

Civilization

The twin stars of Io and Lysithea rose high above the forest clearing, sending dancing shadows of branches and leaves against the ground. “Bzzzz” A noise emanated behind an alien girl’s teeth as she thrust out with a wooden branch, before pirouetting and slashing at an imaginary Terran. “Deeee,” Sri yelled as her imaginary Light Lance intersected with the appendage of another Terran. At some point in the achingly long history of the universe, small and fleshy organisms who called themselves Terrans had colonized the galaxies. Originating from a pale blue dot, they built Stellar Machines – each the size of a small moon and shaped morphologically like themselves: two arms, two legs, and two eyes. Their Stellar Machines were once worshiped as gods by the girl’s race. Like the old gods of nature, however, they were as capricious earthquakes and thunderstorms: you never knew when they would destroy entire civilizations. But they were not gods. Sri knew from her father that they could bleed.

Darkness flooded the clearing, and Sri stood still and restless, afraid to move, her arm caught in a swinging motion as she was aiming at the throat of another Terran. She tilted her head slightly upwards, and saw the silhouette of the torso of a Stellar Machine. The Machine’s shoulders covered the horizons, eclipsing both stars and strangling light into darkness. Its head, the size of a mountain at this distance, swiveled to scan the hundreds of miles of land before it. Sri stared at the Machine, envisaging the Terran pilot within, hidden behind a star system’s worth of armor and weapons, its beady little eyes viewing the Stellar Machine’s instruments and displays. She imagined the pilot’s face in a haughty sneer, reflecting the highbrow arrogance it took for one species to claim lordship over the stars.

A cracking sound interrupted the silence. Sri looked at her hands, not realizing she had clutched her branch so tightly it had broken within her grip. The face of the Machine seemingly

turned towards her and Sri tried to lock eyes with it, as much as one could lock eyes with a face that covered half the sky.

“One day, I’m going to be just like my father,” Sri whispered, softly against the wind brushing against her long antennas. “Claiming the stars and making you bleed.”

A deafening roar emanated from the Stellar Machine, as if it had heard Sri’s prayer. Sri turned her body away from the Machine, holding her breath and listening to her heart thump within her chest as she braced for the worst. A blue glow emanated from large pulse engines along the Stellar Machine’s torso, and it veered off to patrol another district. Sri let out a gasp of relief, and threw the two broken branches at the sky where the back of the Machine rose up into the horizon. A voice behind Sri called her to go to dinner. Sri’s four hooves crunched against the leaves as she left the forest clearing, her face crunched up in determination.

“One day.”

Two beeps alerted Alice of incoming projectiles. Swiveling her control sphere to view behind her Stellar Machine, Alice stared at the projectiles in real-time: two small branches, falling away into the distance. Alice sighed. The sensors after the recent maintenance were far too perceptive.

“Robert, show me who threw it.”

The Stellar Machine AI brought up a holographic view of a young female alien. “Name, Sri. Father was Admiral Lapith, leader of the Centaur Rebellion, killed in 10,549 AD. DNA testing indicates she has excellent single nucleotide polymorphisms for Machine piloting. Not recruited to the Alien Defense Force due to familial linkage with known belligerents and negative personality traits,” a vaguely masculine voice intoned.

“Thanks Robert.” Alice sank back into her seat and relaxed. “Play Beethoven’s 9th in D minor when you have the chance.” Faint tones of the symphony began playing in the background.

“Time to destination?” Alice asked.

“An hour and twenty minutes until the next patrol point.”

Trouble rarely occurred throughout the Billion World Empire. Even the Centaur Rebellion had only required four Stellar Machines to put down. Drumming her hands against the arms of her chair, Alice mindlessly scrolled through the intergalactic news on her Hologlasses. Her alma mater, the University of Terra in Chicago – where the word Chicago originated from, Alice had no idea – had won its first championship in spaceball. And as per usual, a lesser House was fighting against another lesser House. The winner would most likely be elevated by the Emperor to control a few million-star systems.

An abrupt red notification flashed over her glasses, and Alice gasped. She read and re-read the text spelled out by the Intergalactic Warning System. “Robert, confirm warning authenticity?”

“Warning confirmed. Multiple orders for all Stellar Machines to return to the Sol system. Source of origin: Emperor Nero of House Terra, First of His Name, the God of Humankind, and the Father of the Stars.”

Alice frowned. There were over a million Stellar Machines from a hundred Houses across the empire, each enforcing a sector of a galaxy to maintain Terran rule. Nonetheless, a directive from the Emperor could not be ignored. *A rebellion perhaps?* Alice wondered. Rumor had it, Emperor Nero was becoming ever more insane, with only his advisors to hold him in check.

“Robert, play ‘Take Me Home,’ by John Denver – original edition please. Let’s go home.”

Nero viewed the assembled Stellar Machines of the Billion World Empire under a dome that stretched on for kilometers, the only place left on Terra where birds still perched on trees and wind

still swept grass. The rest of Terra was sheathed in steel and glass, skyscrapers rising kilometers high. His cold, calculating eyes watched the horizon, littered with Stellar Machines jostling for position to be near the seat of galactic power.

“Can you smell the decay?” he whispered. “Nothing is alive on this rock. The whole Empire is rotten.”

Silence answered him. His ministers thought he had gone insane, perhaps from too much Sleeppec, the drug that maintained his immortality. No. His ministers were myopic, too busy living off the excesses of his empire to see the truth. They were parasites, living off the carcass of humanity. Nero had pruned, he had grafted, he had burned branches of humanity, hoping to revive the dying orchard. Yet, humanity had survived, poisoned to the core by corruption and reliance on Sleeppec, unwilling to let go. All the great minds of humanity, all the most talented geniuses, all the richest and successful, lay asleep on Sleeppec and protected on Terra. For every one month alive, the most important of humanity spent ten years asleep on Sleeppec, as the drug preserved them in sleep as if they hadn't aged a day. Only second-rate minds could be called upon in service of humanity. The trailblazers, the pioneers who could advance humanity were too precious to be called upon. Humanity was unchanging, immortal but immutable. That is why it had to go.

Above him, Nero saw the dome change from transparent to a painting depicting an ancient fresco long since fallen to pieces in a cathedral somewhere when Terra was called Earth. A nude man stretched up to touch the finger of God. Nero mused: humanity once looked at the night sky, wishing to do more. To become God. Become Immortal. Create life. Rule the stars.

Progress was once the essence of humanity. To improve, to iterate, to become better versions of themselves. Until Sleeppec. Once humanity became Gods, they lost the very purpose that made them human.

Nero fingered a switch. History would see him as the devil, the destroyer of humanity. Yet, he had sent out enormous colony ships for the last three thousand years, each one holding a hundred souls. Seeds that might one day spread their roots, growing towards civilization. To become human again.

Nero pressed the switch, and the Sun exploded.

A human boy stared up at the horizon, panting. Starry lights filled the night sky. He lowered the two branches he was holding, just a minute ago fighting imaginary alien horses, beings that had enslaved his planet centuries ago. It was said that once upon a time, humanity reached for the stars. Now, they groveled in the dirt. One day, the child promised. One day I will rule the stars.