

The Orphans' End

by Stephen Moss

The long years of preparation, the embittered political and martial struggle, the toil and sacrifice, it had come down to a matter of seconds. For Banu, at the bleeding edge of a squadron of Skalm, the journey had been nearly a decade long. For the Gods, the orphan pilots, it had been a shorter, but no less convoluted six years.

For Wednesday God, imbedded within the very tip of the Earthfleet, the journey building up to the glancing had been an interrupted time, pocketed with times of doubt, question, and introspection. But that was all behind him now.

Now was the time of the battle. As the Mobiliei fleet finished brutally amputated its rebelling Nomadi and Mantilatchi sectors, the Earthfleet was quickly approaching, accelerating headfirst into the wall of enemy Skalm.

As the glancing approached, Wednesday's interaction with Guowei was becoming close to the point that the line between them blurred, a tight conversation that both relished, though for very different reasons.

Guowei took great pleasure in the reality of it all. He had learned to beat all the simulations his peers had thrown at him. Well, he had learned to manage the odds, at least. There was a point where an imbalance of force outweighed any advantage intellect or inspiration could give. This, though, was different from anything he had faced before.

This was alien, truly alien. He had sparred with the Mobiliei Agents, but they were but echoes of their real selves. The one called Mantil had been good, sometimes superb, but he had also been just a copy, and Guowei had seen his weaknesses and opened them.

But that would not be possible here. These were no copies. This enemy was real, and any nonchalance Guowei might have once felt was a long, long way away now. This was it, and he merged with the beautifully simple mind that was his forward commander and they took in the budding detail of the enemy line, discussing and updating tactics as they both moved closer to the final formations they would have in the glancing.

They were at a horrible disadvantage. They had less numbers, and they had a harder mission. They must stop all of them, or at least the vast, vast majority. It was going to be, Guowei knew, close to impossible; and he saw in his partner's mind, in Kim Suyoil's brilliant innocence, the realization of the fact that they were going to have to sacrifice any hope at survival in order to have a chance.

Guowei did not filter his profound respect and appreciation for the bravery of the young boy out of his signal, not even a little, and as the final moment came so close that their conversation was only slowing the speed at which Wednesday would have to react, Guowei allowed his overflowing sense of fraternal love for Suyoil and his orphaned brethren to flood the system before the battle went supernova.

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Suyoil reveled in the strategic genius of the voice in his head. He listened to it like an imaginary friend, comforting and encouraging him as his myriad fingertips and toes tweaked and danced like Kali's dancing blades.

Suyoil's body was one with his fleet, his movements made real in an instant, orders rippling outward to his forces, sending them twirling this way and that in the final seconds before impact. Suyoil was not an ambitious soul. He had nothing of the megalomania and just plain mania that had driven a desperate world leader to volunteer him and his friends for this terrible but vital task. But here, in these moments, his doubts fell away from him, as they had in the glancings back before reality made its ugly presence known, back when Mother's love had been all he had needed.

Here his focus was pure. Here, now, his mind expanded outward and transcended the reality of his impending death to a place that existed only in the instant, the vast, light second-wide instant, where he was as close to godliness as any human had ever been. His mind braced for it, settling and calming into something close to serenity as the wall finally broke over him, a great tidal wave of fusion flame and particle swell, smashing and crashing around his hundreds of arms and legs.

His last thought was one of nuance and grace, of the slightest changing, of seeing in the million spears rushing in on him a series of the slightest gaps and opportunities and sending out the orders that would drive his best positioned units into them, to pry them open and cut into the heart of his enemy.

Here was the meeting of strategy and tactic, the flipping of the switch from future to present, as it all came to frenetic fruition. His final orders, inspired and desperate, were still flashing outward from him as the fire consumed him and the rest of his forward phalanx.

In his last moments, in the final terrible milliseconds, there was something more than pain. Beyond thought, or below it, in a deeper place, a bass thrum underscored the chorus roar of the battle. It was the love from Guowei filling him. And it was his own love for his bunk-mate Friday, cold and huddled together, threadbare sheets wrapped around them as they whispered tall-tales and dreams to each other in the night.

