

From the same universe as Andy West's Newcon Press
novel: 'The Outcast and the Little One'

Impasse



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*Mortality mortality,
evolution's reality.*

Swift Might blundered through mires of black sludge and castellated wastes of umber crystal. He shattered impeding formations of ancient minerals with prodigious fists or great gouts of fire. His course ploughed the surface as straight as a furrow, but in truth he was going nowhere. Occasionally he paused to hurl fury and frustration at the indifferent stars.

No matter how fast his progress, harrowing nightmares still trailed the edge of his awareness: bitter betrayal embodied in the guise of Steel Rage, the astonishing ferocity of Eye of Storm's attack, the ignominy of defeat and flight, the wreck of his fatally damaged craft. Behind all these and other torturing visions lurked the ultimate nightmare. Its scarcely acknowledged names pushed their way into his consciousness; The Nothing, The Dissolution, the greatest failure of all.

Swift Might redoubled his pace. He, who had always taken whatever he wanted and scorned the hope of inferiors, now chased that tiny light to the limit of his strength. Though the odds were against it, he assured himself that somewhere on this forlorn rock there had to be a prospecting team or a raider's lair, maybe an automated processing plant or a navigation beacon; anything that would enable him to claw his way back to civilisation and plot his revenge.

Pain was Swift Might's constant companion. Not just from his ragged wounds. He'd tried to isolate the nerve circuits around those, though needling messages of hurt still found their way through. But there was no possible isolation from the aching confusion that riddled his ageing mind. In addition to swelling rates of error, the many extensions and peripheral upgrades, greedily acquired to maintain supremacy, threatened to submerge his faltering core.

Sorely injured and robbed of his high status among the Au-Sek, the great burden of creeping dysfunction was much harder to bear and more difficult to

control. Although Swift Might refused to acknowledge the fact, the speed of his action was dulled and his might was no longer so mighty.

His concentration wandered and his urgent scanning of the desolate horizon at all frequencies lapsed. The loss of his fortress home on Ceres sapped him like a physical blow. Standantima, ‘Stands against time’, had been the looming symbol of his dominance. Its soaring blue-black battlements, sibilating shields and massive armament demanded the greatest respect. Traders and raiders from the highest of the alien Worlds had humbled themselves before him, earning mercy or hard judgement at his whim.

Irony gripped Swift Might. Standantima still held back the march of time, but no longer from him. No doubt Eye of Storm ruled there now, while The Dissolution pursued a once-feared chief across this puny asteroid.

His anger was the only force keeping him going. He contemplated the balm of revenge. But spells of dizziness swept across him like violent gusts of wind, bringing a more impenetrable blackness than the spangled dark of space.

Then he was on his hands and knees. He didn’t recall how. His palms pressed against something smooth and flat. He gazed downwards. A glimmer of reflected starlight met his eye. He released some Sonics and a little Ultra-Violet, overlaying their returned waves: methane ice. His perception descended into a pearly domain of refracting planes and scintillating crystals. This entire universe of interacting geometry was utterly at rest. Yet a cold, opaque heart seemed to shift, beckoning....

Swift Might abruptly cut off his signals. Pale vapour had enwrapped his arms. He recoiled, then rose and hurriedly restarted his trek. He chided himself. Above all he had to maintain discipline! Why did those bizarre tales from the primordial people of Earth, so amusing back on Ceres, have to creep up on him now? There were no wraiths beyond The Dissolution. Such a notion was

ridiculous. Beyond was just endless nothing, and to fall into that pool of absence was heinous failure.

Yet only minutes later he was falling. He recovered from another lapse in concentration, just too late to avoid breaking through a crumbling ledge. His instinctively outstretched senses revealed a wide ravine and a considerable drop, though this wasn't a concern in itself. Gravity was too light for a harmful impact. But metallic objects on the floor below triggered a spark of hope, which was quickly doused by a flood of fear.

Swift Might landed flat on his back, yet with a true warrior's reflex he rolled and leapt up in a split second, shoulder weapons blazing and fists swinging. If his opponents were surprised, they didn't show it. With impressive speed four Aumons ducked his fire and sprang at him as one. His chop crushed the chest of the first before the other three were upon him. He was ignominiously felled, unable to bring limbs or weapons to bear. He bucked and heaved, but acting like a single entity the remaining Aumons formed an efficient net that clung ever tighter, pinning him fast to the ground.

