

YOON HA LEE

THE HUNDREDTH QUESTION

Prologue

THIS IS A TEST.

YOU WILL BE SCORED OUT OF 100 POSSIBLE POINTS. RESPONSES WILL BE TIMED.  
GUESSES  
MAY OR MAY NOT BE PENALIZED; THE CONSEQUENCES ARE UP TO YOU.

PROCEED.

1

YOU DIDN'T WANT TO BE here, not really, not ever, but want is a one-way word these days. The government says jump, you ask what delta-vee. So here you are, wherever here is in the continuum of worlds, every reflex tuned to snapping. Fresh out of training, you have yet to trade scars with one of the aliens' battleships; no one's yet engaged one face to face and lived to brag about it, if they have faces.

From the inside, the carrier Pavane is a labyrinth of dull silver tubes like eyeless mirrors, the surfaces smooth but unreflecting. Or perhaps the corridors are mirrors after all, and you are the only one here, huddled in the womb of your little fighter, the lone human in the heart of a kaleidoscope.

But you remember the long hours of practice and battlesim, one-on-one duels while computers and instructors calmly evaluated your performance. There are ninety-nine other sweating soldiers in their own fighters. Swarm Brown, for new recruits. Surviving lancers will progress through a spectrum to Swarm Gold, and eventually retirement. The war will be over by the time you get that far, or so they tell you.

The fighter thrums: sixty seconds before launch.

The womb's air is acrid with the stink of your fear, but life-support swiftly increases its processing rate to compensate.

Moments tick by, measured in eye blinks, and you close your eyes, letting the interface take over. There are no viewports. Biological sight becomes a hindrance, or so you've found.

And then the Pavane spits out Swarm Brown's hundred fighters, spits out a hundred swarms and sends them hurtling through the radiation-splattered darkness against the bright, jabbing patterns of the alien battleships. You evade as soon as you have maneuvering space, twisting away from the rest of your swarm to find

that an alien follows you to the battle's periphery.

The aliens never fight in clusters. Otherwise, the carrier would fry a hundred in a burst. Always they harry and scatter, pebbles battering at a boulder, or dance one-on-one. Duels they accept as their due, never summoning their comrades to help even when their ships falter. Years of experience have taught humanity to fight on the aliens' terms or not at all, one instructor told you. Something about that nags you, but then you must dodge the spindrift fire that targets your fighter.

Not a duel, but a duet. The battlesims were nothing like this. After a while -- a heartbeat? an hour? -- you almost forget that this is war. Then one of your lances strikes the alien's engines, and it blossoms into destruction, one of many graveyard flowers. How could you have forgotten?

Orders come through the interface, and the tattered remnants of Swarm Brown reassemble for pickup. You have escaped.

For the first time in your life, you want to sing.

5

A few battles later, you are still alive, but the song within you has twisted into darker threads. You have a few hours' leave at this spaceport before you are hurled across the stars once more; the port's name eludes you. Walking among the crowds, surrounded by colors both glaring and pastel, sheer human proximity reassures you. No womb separates you from faces, voices, the brush of shoulder against shoulder.

Instead, you wonder that they can't see the scars that pattern the wrong side of your skin, the alien blood gloving your hands, more tangible than a lover's smile. Civilians, soldiers. It's a one-way wall that separates the two.

You were right the first time, for the wrong reasons.

Biological sight is useless to a soldier.

21

Swarm Cobalt. You have been shuffled from swarm to swarm, carrier to carrier, enough times that the colors smear together into gray. Somewhere on your service record is the long list, your personal spectrum; on your dress uniform, too, if you ever have a chance to wear it. You would be lost amid the blur of faces at any formal function, and there was a time when the thought would have disturbed you.

You listen to your bunkmates:

"Heard the aliens blew up Cassandra City." The woman's voice is low, too low, ready to break. "My brothers."

Cassandra: you try to remember what you heard through the garble of the news databursts. Cassandra the Jeweled City, on Eostre V. It could have been your own home. The aliens will not retreat, will not leave humanity in peace, will not agree to draw spheres of influence. So they say.

"...and you?"

You decline to join the conversation. They understand. You've seen veterans who speak in nothing but profanities cobbled together from a dozen-plus languages, or laugh no matter what the occasion. The government doesn't care, as long as they continue to sow death among the alien ships.

"I miss the gardens. My cat -- you have cats on your planet, don't you.!"

"Not my colony, no. Spiderbirds, yes. Ever had one weave a web all over your room.? I can't believe I miss cleaning up after the fragging creature."

"Ah. One of those."

Ah. Of course. You never had a pet, and there are none on the Pavane.

48

Planet after planet, colony after colony, asteroid mining fields and traffic nodes, battlefields where dust shrouds every movement and others where the stars' radiance drowns your fighter's lances and the silent explosions. After a while they stop telling you who you're defending this time. It doesn't matter, you suppose. All for the cause.

