertwined.

*Small One?*

*Swifty?*

*Joseph Blair.*

*GET OUT!*

Small One felt his consciousness rising, rising through a sub cranial pool of thoughts, his mouth opening and closing in the pursuit of air. Further...further...

*GET OUT!* Swifty's voice echoing in his head.

Further...Small One felt the world open up before him. Flashes of light shattered his eyes; explosions rocked his ears; blips of his own thinking began to register. Swifty was locked in here along with him. He must gain dominance.

*GET OUT!*

*I need you to see something, Swifty. Because I don't know if you've ever really looked at anything.*

*I'M NOT...GOING...ANYWHERE.*

*Do you not see the musket fire, Swifty? Do you not hear the cannons? Let's walk over to the edge of the palisade. Let's see what you've been refusing to look at.*

*I'M NOT GOING—*

Small One broke through her single-minded barricade of thought and established greater control.

*Yes you are. We're moving now.*

Small One dragged the unwilling body of Joseph Blair over to the cracked adobe that overlooked the rage of the Mexican army. Most *soldados* were too close to the wall for Alamo cannons to be useful, so the defenders reached over the wall's edge with their muskets, picking off one Mexican at a time. Their silhouettes were now visible in the moonlight.

*Look at the army, Swifty. See how many soldiers they have. See how determined they are to take the Alamo. Isn't that us, Swifty? Isn't that the Realm during every single conquest?*

Small One shifted their host to gaze upon Bexar. The red flag still flew above the bell tower.

*No quarter. No mercy. Only death awaits us. Think, Swifty. In this beautiful, beautiful world there exists death like this. What power does the Realm possess to deal with such extremes?*

*CONTROL...POWER...GREATER THAN DEATH, THAN BEAUTY.*

*Let's see.*

Small One moved across the palisade until they were stationed next to Commandant Travis and a dark-skinned man. All along the wall, Alamo defenders were rising, aiming, firing, sitting back down to avoid the return fire.

*The soldiers have power and control, Small One told Swifty in their shared thoughts. They wield the power to kill in their hands. They have the higher ground. They have the stone walls. But it can all come crumbling down...*

Small One forcefully turned Joseph Blair's head so that they watched as Commandant Travis rose, towering above the palisade, musket pressed against his shoulder. The first rays of dawn colored the chapel on the fort's eastern side. Small One adjusted the angle of their gaze, and for one spectacular moment all they could see was Travis's imperial figure against a backdrop of puffy clouds tinged with red. There was a sharp bang as Travis pulled the trigger. A tongue of flame licked the end of the musket's barrel. Travis started to lower. A bullet entered Small One's field of vision. It flew across the dawn sky, then drove into Travis's forehead.

A scream that was not his own filled Small One's head. It was nothing like the cries of the wounded Alamo defenders. It was the scream of a Seeing One, the first scream to ever be uttered by a native of the Realm.

Small One felt hot, sticky liquid all over their body. He wiped a hand over their forehead and it came away smeared red. The scream continued, jagged as a cliff's edge, piercing as a lance. Swifty gained dominance over Joseph's Blair's body. To Small One it felt as though he was being submerged halfway into the sub cranial pool by a giant hand pushing down on his skull. He felt themselves moving, away from the palisade, down the steps to the plaza, and into the infantry barracks. Stumbling over cots and bundles of skins, Swifty forced them to the corner of the empty building and sank into a ball of limbs. Small One felt the giant's hand release the



top of the head, and he rose to the surface of his thoughts once more. Swifty had excised herself, Small One realized. He no longer felt her presence contaminating his own.

“Swifty?”

No response. He squinted around in the darkness of the barracks. There she was. Swifty was curled so tightly together that her shell—a pale shade of blue—covered much of her body. Small One went to her.

“Get away from me while you still have blood on your face,” Swifty ordered, but her voice lacked the imperial quality that had seen her through the Changeling ranks.

“Why would I ever want to wash this off?”

Swifty looked up at him. “It’s a foreign substance...and it shouldn’t have happened. You shouldn’t revel in a mistake.”