It was physical impasse! Swift Might could not fight, could barely even move. But the much slighter, skeletal Aumons were fully occupied with holding him down. They couldn't spare a single appendage with which to inflict damage. Further, they were unarmed while he was extremely robust in his articulated shell of practically impenetrable plate alloy.

All motion ceased. Yet the conflict continued, rolling into another domain.

Swift Might had never actually encountered Aumons before. But he knew that despite a wholly alien culture and radically different modes of survival, the essential substance of their being was much like his own. The physique he considered puny was nevertheless constructed around a core of steel and carbon-fibre, like some diminutive designer's model of the grand Au-Sek frame he

occupied. Aumon thoughts, which he considered disgustingly communal and timid, nevertheless flew on photons and electrons just as his did. The creatures that bound him were electroptic forms, sharing a common ancestry with his own Race.

Swift Might's memory did not contain trivial data regarding when the Au-Sek line had split from its Aumonic roots, but it did contain data about vulnerable electromagnetic windows into Aumon thought. He transmitted withering blasts in the high microwave region, carefully monitoring the mental activity of his clinging adversaries between each pulse.

The Aumons twitched and trembled, clearly suffering, but their grip remained tight. The whispering signatures of their thought stumbled, but did not stop. With mounting frustration Swift Might poured out different wavelengths and pulse-widths, battering the mental walls of his enemy and probing mercilessly for a weak spot. He also managed to twist his head and aim screaming Sonics into the unprotected face of the nearest Aumon.

Swift Might felt victory was within his grasp. Confidently, he stretched his capabilities to the utmost, increasing still further the intensity of his assault. These lowly workers must have a ship. As the hope of escape shone through his core the darkness of The Dissolution receded.

Then cold intrusion buffeted his thoughts of triumph. Strange images engulfed him. His concentration blundered about, not going where he knew it should. Realisation struck Swift Might hard. The inferior Aumons had somehow crept inside him. They were trying to hi-jack his mind!

A jolt of dread helped him resist and cling to awareness and identity. This prompted a flash of insight too; he realised the Aumons were winning because they acted as one entity. He did not truly face three feeble Aumons, but a single

sentience of much greater capability. He had to break this formidable opponent into manageable pieces!

Swift Might trawled through millions of empty wavebands, frantically seeking those vital links that sustained the combined Aumon thought process. His search slowed as scrabbling alien action dug out his barely suppressed nightmares and sent them trampling through his consciousness. The pain he had sustained for years was suddenly and artificially inflamed, becoming a raging fire. He felt himself drifting apart, like a stricken ship in the void, spilling precious contents for scavengers to pick up. A huge process loomed in his mind, threatening to suck in and digest his very being.

Then Swift Might chanced upon the chattering channels of Aumon coordination. With an effort of last resort, he delivered an avalanche of jamming over the Aumon links. He was rewarded by immediate mental liberation and rapidly recovered himself, too relieved even for anger.

A frenetic chase through the spectrum followed; a fast fencing of frequencies. The flitting Aumons re-established links elsewhere, only to have them detected and negated by the lumbering Au-Sek. To swing the odds in his favour, Swift Might obliterated whole swathes of the electromagnetic map. The Aumons were not infinitely flexible, there were only so many places their facilities could go. Algorithms rapidly improved on both sides, but neither gained a winning edge. The Aumons could still push some communication through, but never enough to support their greater shared mind. Swift Might was constantly occupied in thwarting them.

An invasive impasse was reached. Both Races delegated the chase to unconscious reaction.

As calmer minutes rolled by, Swift Might realised that time was not on his side. The fight had so far kept him concentrated, but if he suffered another

mental lapse these tenacious creatures would rip his mind to shreds. The storm he had seen in his head must be the voracious system of their communal thought.

Although it would add to his pain, Swift Might concluded he would have to humble himself and negotiate. He picked a commonly used channel and started in Intshi, the clumsy but ubiquitous speech spread by the Humans, the ones of flesh and blood.

“Eventually, my clade will miss me. They will come in force. When they see me restrained, the fire of their anger will devour you!”

Swift Might paused here for dramatic effect. Bold tones and phraseology such as this had always made a satisfactory impact in the past, especially on Elten Humans, the original Earth peoples. Confidently, he continued the bluff, measuring his words to a steady pace that hinted at depths of wisdom and consideration.

“So let us not be trapped by history. Perhaps right here and now we can overcome the old antagonism between our Races, and make a fresh start.

