

Chatravati

The warm breeze carried with it the scents of the plateau below. It was an acrid smell of sweat and decay, of gunpowder and poison and of corpses that rotted in the sweltering heat beneath the thunderclouds.

It had been said that the demons were constructing temples out of carcasses, enormous ziggurats of flesh and bone and face.

Chatravati wiped his forehead with a stained scrap of cloth and looked out across the wasteland. He could scarcely believe it, despite having been here two weeks. The times before that were growing hazy and indistinct, a side-effect of time travel.

Now, Chatravati fished for the card in his pocket and followed the familiar printed letters with his eyes. The Department had provided each member of Westcrest with a similar card detailing facts about the lives they had left behind.

They had been instructed to read the cards frequently, lest they “lose synchronisation” with their future selves. Chatravati, an intelligent man, wasn’t sure what that meant. But it did provide him some small comfort to grip the card—a talisman from a future yet to occur—and to *remember*.

Chatravati read the card over and over, barely blinking, until tears stung his eyes. He turned when someone spoke his name.

“Sophia,” he smiled.

“Are you okay?”

“Just ash,” said Chatravati, daubing at his eyes with that same scrap of cloth.

And it was true: ash swept up from the bloodied wastelands and with it the ghosts of now-dead men—and things besides men, for the war below was being fought by all manner of creatures.

Chatravati returned the card to his pocket and embraced Sophia. Something about her—a personal, intangible smell—reminded him more of the future than any amount of letters on a card could.

“How was it?” they wound their hands together and, slowly, made their way back to the camp, their shoes leaving footprints like fossils in the red dirt.

“We have what we need,” she said. There was something in her tone and by the way she held her mouth that made it clear she was not willing to speak further on the matter.

Chatravati nodded, willing to let it pass for now. He knew that if she was keeping something from him that no amount of prying would loosen her tongue. She would tell him—or she would not—and the choice would be hers alone.

And so, instead, they made idle chatter: speaking of Bombay and Caladon and Genoa, cities that were yet to exist. By speaking about them it was as though they were willing them into being, helping to create a future they were yet to be born into; a future to which they still hoped to return.

They walked beneath a towering canopy of jungle palms. Not a single flower could be seen growing amongst the broad green leaves of the ferns that clamoured about the path. The red dust underfoot clung to everything it touched and it was in this manner that the tents of the encampment below had come to blend in with the surroundings, providing a sort of camouflage that might have been useful were the camp not so crowded.

For even if the tents were rendered invisible against the red dirt, the assortment of creatures that moved about between them certainly were not. Humans represented only a small proportion of the Old Earth population and as he and Sophia entered the camp, Chatravati could not help but stare.

There were centaurs standing in chest-plates too heavy for even the strongest man to wear; strange, metallic Yjarj and pale-skinned golden-eyed refugees from the Violet Empire whose civilisation had been decimated by creatures they called the Khul.

“Heads up,” chattered one tall green creature as they entered the camp. “Transport overhead in five, four...”

The remainder of the countdown was drowned out by the roar of an engine. Chatravati threw himself to the ground as a roaring shadow passed over the camp. Of all the things he had seen since they had travelled to the Old Earth, it was still the spaceships that most alarmed him.

Sophia helped him up. Around them, the conversations that had been interrupted by the flyover resumed.

“You’ve seen vampires and centaurs and sea monsters,” Sophia said as she brushed the dust from his face. “But are still cowed by the sight of a *spaceship*.”

“Spaceships are *nothing like* vampires,” said Chatravati through clenched teeth. She smiled but did not mock him further. Together they pressed through the crowd, seeking out the tent that they would recognise by the forked black flag flapping before it. Emblazoned on that flag was the number 38.

It was dark inside the tent, the only light cast by a lantern resting on a low table in the middle of the room. Uncertain shadows flickered on the walls.

“Well if it ain’t a couple o’ Provers,” said a familiar voice as they entered.

“Marshall!” Sophia rushed towards the cowboy. As Marshall caught her his hat tumbled from his head. “Whoa darlin’,” he said and lowered her to the floor.

Chatravati crossed the tent after Sophia and he and Marshall firmly embraced. “Welcome back,” said Chatravati, for Marshall had been away.

“Same to you,” said Josephine, swathed in shadows against the rear wall of the tent. Marshall helped the old lady up and she stepped into the light, beaming at them. Josephine was the leader of Westcrest and she was a witch, though she told most people otherwise.