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Friday saw it the very moment Wednesday fed his mind with his final orders: the opportunity.

He saw it clearly and was moving the next instant, before the thought had fully taken form in him. It was a guest overstaying his welcome, the carrier ship, big and powerful, a mammoth that had left the safety of the subspace herd and was now here, alone. It was not running as it should have, back to the shelter of the netherworld. It was staying, and as the final orders came from his brother, Friday took his squadron and sliced through a gap in the firewall and into the carrier like a whip-crack.

He felt as his brother went silent, felt the final moments of certainty and composure in Wednesday's last millisecond orders, but he enjoyed none of the peaceful transcendence Wednesday felt in the heat of battle. He felt only passion, and now something even more powerful: rage, fury, an anger so mighty it outshone his particle swords as he wailed his grief outward, dancing around the massive lance from a panicked carrier ship and then hammering into it.

He targeted its core not just with his weapons but with all of his tumultuous rage. Where Wednesday had been a becalmed eye at the center of a hurricane, Friday was the riotous core of a tornado, flinging himself at his prey and into it, punching his deathblow into its flanks as he forfeited his life, a life he could not imagine living without his friend anyway.

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For Banu, the glancing was no less instant, no less of a spasm of ferocity, but it held a greater sense of strategic portent, of a fate still under control. Wednesday and Guowei had sent her squadron high, to come in hard from above, not spared, not at all, but held for just moment, to make their sacrifice count.

As the fist of the Earthfleet drove into the face of the wall, splintering and breaking as it did so, Banu was one of several breakouts that flanked inward, a multitude of hidden uppercuts and driving heels powering into the broad, Goliath jaw of the Mobiliei armada.

Just as Wednesday's world had shrunk into the glancing, Guowei fading into the strategic past, so now did Banu's focus into a point, as her squadron carved down and through the enemy, rending and splitting as they went.

She would deliver on the promise made to her orphan siblings, making the Mobiliei pay, making them pay with their lives for their slaughterhouse intent.

As she came into the closing gap between the last of the Mantilatchi rebel forces and the storming Mobiliei armada, she joined with them. They could not speak to each other, and had no time to anyway. This was faster than that. This was two dancers vaulting passed each other, barely a nudge and a push, a finger-stroke to make their intent known to each other before their bodies parted once more.

But language was there, in their movements, and the last battered remnants of the Mantilatchi force took her meaning and broke downward, not joining her, as their momentum in the opposite direction was too great, but mirroring her movements as she banked down into the storm of lightning that the space around the battle had become.

The war had become a nebula, a tiny supernova of atomic fire that briefly outshone the Sun, exploding outward, consuming and subliming the warriors in its midst, and now she flew across the ballooning sphere of destruction, her sensors singed by the fight's furnace.

Her squadron was dispersing as it went, separating and dividing as it diluted itself. It was the only way they could avoid the slashing swords of the enemy fleet in the closest moment, their perihelion, where the singeing orb of radiating death around the battle was at its deadliest.

Wednesday had thrust his vanguard into the armada's heart, and, in his final orders, brought his peripheral units down upon them as well. And so, it was with a mix of respect and shame that Banu now fired into the midst of the glancing, knowing her arrows would as likely find friend as foe.

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And then ... she was past, it was now a blink after the battle proper, and her pattern was cutting down the far side of the battle as she continued firing, a small part of her looking for some remnant of the main body of Earthfleet in the battle's wake.

But there was no sign of life in the cloud of debris cutting backward, only the broken limbs and shattered cores of Skalm, some bleeding fusion into the cosmos, others spinning wildly, either lobotomized or clipped, now gyrating spastically in their death throws.

She could see the remnant of the Mobiliei force moving off as well, it was moving farther and farther every millisecond, and now her pincer unit fired up the backsides of their enemy. They stabbed at them. Wednesday and Guowei had given them precious sideways momentum where the last of the Mobiliei were still moving mostly as one, and Banu took the opportunity to try to pick a few more of them off, sending her squadrons fire after them with focused ire.