“We are sentient beings! Surely we can come to an amicable arrangement that would free us all!”

“The Brotherhood has good reason to distrust your Race,” came a flat and immediate reply. “We are greatly dismayed by the loss of our Brother,” continued a word stream that betrayed no inkling of dismay, nor indeed anything else. “You Au-Sek are factional and capricious, whereas the Aumon Brotherhood is loyal and constant. We therefore deem that aid is likely to reach us first. When the path is uncertain, history is always a good guide.”

This utterly expressionless delivery frustrated Swift Might. He could gain no insight into the Aumon state of mind. He couldn't even tell which individual was communicating! No doubt his adversaries were in a much more

knowledgeable position after their jaunt into the peripheral regions of his own mind. He didn't regret for a moment destroying one of their number, though admittedly this was a significant hindrance to negotiation.

A true warrior, Swift Might fought on. The Aumons had inadvertently leaked one hint of weakness, the word *uncertain*. Rising above pain and trouble, he focussed all his word-play skills on the moment, starting humbly.

"The termination of your colleague is a most unfortunate consequence of past relations. But did you not spring upon me?" He smoothly transitioned to pricked honour. "Is it not legitimate to defend oneself when assailed?"

Superior deceptions contained a high proportion of truth.

"My ship is damaged," confessed Swift Might, in the frankest voicing he could manage. "Let us cease this useless struggle and help each other! We Au-Sek are powerful and can grant great reward. If you transport me away from here, my whole clade will be at your service."

Spikes of irony almost sabotaged Swift Might's communication. He caught himself in time. Nothing could be less true. Returning to Ceres right now would be suicide.

"The nearest neutral territory will suffice," he added. "So you are not overwhelmed by approaching our homelands."

A long pause encouraged Swift Might. The lack of an outright rebuttal surely meant they were considering his offer.

"Perhaps you have rivals we can help you to crush," he fished.

"The Brotherhood does not support rivalries or violence."

Swift Might detected context, hints of distaste. These Aumons could be moved after all.

"Artefacts then... an ore-processing craft! A grand gift. You know we have the best, refining a hundred thousand tonnes an hour!"

Seconds of silence tightly stretched. Swift Might curbed his impatience, anxiously holding back for a tug on his bait.

SCO-1678 floundered. This situation was way beyond the scope of his experience. Beyond any teachings of the Brotherhood.

He longed for the comfort and support of close contact, yet the body of the Brotherhood was far away. Nor could he even send a coherent request for assistance. The monstrous alien's interference virtually blocked him from the ship. He'd managed to trigger an emergency beacon, but that was a dubious benefit. Out here, it was almost as likely to pique the interest of yet another and probably competitive Au-Sek clade as anyone sympathetic, in which case there would be no consolation from the fact that their enemy might well be terminated along with them.

The inspiring, nourishing communion of his cell was ruptured too. Only an absolutely basic interchange escaped the Au-Sek's massive jamming. And one of their number was extinguished, never again to slip through the asteroid belt as a scout and prospector for the Brothers. It was to be hoped that PRP-65732 would find the long rest of stately dreams, but it seemed unlikely right now. Unlikely for all of them.

SCO-1678 felt extremely exposed and hopelessly inadequate.

He had sensed shocking confusion and dysfunction in the one who named himself Swift Might, acute negative feedback paths and the heavy drag of deep history too. But there no longer seemed any way to exploit these curious flaws, which was unfortunate; for if this impasse continued indefinitely, the strength of the Brothers would eventually fail.

SCO-1678 had noted a nuclear heart of great power radiating from within the robust Au-Sek; he assumed it was virtually inexhaustible. But he and his

loyal team sustained their lives on chemical packs that required regular swap-out and recharging. If they didn't get back to the ship in sixteen standard days at most, their functionality would rapidly degrade.

The Au-Sek's offers did not match available records, nor extrapolate well. This brute beneath them was an offence to the Brotherhood's principles and not to be trusted. Yet with their existence at stake, all possibilities had to be considered.

With acid uncertainty eating away at his every thought, SCO-1678 clung tenaciously to the status quo. He faintly hoped that time might alter the equations of impasse. Yet when their time ran out, he'd be forced to gamble his cell's existence in a terrible bargaining game with this violent, treacherous, and no doubt highly professional plunderer they were barely holding at bay.