“And so the Provers are united,” said Josephine with a chuckle.

Although it was true that those inhabiting the camp came from a diverse range of backgrounds—different planets, timelines *and* dimensions—these four who had come from Earth’s direct future had earned themselves the dubious title of “Provers”.

The term implied that—*by their very existence*—the four members of Westcrest proved that the ritual would succeed. For Chatravati the term was an uncomfortable one.

“Oh, Sophia,” was the next thing that Josephine said and she crossed the room to embrace Chatravati’s lover. Chatravati and Marshall both witnessed the unusual exchange, but thought nothing of it. After all, there were far stranger sights to be had beyond the thin walls of the canvas tent.

“The preparations are complete,” said Sophia. “The nomads have agreed. It will be enough.”

“Then we have a chance,” said Josephine.

“That is, if we survive until tomorrow,” Marshall drawled, resting his hand on the butt of his revolver. “I’ll bet you dollars-to-pesos that Nergal bastard’s coming for us tonight: with everything.”

“Marshall is right,” said Josephine. “He will have already smelt change in the air.”

“We will not let them prevent the Rapture,” said Sophia, for that was what they were calling the ritual that would save the world.

“Hallelujah,” whistled Marshall as he spun the chamber of his revolver and they all listened as it went *click-click-click-click-click* in the dimly-lit tent.

While the others rested, Chatravati excused himself and stepped back outside into the strangeness of the crowded camp.

“Good Sir, can I interest you in a lucky charm?” Asked an enterprising man standing behind a makeshift storefront. Chatravati was impressed that mercantilism could flourish, even here, with war raging all around them.

Chatravati ignored the man and pressed on, following a winding path of sawdust, red dirt and strange footprints between the tents.

His journey took him past row upon row of metal cages. Most of them were empty, but some contained creatures the likes of which Chatravati had never seen.

Brightly coloured feathers pressed up against the bars of one cage as Chatravati passed it and a variety of mewling cries and croaks issued from others. What would happen to them all if tomorrow's ritual was successful, Chatravati wondered? Would these creatures perish here, with nobody to tend to them, or would the spell send them to their freedom?

How exactly the Rapture was supposed to work remained a mystery. Only those directly involved with the incantation were permitted to attend the regular meetings that had been taking place. Sophia and Josephine numbered among them, but neither had divulged anything to Chatravati or Marshall. Both women insisted that the spell would succeed.

"You have *seen* the future," Sophia had said to him. "We *cannot* fail."

But Chatravati knew that no victory ever came without a cost.

He passed several large bales of hay and was almost crushed by the careless stomping of a young centaur.

"Ho!" Called another of the creatures, who looked much older (and angrier) than the one that had almost trodden on Chatravati. "You must be wary Thane, lest you unknowingly trample the *little* species."

Chatravati, smiled politely and bowed his head—unaware that his expression looked more like a grimace to the centaurs, who have rather different ways of seeing things than humans do.

He passed more cages and tents and wooden storage crates marked with strange symbols, before he reached his destination.

Nestled between two rows of large tents, tucked protectively away from the rest of the camp was a narrow laneway. The laneway was crowded with small red tents, before the opening to each hung a tiny golden bell. Little more than halfway down the lane, Chatravati stopped to ring one.

The sound made by the bell was diminutive—barely audible over the howl of the wind and the sound of blades being sharpened and the incessant hoof-beats of the centaurs. Nonetheless, a voice that rivalled the bell for its softness bade that Chatravati enter.

"Did you bring me a gift?" asked the Enchanter as Chatravati stepped into the tent. She looked to be a young girl, no older than seven or eight years old. Her hair was blonde and fine and it sparkled softly in defiance of the darkness all around her. She was one of the Sacred Enchanters, born at the beginning of time and gifted with the tools of creation; her name was Cynthia.

"I...I did, yes..." Chatravati stammered and somehow managed to fumble in all of his pockets at once without finding anything. At last he found it, tucked away with the card that contained the details of his future life. Three sheets of yellowed paper, tightly folded together.

“Let me see,” said the girl and Chatravati lowered himself to the floor so that the two of them were nearly face to face. His hands shook as he unfolded the sheets of paper and laid them out, one by one, before her.

Each page depicted intricate drawings of flowers—creating such drawings was a talent Chatravati had been developing his entire life. Here upon the Old Earth, Chatravati was astonished to discover that there were no flowers, and so as soon as he was able to procure the materials he had begun sketching and painting as many as he could remember.