“The Watchers showed you this, Swifty. We knew what was going to happen—”

“They *told* us. They didn’t show us. Commandant Travis shouldn’t have blown apart. He should have deactivated or crumpled or...just fallen over. That’s how enemies are supposed to die. In every world I’ve seen, that’s how they die. Death shouldn’t be so—”

“Beautiful?”

Swifty dropped her gaze. “Visceral.”

“The queen wants Earth for its beauty. But she doesn’t know what beauty is. If, throughout this entire trip, you’d opened your heart even half as much as your mind, then you would have been prepared for this. The Realm is different, but on Earth, Beauty and Death are greater forces than Power and Control. And if we decide to invade this planet, it will mean our demise.”

The shouts and sounds of musket fire that had remained distant throughout their conversation increased in volume. Small One peered around the barrack's door. "They're over the walls," he said. "Our directive is complete, Swifty. It's time for us to go home." Small One stood in the entrance to the door, took a step forward.

From behind, "What about Triumph?"

Small One remained facing forward. "He's hurt on the northern palisade.

"I need to bring him back. I'm unit leader, I'm responsible."

Small One nodded. "Infiltrate Joseph Blair. I'll excise and wait for you two outside the gates. I'll crouch down, so the soldiers won't think I'm anything but a spare hunk of metal."

"Fine."

Small One made sure Swifty secured her tubes to the back of his head, then disconnected himself from Mr. Blair's consciousness. There were a few moments of nothingness as he was squeezed out the mind tunnel before a sky the color of lava filled his vision. "Go get Triumph, Swifty." Even without turning, Small One knew she lingered.

"I don't take orders from a Changeling."

His chin raised to face the incoming chaos of muskets and men, Small One said, "That is not my name."

"You've forgotten who you are, Small One—"

"That is not my name either. You call me Harmony. For harmony is what I will propose to the Realm. Now go...find Triumph."

Swifty passed him in silence.

Small One watched her move hesitantly into the mounting fray. He saw one defender take a bullet in the back, stagger down the palisade steps, turn and fire, stagger another five

yards, take another bullet in the leg, reload, half turn, before a third bullet blew through his skull. He wondered how long Swifty would last. His brain told him leave, but his feet remained locked inside the barrack doorway. Watching Swifty do his bidding fulfilled an internal desire that Small One had never been aware of before. With a jolt of fear, he matched the feeling with a name. Control. *It drives all of us*, Small One thought. *Every single one.*

Swifty didn't make it across the plaza. She was twenty yards from the steps leading to the north wall when a bullet struck her in the chest. Small One waited to see if she would excise herself in Joseph's Blair's surviving moments. He did not know whether or not such a thing was possible, but he had to be sure. Sure that he would be the only one returning to the Realm. Once satisfied that Swifty was lost within her host, Small One proceeded to follow the same escape route utilized two days before by Louis Rose. Through the barracks, into the animal pen, a scramble over the wall, along the tributary that would lead him to the San Antonio River. He stayed in the shadows along the wall. Whenever a group of *soldados* came too close, he curled into a ball, curving his shell over his body so he resembled nothing remotely human.

Small One escaped the Alamo.

Harmony.

Small One mulled over the name he had given himself as he stared across the wide berth of the San Antonio river. It wasn't so much a name as it was an ambition, a vision he had to turn into reality.

He jumped into the river. Bubbles rose from his mouth as he sank on his back. Then it was as if a hand, gentle as a feather, powerful as an engine, was pushing him upward through the mesh of bubbles to the river's surface. Small One lay on his back and began to kick. Water

droplets splashed high into the morning air, becoming diamonds for a few glorious seconds before falling back into the river, mundane and familiar.

He imagined how the queen would react when he told her of everything he had witnessed.

Water that could sparkle like diamonds or slash like a knife

Sweet sounds that could inspire

Colors that could dazzle

A horse refusing freedom

A dog refusing violence

Green grass and white clouds

A blood-red sky

The fears of the young and the lies of the old

Rousing voices and amber eyes

Power and Control

Beauty and Death

Harmony.

*This is Earth, Small One told the queen in his head. And you will leave it be.*