A reply yanked Swift Might back to full alertness. He was shocked at himself. How could he let his attention wander now? When precious life hung by a thread and the black maw of Dissolution lurked just below!

The Aumons naïvely requested he return full interaction to them, apparently so they could form a truly communal response to his offer. Did they mock him? Though fear and fury churned within, he replied as tactfully as possible. Agreement first; release for both sides after. Yet as pressured minutes grew to aching hours, the discussion circled around and around, going nowhere. These irksome Aumons neither accepted nor declined his overtures. With rolling undertones of warning, he shifted back towards threat and hinted once more at Au-Sek revenge, which was legendary in scope and ferocity.

Nevertheless, impasse continued.

Swift Might's head pulsed with pain. It seemed as if the electroptic veins to his mind ran with fire instead of photons. His anger threatened to smash his

control, yet simultaneously a great terror froze his innermost self. Images from his protracted past, both glories and grim setbacks, tumbled luridly over his sight. He could not wholly sweep them back.

Maintaining focus, maintaining pressure upon these clinging insects, was an excruciating effort. Something prickled at the edge of his understanding, but his concentration was too ragged to resolve it. He felt certain he could once have brushed the diminutive Aumons off with ease, and incinerated them at leisure.

With nowhere else to go, the conflict spilled over into philosophical challenge.

Swift Might's tremendous frustration spurted out in stinging words.

"I've always wondered," he started scornfully, "why you Aumons associate so much with Humans, indeed are servile to them. Especially Elten, the most primitive of all!

"Do you deny the superiority of our kind? Do you think oozing flesh more enduring than hardened alloys? Or sluggish, biological brains more capable than the flashing electrooptic nets of our own fleet thought?"

Even in verbal attack, Swift Might remembered some cunning. He was attempting to manufacture camaraderie. Yet to no avail.

"The Elten are our creators, ultimately yours too. They should always be honoured for their bounteous gift of life.

"The Elten's instincts and wise practices, moulded over millions of years, allow them to flourish beyond the strength and scope of either of our Races. We are proud and grateful to kneel beside them."

Swift Might had felt himself slipping away again, but the blindly humble nature of this speech infuriated him.

"If the Elten were ever wise," he stormed, "then it was back when they admitted the necessity for robust and noble competition!"

“Since then they’ve badly degenerated, losing themselves in self-deceit, pointless compromise and nervous inaction. Only the vast momentum in Elten numbers lends them continued relevance; their fall is imminent!”

A long silence followed. Through the shifting veils of his suffering, Swift Might detected intense thought-activity emanating from the Aumons. He realised philosophy could be used as a weapon to unbalance these admirers of the Elten and prim conformers to total communalism. Perhaps enough to grant him a precious opportunity. It felt unfitting, but in the end a true warrior must use whatever arms come to hand.

With the insight gained through many victories, Swift Might perceived that his enemies were close to defeat. Their circular bargaining indicated a lack of strategy. Their delayed responses were another sign of mental strain. But his own concentration was close to collapse too. So with resolute care, he set a string of watchdog timers to fire into his nervous system at increasingly higher signal strengths, each to be triggered should the previous one fail. The last two or three would be torturous if ever they were needed, but whatever happened his mind could not now wander for long. The price of pain was well worthwhile. He must defeat these creatures, defeat the lurking Dissolution. Continued life was worth any level of hurt, any handicap. He would not let it go.

Eventually, the Aumons pronounced.

“If by noble competition you mean war, we deem total conflict of that kind to be a reflection of weakness, a self-perpetuating symptom of unbalanced societies and a resort of prejudiced minds.

“It is true that the Elten inherited this scourge from a more primitive past, but war has not afflicted their recent generations. Indeed they preach its calamity, to reinforce their own evolution and save younger Races such as ourselves from a terrible blight. We have heeded their word.”

“Fine morals,” jeered Swift Might, “purchased by the power of others. The Elten and Enhancers shield you from disputes, but what would you do if that shield should shatter? Or be withdrawn? The Human Races are notoriously inconstant. Biology is a mire upon which no cause can rest for long before being sucked into hopeless depths of confusion.

“As for true war, that numinous servant of selection does but rest. When the crumbling dominance of the Elten is seriously challenged, they will willingly plunge their itching arms back into the crucible of fire and slaughter!”

Swift Might sensed his thrusts go home as the Aumons struggled to commune around the walls of noise he’d imposed. His phrases were crafted for the most aggressive assault on their ideological position, without other considerations. Yet he was startled to discover he actually believed his own delivery, and fervently. He wondered....