The drawings were incredibly detailed. Each one perfectly depicted a different species down to the subtle speckling on the leaves or the by the curling of its petals. Most of the flowers had been coloured in gentle shades of paint.

“I couldn’t find the right pigment for this one,” said Chatravati, pointing to one flower. “It’s supposed to be blue, but...”

“I can see them,” whispered the enchanter, her eyelids closing. “I can *smell* them.”

The tent suddenly felt even smaller than it actually was, as though it were suddenly contracting around him. In a way it reminded Chatravati of another room, except the room that he was thinking of felt as though it were expanding around you rather than contracting. The sudden overwhelming smell of flowers flooded over him and it was too much.

His eyes closed and he could see only fields and fields of endless flowers. And then they were all rising up around him until he was drowning in them, smothered by them. In an instant the sensation passed and he was breathing again in great ragged gasps. Across from him the enchanter smiled.

“Thank you for your gift,” she said and then added: “I will help you.”

When Chatravati returned to the tent he slid beneath the blanket beside Sophia and wrapped her in his arms. She pressed her body tightly into his and whispered soundlessly against his lips: *I love you*.

They remained that way until the explosions began.

Chatravati would remember that sound forever. It seemed to him like the sound of centaur hooves must have sounded to the ants.

Boom. Boom. Boom.

Chatravati and Sophia struggled out from beneath the blanket. Josephine was already awake, sitting in the darkness and smoking a pungent cigarette.

“Damn fools,” said Marshall, rubbing his eyes with his fists.

“We have to go,” said Sophia and together, all four of them walked into Hell.

The sky was aflame. Clouds swirled in hues of orange and purple like the brush strokes of an artist who had gone insane. Thin lines of bright green light cut across the sky: Nergal's arrows. Missile trails. The ground rumbled and waves of fire swept across the camp, carrying with them the screams of the burning.

"Let me at 'em!" Said Marshall, curling his top lip and drawing his gun.

"We need to get to the clearing," said Josephine. "The ritual must commence."

"Already?" said Chatravati, because everything seemed to be happening too quickly.

Most of the inhabitants of the camp seemed to be fleeing in the opposite direction, which made their progress difficult. Chatravati cowered as huge chunks of rock hurtled through the sky above them. Fire bloomed wherever the rocks struck the ground and each impact shook them to their knees.

They came to a clearing where a giant insectile demon was surrounded by centaurs. Chatravati recognised one of them as the youngster—Thane—who had almost trampled him earlier.

The centaurs struck out at the beast repeatedly with spears, but could not pierce its chitinous armour. Thane's mentor tripped and tumbled sideways and the giant insect impaled him against the ground with one bladed forearm.

Marshall rushed forward, drawing a lasso from his overalls and tossing it in a high arc in order to ensnare the insect.

"That rope won't hold," said Chatravati through gritted teeth.

Marshall pulled back on the lasso, the muscles in his arms straining visibly as he dragged the creature down to the red dirt. Its legs, dripping blood and venom, punched grotesquely at the sky but the young centaur Thane dodged them all in order to drive his spear into the soft underbelly of the creature.

"Yjarj fibres," Sophia told Chatravati. "Nergal himself would have a hard time breaking that rope,"

But as strong as the rope was, it was now tangled uselessly beneath carcass of the demon. Marshall let the rope fall from his hands and rejoined his friends.

Another flaming rock struck the ground and all of them fell. Dirt and rock and many more unpleasant things rained down on them and for a moment Chatravati was certain that this was the end: not just for him, but for *everything*.

And then he was on his feet and calling for Sophia, but his voice was swallowed by the roaring wind. He couldn't see more than a few feet ahead through the raging curtains of red dust. Then Marshall appeared and gripped him tightly by the hand.

"I need to find Sophia," Chatravati yelled, but the cowboy couldn't hear him. Then, abruptly, the dust was gone and Chatravati could see and hear again. He coughed and spluttered.

“Magic hides this path, for now,” said a voice and Chatravati blinked through tears at Cynthia. Sophia and Josephine were already there, sitting together on a chunk of grey stone while others who were instrumental to the ritual shuffled past on their way up the hill.

When Chatravati turned around he could see only dancing swirls of red dust where the camp should have stood behind them, but he could not even hear the wind.