The aliens have gotten better, it seems. Or perhaps it's because Swarm Viridian is sent against the aliens' own experienced fighters. Here you are again, dodging and diving, balancing thrust against gravity webs, hardly aware that the universe contains anything other than you and your opponent.

There was a time, you remember dimly, when you came out of a battle wishing life support were more efficient, to free the womb from your sweat. But you know that, if you emerge from this skirmish, your hands will be dry, like your eyes. How many more battles before you reach Swarm Gold? Is there a Swarm Gold, or is it a legend. Does anyone get that far, or are their hands as empty as yours?

Your concentration flickers, and suddenly heat roars through your skin, your bones, the branching of your veins. Sensor-blind, eye-blind, you stab through the interface, guessing at the alien's evasive maneuvers, a helix skewed in ever-sharpening angles. Whether you hit it or not, you don't know, but no second blast follows.

You wait. Surely the Pavane will pick you up, though you can't reach pickup. Surely.

You shouldn't have agreed to come to the ceremony, but you had no choice, really. The public needs its heroes, has always needed heroes: King Arthur, Rama, Kit Carson, Maui .... You smile back at the people around you, feeling your face stretch in an unfamiliar way, and not just because of your long-healed bums. The medal pinned to your uniform is lost in the glitter of fashions around you w no. It stands out.

"So how's it like being hailed as another veteran?" asks the soldier next to you, a wry glint in his eye.

You shrug, mumble a noncommittal response. You're not a veteran till you reach Swarm Gold, and retire.

"They'll forget you," a harsh voice mutters in your ear. You whirl around, then relax. Basic training takes longer to forget than you had thought. "Glory for a day, and then you're gone. They use up their heroes faster than a dreamer uses up drugs." The voice's owner, disfigured and hunched over, pats your arm, then quickly vanishes.

Veteran. The word tastes like ashes.

Now that you've reached Swarm Carnelian, you're no longer a mere lancer. The basic training you received once upon a lifetime has a purpose after all. This time your swarm is to invade one of the aliens' outposts, humanity is no longer on the defensive. Whether you will see one of the elusive aliens, you don't know. No one does.

The kaleidoscope spins around you for a moment as your fighter is moved into place. Once you tried to figure out if you were assigned to the same position each time, but after a while you gave up trying to keep track. All you can tell is that there are fewer ships in each swarm as you ascend the hierarchy.

The interface shows you a splotch, then a cylinder, then the outpost's intricate structures and substructures. Your senses tell you something is wrong, and then you laugh to yourself: there are no dancing patterns, no alien battleships. They have been taken by surprise. You hurtle along the cables and corridors, peripherally aware of your comrades nearby, and at last you come to the heart of the outpost. What it holds, what purpose it has, you can't say.

Reluctantly, you leave your womb, flare pistol cradled in your fingers. It takes you a moment to adjust to eyesight rather than the interface's sensors, and you curse yourself: you should have disconnected while you were protected in your fighter. Fortunately, nothing hits you. This time.

Then your swarm's leader nods, and twenty-five flares pinpoint the vault's entrance. The circuitry sizzles -- and then, impossibly, the entrance explodes

outward; you are flung backward, one of your comrades' bodies shielding you, and you gag at the fluid that leaks over your armorsuit. Blood, you think. Your side aches more than bruises can explain.

Shoving the corpse away, you rise, readjusting your grip on the pistol. The inside of your gauntlet has suddenly turned slick, or is it your palm? Eight other members of your swarm have begun to pick themselves up. There is nothing of dance or duet in this, only blood and the stink of ruptured flesh. No one warned you it would be like this, instead of the bright graveyard flowers, there are only fallen shapes as unmoving as stone.

Then you turn around and see the aliens.

99

You freeze.

They lied to you.

They spun lies around you like a spiderbird weaving its web in a sunlit room, or a kaleidoscope of silver tubes.

The aliens aren't aliens after all, but humans. People who fought for their home, whose faces you never saw.

Your leader is dead, but theirs is not: a one-armed woman who stands tall despite the tears tracking across her begrimed face. The weapon she holds is unfamiliar to you, but it doesn't matter. She points it downward, not at you or your surviving comrades. One by one, she fires at the corpses, hers and yours, leaving black streaks across the floor: not a burial, not a graveyard, but it's all she has.

You outnumber her, you and your comrades.

The tableau holds for a moment. You remember your orders, and you remember the lies. Slowly, you lift your pistol, but do not fire.

Surprisingly, the woman sighs. And then she salutes you.

Salutes you.

100

If you had just killed 99 people and the 100th asked for mercy, what would you do?

Epilogue

GUESSES MAY OR MAY NOT BE PENALIZED. THE CONSEQUENCES ARE UP TO YOU.