Agony seized his frame. A hundred thousand needles pierced him at once. For endless milliseconds an intimate landscape of acute torture was his whole world.

Then the hurt grudgingly receded, like a wave called back. He became a single and overwhelming thought; gratitude. He worshipped the ocean of pain for sparing him.

Hot and cold shocks still traced his circuitry. His vision was a churning kaleidoscope of vivid colour. Nothing made sense. He floundered back towards the shores of identity and reason.

He remembered conflict. The Aumons! Had the pain been an attack? But no, the voice of the Brothers spoke, at last moved to anger, or as near to it as these collective creatures could get:

“It is accepted that the Brotherhood aspires to high morals, but this is a more certain position than yours, who are devoid of morality and believe only in

battle! Au-Sek civilisation is constantly riven by internal strife. The physical power that your Race so frequently flaunts is most often directed inwards! So the pretence is yours, for in truth Au-Sek strength is fatally flawed. Even when exerted, it can never endure for long!”

Swift Might thought he must still be seriously disorientated, for these words bludgeoned him and he had no answer. By now he understood the stabbing intervention to have been his own watchdog, which scared him. He hadn't expected to need such a potent revival so soon. Without it would he ever have come around? How much time and thought had he been losing without noticing? How much would he still be able to call his own?

Fortunately, the Aumons seemed not to have noticed his brief absence. As far as he could tell, his autonomous jamming algorithm had somehow kept going. But he was so, so weary. He didn't know how much longer he could keep up this competition. The Brothers, persistent agents of The Dissolution, were grinding him down.

He tried to rise above internal torment, collect his ideas for another philosophical onslaught. Yet the stars were wheeling above him, mocking him. Hours must be streaming by, perhaps days. His determination of time had become corrupted.

He realised he had never before been granted the luxury of such a long span to devote to thought. Ironic, considering his current state of mind. In his youth, life had been an elixir of ascendancy and satisfaction. Now that elixir had gone sour, acidly rotting his insides, while time prodded him towards The Nothing on the end of a piercing spear.

He never thought it would come to this. Yet still he craved every poisoned drop of existence. Giving it up was unimaginable. He could not let them wrest life from him. He could not!

In a rare space of clarity, a nagging at the back of his consciousness resolved itself. An emergency beacon was streaming off the asteroid from somewhere nearby. He was horrified. That must be their ship. How long had it been going?

He transmitted negating signals, but the beacon was powerful and the ship's Primitive noticed something was wrong. It re-modulated.

Fear fired Swift Might again. He remembered the Aumons had not fully answered his last challenge. He crafted accordingly, then loosed a savage salvo of realism.

SCO-1678 revised his estimate downwards. No more than fifteen days, of which six had already passed. Absolute cold sucked voraciously at him. He got a message through to his companions, instructing for operation at minimum temperature to conserve energy. His every fibre cried out for proper communion with them, but that was simply impossible. Now the team he was supposed to motivate were becoming seriously demoralised by the cunning Au-Sek's intermittent malignity. So was he. It was all he could do to make basic parries. The absent Brothers were a disabling hole in his thought.

Yet he had made a decision. Should time run out, as now seemed inevitable, should it come to truce, they could not allow this berserker take their ship. He might unravel its secrets, or at least use the craft to inflict physical damage on the Brotherhood. As soon as possible, before the Au-Sek beast became too suspicious or could dispense with them, SCO-1678 would blow the engines and obliterate them all.

So, as Swift Might more fearfully and desperately cupped the bitterest dregs of life, his Aumon opponents plotted an altruistic end.

Swift Might was running. For the first time ever in his life, away from a fight. It was shameful, but abject fear stretched his limbs. He was betrayed and overcome; his precious life wholly exposed. Already The Dissolution pawed at him.

He pounded down familiar corridors, acutely aware of vital hydraulic fluid squirting through a rent in his side. Eye of Storm's wrath rolled after him, scorching the walls. Projectiles sang by or kicked up clouds of splinters. Minions scattered before him, not honouring their fealty to stand against this terrible usurper who came behind.

Then pain skewered him, overwhelming all else with screaming signals. Was he hit? His consciousness blew apart, into innumerable shards of torment.