As the two fleets moved apart, now massively diminished, they were already two thousand kilometers apart a second after they had passed. But now Banu came into the debris, the aftermath, and like she had once taken a Stratojet and threaded it through a cloud of wasp missiles, she now plunged into the field of her fallen brethren.

Was this Wednesday's Skalm she was darting passed? Was that Friday's core she was forced to fire into as it threatened to cut across her path? And what was this now? What was this new threat, this new obstacle?

It was a web of focused fire from the departing Mobiliei, a final gift as their range stretched, and Banu saw it as a crisscrossed maze filling her view. They were returning the favor, they were giving their last licks, and for the last of Banu's squadron it was too much in the confined, over-charged madness of the battle cloud.

They went wild, spinning outward as each pilot fought to avoid the storm of aka and beam, cores exploding like mines and artillery shells on every side, and suddenly Banu knew some sense of the madness that the center of the battle must have been. She knew it as a closing of doors, all the Skalm's maneuverability reduced to single-digit options as her squadron finally started to die around her.

For all her skill and ability, all her experience, she saw now the luck that had brought her this far, the simple dice roll that had left her and her squadron so untouched. It was a luck that had just run out. She banked hard around a spinning Skalm, still firing, its triggers still clutched by dead fingers, and as she did so a Mobiliei particle lance came across her view. She dodged it easily, side-stepping it as a matter of course, but the attack had not been for her. As the lance found its target, the very Skalm she had just dodged, the damaged craft erupted, its central core igniting and detonating its three remaining subsidiary engines in quick succession.

The fire in and of itself was not too much for Banu, but as the blast washed out over her she was momentarily blinded, and in these tight confines it was like being hit by a wave of water whilst clambering over sharp rocks. The next moment she felt them slicing into her, jagged edges cutting at her superconductive skin, splintering reefs sawing her nanotube bones.

As one of her akas came loose she calmed its antagonistic mirror, trying to find purchase as she was buffeted, but now a pain came that was greater, not a rock but a blade as she fell into another particle beam. She could not tell if it was from a dead comrade or their departing enemy, and in the end it did not matter. It severed another of her akas almost completely, and buckled her main drive nozzle, and with that she was adrift.

This was not the pleasant kind of drift, though. This was not a life on the ocean wave, but a leaf on an acid sea, the swirls of corrosive death around her smacking and bashing her once proud form, shredding it.

She held on as long as she could. She knew that if she released her capsule early, while still in the hell-cloud of her dead comrades, she would surely be consumed. So she clung on to the disintegrating hull of her ship, staying with it till the last possible moment, looking for some sign of the other side, hoping against hope that her cores would not be corrupted before she was in reach of safety.

Then she saw a gap in the fire, a slight darkening in the flame, and she took it, releasing a pulse of her still vital fusion heart out through a small nozzle at the end of the tube that held her life-capsule, the black pill that held her brain. The pressure drove her outward, firing her like a bullet out of her Skalm, out, away, hoping now for the void, for the still calm of vacuum.

The capsule launched away, ricocheting off of bellowing clouds of radiation and great swelling orbs of flame. She did not feel it, though. For her, there was only silence now, a deep, enveloping silence enforced upon her by her lack of any sense not given to her by her machine cocoon. For she was without ear, mouth or nose. She was without face.

She was, at last, alone.

Any noise or impact from the outside was lost, and the only proof of her survival would come with time now, as milliseconds ticked away, and became a second, which eventually became a minute. And so that, for Banu, was that.

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Eventually she stopped waiting to die. It seemed it was not going to happen today. Tentatively she pinged her system to check her surroundings. As she did so, a small, built-in AI contained within her capsule opened its eyes. Hidden behind thick lids. Small sensors irised open and took in their surroundings. The battle was far behind her now, but still filling one whole hemisphere of Banu's view, statically blurring that side.

The AI, taking into account the spin they had gained in the last moments in the cloud, began filtering out that part of their view, redacting it to protect its precious eyes. Banu was grateful for it, though, and for the respite it gave her battered psyche.

She set the AI to analyze their trajectory and predict any potential danger spots and then left it to its devices. This was no Minnie, nor even a mini-minnie, and it would take time to muddle its way through tasks, as Banu would need time to get used to its treacle-trickle of information.