“Let’s get along,” said Marshall, offering Josephine his hand.

“I need to go with them,” said Sophia, but Chatravati shook his head.

“Not yet,” he said. “I have something to show you.”

Cynthia led them along a different path, between layers of dense foliage. Leaves and branches crowded them on all sides, poking and prickling.

Chatravati had expected Sophia to, but she remained silent. When she did speak, he saw that tears shone in her eyes.

“There’s something you need to know,” Sophia said.

“Not now,” said Cynthia, who had brought them to a swiftly flowing stream of brilliant, turquoise water. She dropped to her knees beside it.

“This is the secret stream called *Attica*, which flows into the lake at the sacred grove,” she said as she traced her fingers through the water. “It is gifted with the power of the *Ever*, which is neither *then-or-now* or *here-or-there*. It is with this power that we will send Nergal far, far away.”

Sophia looked between Chatravati and the enchanter.

“I have something for you,” said Chatravati and at the same time Cynthia spoke a similar sentence in such a way that their voices merged briefly into one. He drew Sophia against him and kissed her on the forehead. Sophia wrapped her arms around him.

Beside the stream, Cynthia linked her fingers together to form a cup with her small hands and lowered it into the glistening water. And then: the enchanter laughed as she swept her hands upwards, flinging droplets of radiance all over the lovers and the surrounding jungle.

Sophia’s eyes grew wide and tears spilled openly down her cheeks as she realised that every drop of water had turned into a flower. In every place the water touched a new plant appeared, stalks rising and buds blooming into the flowers Chatravati had drawn.

Brilliant pink orchids exploded from amongst the leaves and roses; there were delicate jasmine flowers, tipped with orange; and a chain of water lilies that floated away down the stream. And also there, between their feet, a single, sacred lotus.

There were daisies and roses and tulips. One, brilliant sunflower, unfurled into being, clustered beneath it: violets and bluebells.

Cynthia left them there, leaving a trail of softly glowing petals in her wake as she headed on towards the sacred grove. And now, alone, they wrapped themselves in each other, flowers

blooming all around them as Sophia finally told Chatravati that this was the last day they would spend together.

“I don’t understand!” said Chatravati, reeling away. “Surely somebody else can do this in your place! Why must it be you?”

Sophia, placed a hand on his shoulder. “I volunteered,” she said.

“You volunteered... to die?” Chatravati’s jaw hung open. His face was a mask of anguish.

“I will not die,” Sophia said calmly. “I will still be a part of the world, I will become as a piece of thread that binds it together. I have spent my entire life asking questions, Mayad; at last I will know the answers.”

Chatravati stumbled to the red dirt and stared disbelievingly at the newborn flowers: plants that he had helped create. Were these the same species that grew in the future? Had *he* drawn them into being?

The ground seemed suddenly unsteady beneath him. His hands felt as though they were sinking into the dirt, as though it were all some rapidly dissolving illusion. None of this could be real, surely it was all some kind of—

“Are you joking?” Chatravati rose to his feet. He felt sick.

“I will still be with you, every day,” said Sophia.

“Why did we even come here?” Chatravati said desperately. He clawed at his face with his fingernails. “You left me to my own devices while you and Josephine slunk off to secret meetings. You never told me what was happening! You never asked for my opinion!”

“Your opinion doesn’t matter,” said Sophia simply. There was no malice in her voice, only softly-spoken truth. Around them the flowers continued to grow, ignorant of the war and of the breaking of human hearts. Chatravati sobbed.

“You must listen to me, Chatravati Mayad,” Sophia said very seriously and something in her tone turned Chatravati’s sobs to sniffles. He blinked away his tears and he listened, although each word cut him like a razor blade.

“The ritual is the most complicated magic I’ve ever heard of,” Sophia said. “Even in legend.”

“It’s so complicated,” she continued. “That the spell is not yet complete. One final component remains that still won’t be ready for... oh, I don’t know... four *billion* years or so.”

Chatravati stared at her and she did her best not to acknowledge the pain in his eyes.

“It’s *your* job to wait for that missing component, Chatravati. To wait for it and to protect it and, eventually, to bring it back here. To finish what we are starting today. It’s your duty, Chatravati. It’s up to you to save the world.”

Chatravati couldn't take it any longer. He embraced her tightly for what he now knew would be the last time. "I can't let you do this," he said to her through his tears.

"You have to,"

"I know."

And then, hands tightly linked, they walked together.