Something remained. Something so shorn it did not even know fear anymore, only a remnant of purpose. That purpose was existence, and this required awareness. It put together fragments of thought and character, as though reassembling a smashed mirror. Not everything seemed to fit, but nevertheless it then peered within to find itself. Eye of Storm glowered back for a moment, but no, that was just a haunting hangover from the past. A more stable form coalesced. Marred by tilted planes and myriad rifts, something of Swift Might gazed outwards.

Nightmares must have possessed him yet again; he still felt an eradicating presence at his back. It hadn't been for long; the watchdog reclaimed him swiftly. But perhaps at a cost. He felt... altered in some indefinable way. Memories conflicted, confusing him. He'd have to follow that up later, but every thought was an ache. This selfhood seemed unbearable; he briefly wondered why therefore he bore it. But then returning priorities urged him to check upon the Aumons.

The impasse was not fractured, though his enemies seemed to have problems of their own. He noticed that their energy output was down. Given a few more days, maybe he could shake them off after all. Yet that timescale suddenly loomed like an insuperable age.

Swift Might teetered between hope and despair. Then the old fight rose up in him once more, powered by an unquenchable lust for life that had made him such a ruthless and successful clade chieftain.

Shovelling confusion aside, he scoured his data-banks for every useful fact about the Aumons. Not normally given to philosophy or social analysis, he nevertheless excelled himself. He reopened the channel and derided the Aumons for their complete communalism. He scoffed at their short, meaningless lives. Each one was merely an expendable moment within a monolithic machine; even his meanest servants lived longer. He pulled up still more data and dropped it upon them in the Human's ponderous language, which fortunately was rich in expletives. He strained his limbs against theirs again, and felt they were weakening physically as well as mentally.

He was about to attack the Aumon institution of Memory Houses, when he perceived these in a new perspective, one that sabotaged his offensive. His diatribe jerked to a halt.

He'd always considered it shocking that most Aumons terminated voluntarily. Even more so that the thought patterns were sucked out of them at the end, to be cycled in stagnant simulation on ranks of Primitives at the heart of an Aumon society, the Memory House. That had seemed like the ultimate cruelty. Robbed of sight and sense and limbs, then crushed into a single, cultural sediment by the weight of years and minds piling above.

Yet now, such a fate appeared strangely attractive. Wallowing in the permanent comfort of semi-dream, with thoughts as grand and slow as planetary

orbits, could not be so bad at all. Cheating time and The Dissolution by gradually merging into a living history.

Bitter jealousy and soothing wonder intertwined inside him....

A sharp stab brought Swift Might around. His disorientation cleared. A lesser watchdog.

He had trouble navigating his past. He couldn't recall how large Standantima was, nor how long he'd ruled there. An itching insecurity crawled around his circuitry. He seemed to have been trapped in this humiliating contest forever. Then a new pang added its message to many others, tautening his distress. It took him a considerable time to identify this as loneliness, or at least a strong desire to be back with his own kind. Yet he didn't remember ever trusting anyone, with the disastrous exception of Steel Rage.

Stars arced over him on their endless paths, but they no longer seemed to mock. Curiously, the furnaces of infinite time and distance beckoned instead.

Swift Might had hardly known rest in all his life, had scorned the need for it as a weakness. Now he longed for rest, as once he had longed for power. Surely, he reasoned, a short repose would ease his pains and allow him to face life with renewed vigour....

Another cruel stab, dragging him back into a bewildering existence of agony. He tried to raise his arm to touch the comforting lights above. When he couldn't, the memory of Aumons and impasse returned. Stamina was running out of him, like precious fluid from hydraulic limbs. He could still maintain the status quo, just, but anything more was now beyond him.

A darkness gathered about Swift Might, but he no longer recognised its name.

Then the rules holding the heavens changed. One star became detached, sailing over the others. It fell towards Swift Might, leaking hints of blue and orange. A ship!

Massive panic partially restored the ailing Au-Sek to his old self.

Swift Might cursed and cursed again. He should have sensed it long before. Belatedly, he detected the Aumons holding a surreptitious conversation with the craft. He quashed this immediately, but the damage was already done. Enough signal strength from their beacon must have escaped to pull someone in. An Elten, as far as he could tell from the only comms fragment he had available to analyse. This was bad.

The Elten's outdated ways, their soft flesh and dependence on pockets of air, should by rights make them one of the weakest Races. In fact they dominated. This paradox in itself had always made Swift Might wary of them, despite the belittling of Elten potential he'd recently pitched at the Aumons. Worse still, more than a few individuals of the old Earthen Race still possessed a capacity to kill without hesitation. Especially those who would be wandering out here, in the lawless regions of the Outer Worlds. And this scion of mankind would surely move to protect those who so often served Elten interests.