If she could have breathed deep, if she could have sighed and covered her eyes, she would have. But with neither lungs, hands, nor eyes, she sufficed with shutting herself off once more to think.

She could not be certain, but her instincts told her that, despite giving everything they had, they had failed. She knew she had been among the last to fall. That there had still been enough enemy ships remaining to return such fire could only mean ...

She tried to stop thinking about it. That they would go on to attack Earth itself ... she tried to shut it out, but could not. She wanted to shake her head or shout but such escapes were not available to her. She needed the machine to help. It was all she had left.

As if in answer, her lone AI companion now spoke up, answering her query about their course and speed. It was as good a report as she could really have hoped for; a straight shot out, away from all this, into the night.

She looked at it for a moment, setting aside a momentary pang of desire to be closer to home. There was no home, not any more. They had lost. It had not been through any fault of their own, through any lack of effort, but that would not be any consolation to the last survivors, to her father, to Minnie, to Neal, wherever he was, as they watched the axe come down. She could not cry, but her grief flowed anyway, pulsing in her mind as her sorrow overwhelmed her.

For a long time she just mourned. She had a store of information with her and she called up images of Quavoce, of his eyes, reliving the first days of their relationship, so scary, so unknown, yet so solid and trustworthy. She found solace sometimes in thinking of how she had felt when he had returned from whatever mission had taken him away that first week they had been together. She remembered seeing his face when he returned to her. Seeing in it that same stolidity that she had memorized, like seeing a home after a long voyage, filling you with a simple reassurance: I had not dreamed this, it is real, this love and this safety, it really exists, in those eyes, so foreboding to most, so comforting to her.

After a while the pain started to fade, its sharp edges worn down, eroded each time they stabbed at her, until they were either not as sharp, or her soul was so scarred it could rebuff them.

Now, with only time and space to look forward to, she looked for a way to pass the time. She knew that she could not recreate the virtual world she knew so well with such a minimal onboard processor. So, instead of watching as the machine tried, in vain, to keep up with her, she decided instead that it would be best to slow herself down, a choice that would bring two benefits.

And so, as the first weeks turned into months, she sent herself into a coma, slowing oxygen flow, calming her higher functions, hooding the raptor's eyes, and in that sleep she began to dream.

For the longest time she did not dream of people. She dreamt of the barn, of being an owl once more. Sometimes she dreamt of swimming and running. Then, one day, she dreamt of the panther simulation, and

through that her mind found its way back to Friday and Wednesday. She smiled at the simple renderings of her two friends, and for the first time since just after the battle she thought of home.

In a quiet place, on a peaceful day, she walked out of the dark woods, transforming from the big, black cat back into her young self as she went, and there, amid dawn's light, she saw Quavoce sitting with Minnie's burly, gentle-giant form, and she nodded. They were, no doubt, long dead now, but she could go to them, for, in truth, she knew she was just as extinct as they. She could go to them now. It was time to visit their ghosts.

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Outside, the years pass as the small capsule swims ever onward, oblivious and negligible, leaving only a tiny ping in its trail, a series of breadcrumbs dropped on the path as it wanders off into the night. She cannot know that something is sniffing out those breadcrumbs. She cannot know that her father is still alive, just as he does not know that she is. But he is looking for her, as is an entire planet. He is looking for her and he will never stop, he will not give up on her, such is the depth of his promise.

Far back in her wake, all the way back at the epicenter of the battle, still glowing and throbbing with the hot embers of their struggle, a spikey probe from a battered Earth finds her scent, and a world awakes to the hope of reunification.

Thank you for reading.

Many have commented since the first publication of *Fear the Future* that they were left bereft by some of the characters' ends.

While that was deliberate, in parts, as it seems to me that war's end is rarely as satisfying or just as we might like to think, I can say that war is also rarely the end of the story, and so it will not be here.

Banu will return, both to my books, and to Earth, in *Fear's Orphans*, later in 2015.

But she will return to a planet touched by a greater universe, and changed by it. She will find her father there, and her Uncle Neal, though in far different forms than she left them.

I truly hope to see you all again then,
-Stephen Moss