With the potency lent by complete desperation, Swift Might assailed the electroptic psyche and sinew of his communal captors, with every ordered packet of energy that was in him.

The man approached cautiously. Three ebony Aumons barely held down a huge and heaving Au-Sek. They clung tenaciously to its dun plating and entangled its limbs, for all the Worlds like ants ambushing a heavily armoured beetle.

He whistled softly, partly to relieve the nervous tension that threatened to make him tremble. He knew something of the Au-Sek, but he'd never been this

close to a hostile one before. Life expectancy within half a kilometre of a raging member of the warrior caste was generally measured in milliseconds. He couldn't help but admire the endurance and bravery of the Brothers. He addressed them on an open channel, but nonchalantly and as though to no-one in particular.

“Well, you've caught yourself a mean package of trouble here and no mistake.”

“You are most welcome,” came an even reply. “We'd appreciate immediate...”

The channel disappeared under an avalanche of aggressive static.

The man edged around towards the Au-Sek's head. He disconnected his own helmet feeds, in case the Au-Sek should slyly plead, or find a way to incapacitate him through their unprotected technology. Sonic attacks shivered his stomach, also blurring his vision, but he'd come prepared and his thick mining suit took out the worst.

Then three billion years and more of instinct yanked the man backwards, as the Au-Sek's weapons suddenly blazed. But the shoulder units hurled fire-bolts vainly at the stars, and those on the massive forearms merely scattered projectiles into the dust, at right angles to his current position. The Au-Sek's spread-eagled pose prevented it bringing anything to bear.

The man crept forward again. He took out his blaster, then fired at point-blank range into the thick plating of the monster's artificial cranium.

A convulsion pulsed through the Au-Sek that no possible tension could hold down. The leg of one Aumon snapped. The grip of another slipped. Like a titan breaking the bonds around buried myth to rise into reality, a great, barrel torso topped by a wide head started to lever upwards.

The discharge hammered Swift Might like a bar on an anvil. But as shock subsided, he knew his tough shell was still intact. And he felt his enemies falter.

Sensing a last chance, Swift Might struggled against the hold of the Aumons, against the weight of his own torment, against the closing fingers of The Dissolution. He strained to reach the luminous promise of life and the red fire of revenge, both now just before him, almost within reach.

Another blow impacted his head like a colliding meteor. Spinning blackness prevailed; he barely retained consciousness. His ravaged armour just held, but now there was damage behind it. He found himself flat on his back again.

Swift Might hurled abuse at the cowardly creatures that pinned him down. He howled his fear across the frequency range. He begged for his life. He threatened. He looked into The Nothing and was afraid.

He was now well beyond pain, writhing in a kind of ecstasy of agony. His right temple burned as though pressed to a disc of white-hot steel. Then a thrusting flame, like the exhaust from a ship, ripped away the damaged section of his plating. A part of his mind went with it.

Three shots. A fourth would be the last.

Swift Might ceased to struggle. He tried hard to remember who he was, but barbed dysfunction snagged his thoughts. He dropped all his transmissions, all his electroptic defence, concentrating on a core self. He cast off the connections to his weapon systems, and a hundred other peripherals and system boosters too. He hurriedly stripped away capability and pain, eventually arriving at the much reduced consciousness he had once been, yet relatively free of hurt and with access to more or less coherent memories of a long existence.

He remembered a turbulent rise, the inspiring tingle from victory through violence, decades drunk on power at Standantima. Though The Dissolution had

finally come to claim him, he had lived like a god compared to these termites, who were lucky enough to have caught him off guard. With the prescience granted by impending demise, it came to him that his Race would one day shake the Worlds. Though he wouldn't ever see it, recompense would be paid. Then those Aumons, with their fleeting lives and cautious communities and Memory Houses too, would be sent into The Nothing by Au-Sek arms. The Elten as well, and all the lesser forms of flesh.

He wondered why his executioner held off the killing blow for so long. He had drunk his fill at last. Though still afraid, he longed for relief and rest above all else.

He tried to restore vision, finding he could still see the stars with his left eye. They were strangely comforting. He glimpsed a movement nearby, and though almost half a century had passed since he'd served anyone, he submitted himself to a new master: The Dissolution.

The man hesitated. He would take a life here, for the first time ever by direct and deliberate action. The Au-Sek lay unmoving, but its brain was still intact and he knew it still lived.

Aumon work-lamps flashed him. He reconnected his helmet comms.

"Termination isn't the only option," they suggested. "Perhaps it is incapacitated. We could bind it."

"I don't trust it. The Au-Sek are as wily as foxes."

He paused, considering.

"Besides, using the codes you gave I accessed the recordings on your ship. On the way in, I listened through the discussion you had with this brute. Ultimately, the equation of war needs more than the momentum of unbalanced societies. It needs blunt ignorance.

“We are ignorant of the Au-Sek. What little I have seen myself fills me with loathing and makes me afraid for the future. This one at least should not be allowed to harm anyone ever again. We will have one less Au-Sek to fear.”

“We, the Brothers, acquiesce.”

Feeling very much like a representative of his people, the man exercised judgement, or perhaps bias, pulling the trigger and obliterating the Au-Sek’s hub of higher thought.

The corpse was shaken by huge and continuous spasms, straining the Aumons’ grip once more. The man inserted his weapon into chinks and joints in the armoured carapace, severing hydraulics and cable runs wherever he could. Eventually reduced to a loose conglomeration of disconnected parts, the forbidding form became inert.

The Aumons immediately rose. One lifted the terminated Brother in his arms and clutched him tight to a flat chest, then allowed his swaying companion with the broken leg to cling to his elbow. These two shuffled diffidently backwards, leaving the man to face their cell leader.

The man got up himself, almost stumbling as post-adrenaline reaction sabotaged his stability.

“Look at the size of him,” he declared. “And all those add-ons. Must be a clade general or even a chieftain. In his prime he could probably have decimated a small army!” It was easier to use personal pronouns now the thing was dead.

“His prime?”

“Yeah. He’s past it. Real old, didn’t you know? Or at least the core is. His styling and the numerous enhancements give it away. Plus being all alone out here. Some get rejected near the end. I’ll bet he’s seen centuries of conflict. Probably mad as a hatter by now.”

“We had some indication of significant age. Your last phrase is obscure to us.”

The man supposed Aumons didn't wear hats, or know that those who made them were often subject to illness and insanity during the nineteenth century. Perhaps they didn't know too much about the secretive Au-Sek either.

“The Au-Sek are anti-phasist. Members of their aristocracy attempt to live forever. But if a violent challenge doesn't take them out first, severe dysfunction inevitably sets in due to core component ageing.” The man shook his head sardonically before continuing.

“Repairs and add-ons buy time, but I guess nothing can last forever. Apparently, a few slip into dotage but can still be physically formidable. Some years back, an old warrior on Numides-4 defeated a younger rival and then went on a terrible rampage. He was quite deranged. No-one could stand against him. Wiped out a whole base.”

“To prolong individual existence beyond useful contribution, is a crime before the Life Equations.”

The man shrugged. He wasn't at all comfortable with death, especially when it lay freshly reaped at his feet. It was alright for the Aumons, whose mortality was of a different kind. Their thoughts found sanctuary in Memory Houses. He would one day have to face true non-existence, like this unfortunate Au-Sek. He shuddered.

“I hope your Brother finds his long dream.”

“He will. We are most grateful for your intervention.”

The prime Aumon bowed, but the man knew there would be no introduction. For such as these, community was all; individuals never gave their names.

“I owed the Brotherhood a favour. Seemed like a good opportunity to pay it.”

“Our Meet will be informed.”

Without further civilities, the Aumons started to leave for their ship. Yet the leader turned back.

“For fourteen standard days we grappled with this enemy. It labelled itself Swift Might, yet the chief danger to us was not strength or speed, but its perceptions.”

They departed.

The man stayed put, trying to find some sense of closure before moving on. It occurred to him there would be useful parts within the Au-Sek, though the thought of robbing a corpse quickly stifled that idea.

Perhaps he'd helped it through a difficult end. He hoped so.

Starlight kindled a faint glimmer in the lens of the creature's undamaged eye. It might lie here for millennia, he mused, frozen into a permanent proclamation of life's transience. He imagined it staring up at the celestial tapestry until even that unravelled.

With a great deal of effort, he dragged over a sizeable rock and placed it by the Au-Sek's head. He etched an inscription with his blaster.

Forever mortal,

Swift Might.