

Architectural Constants

Yoon Ha Lee

The city The citizens of the silklands have no name for the city. There are other cities upon the world's wheel. There are others more celebrated, whether for the rooted topiary birds that line their boulevards, or their sparkling, inverted fountains of wine. Others have taller spires with which to focus the unlight of the phantom moon, or deeper dungeons with which to contain the abysses of desire. In any of these cities, you may mention *the* city or *the* architect, its restless Spider, and no listener will fail to understand which city you mean. *The* city lies at the intersection of leys that move through seas and continents, and stretch into the vastness beyond the visible stars. *The* city extends upwards and downwards in preposterous arches and chasm-spanning bridges. If you listen during the silence following *the* city's curfew bells, you can hear the click-click-clicking of the Spider's slide rule as she checks her calculations. ? ? ? The librarian Eskevan Three of Thorns had dropped his lensgear in the gutter. Twice he had been splashed by murky water while determining the best way to retrieve the lens. He had another hour before the water started circulating. Having sullied the yellow-trimmed coat that declared him a licensed librarian, Eskevan felt doubly reluctant either to remove his gauntlets or to plunge them into the water. There the lensgear gleamed, polished and precise. Enough dithering. He would have to hope that no one questioned his credentials tonight. The master archivist always said a shabby librarian was no librarian at all, but it could not be helped. Other parts of the city boasted libraries of indexed splendor. Other librarians handled nothing more threatening than curling vellum and tame, untarnished treatises. Eskevan did not aspire to any such thing. In the dimmest hours, he admitted that he exulted in the wayward winds and the grime underfoot, the heady knowledge of the paths words traveled. He had heard the whispers up and down the city's tiers, and the whispers distilled into a single warning: *The Spider ascends*. Eskevan, who lived merely three tiers underground, a child of the chasm's kindly shallows, could not fathom the depths to which the city descended or the vast distances that the Spider must traverse. The Spider governed the city's processes, designing new foundations to withstand the weight of condensed dreams, or selecting the materials that would best gird the city's gates. If the Spider had roused, it implied that the city was in dire need of restructuring. Eskevan had no desire to involve himself in such troubles. A trolley approached, sleek and metal-slick. Eskevan plunged into the water and grabbed the lensgear, lifting it clear of the muck. He imagined that he could feel the effluent seeping purposefully through his boots and socks and the neatly tucked hems of his pants. Feel it canvassing the surface composition of his skin, mapping every pore and uncomfortable callus. Feel it molding his feet into shapes meant to tread alien, unstable shores. Eskevan stood rooted and terrified and cold as the trolley whisked past. He breathed its exhalations of sterile vapor with relief, then scrambled out of the sewer. He wiped the soles of his boots against the street's gritty surface and shook his gauntlets free of water. From a coat pocket he withdrew gossamer cloth and wiped the precious lensgear. The cloth absorbed the effluent. He blew it away; it dispersed into seedsilk strands, each of these unraveling in the unquiet air. Closer inspection suggested that the lensgear had not suffered damage. All its facets and toothy edges remained intact. It was easier to break a man than a lensgear. Their values were appraised accordingly. A cat watched him from a doorway, its gaze slitted and bright. He wished it would go away. Eskevan closed his left eye and turned to the patchwork of cracks along the walls of the tenement. He stopped. He scrutinized the insolent cat. Through the lensgear, he saw no cat. The gear click-click-clicked through its several apertures. His teeth vibrated; he clenched his jaw. Each time, Eskevan saw the loose, flat outline of a cat. A paper cutout, if paper could reproduce such glittering eyes. Eskevan opened his left eye and let ordinary vision reassert itself. He returned his attention to the

wall. Graffiti was broken into illegibility by the cracks. Inside the gauntlets, his hands tingled. He used the lensgear again. Amid the tangle of slurs and obscene jokes, he found a single shining line of poetry. With the assurance of long practice, Eskevan reached for the words. To his astonishment, the words

flared white and gold, and whistled from his grasp, leaving him holding an inky afterimage. Eskevan swore. Fumbling one-handed, he opened his capture tome and pinned the afterimage onto the page. It seethed before settling into dark, angry spikes. The line read: *The Spider ascends*, except

"Spider" was misspelled. That simple fact made Eskevan's stomach clench. It seemed he was going to be involved whether he liked it or not. ? ? ? The sentinel Attavudhra Nought of Glass stood at the entrance to the city's nexus, holding a pistol-bow in one hand. It was a thing of tension and angles, of parabolic urges. At her back was a curved sword. Behind her, light shifted. She whirled and shot.

The captain of the guard, Yaz Five of Masks, let the arrow embed itself in his shield. "It would have hit my heart," he said. "It did not," Attavudhra said. She had dueled and defeated her comrades in the guards' trials. She had trained cadets to combative excellence. She was agonizingly close to being able to best Yaz.

His tone was amused: "And that's why you don't hold my position." He drew his own sword, which split Attavudhra's second arrow, then blocked the sweep of her blade. She did not counterattack. Here, now, she was a mirror to his intention, thwarting his motions and nothing more.

Yaz stepped back and relaxed his guard. So did she. "It suffices," he said. Then, to her bewilderment, he asked, "Have you been dreaming?" Attavudhra never remembered her dreams or thought of her past. She said nothing. Guard training was the single lens through which she saw the world. Everything else was irrelevant. Yaz's smile twisted. "Of course not. Come."

Another guard came to take Attavudhra's post. For a second, his image blurred, and it was as though she saw two men standing where one should be, one short and one tall, one fair and one dark. Attavudhra glanced at Yaz, but if he noticed, he gave no sign. *I must be imagining it*, she thought. Yaz and

Attavudhra walked into the nexus, past a kaleidoscope of floating windows that showed varied views of the city: trolleys running behind schedule, orreries out of true with the movements of celestial bodies, shipments of salt and iron arriving at incorrect destinations; the sky's bright dome above, the endless well of darkness below. For a second, white shapes moved across all the windows, like the shrapnel of a jigsaw puzzle. Then they cleared, except for a child's bloody fingerprints on the other side of each glass.

They reached the city's singular gate, beyond which stairs spiraled up and spiraled down.

Attavudhra blinked, but she couldn't make the gate come into focus. Sometimes it looked like bright brass with abstract scrollwork, sometimes like a hole, sometimes like an aged portcullis. Yaz

said, "The Spider will emerge through that gate." "Then the rumors are true," she said. The guards spoke about graffiti that wrote itself in dank alleys, cursing the city; frost that drew flawed architectural plans on windows; masonry whose cracks outlined the shape of a spider. Yaz inclined his head.

"The city is unraveling, and all her adjustments avail her nothing. She must come set things right in person. Your task will be to keep anyone but myself or the Spider from the gate. And yourself, of course. Tell me, when was the last time you slept?" She didn't sleep, either, not since—she couldn't

remember. Hence no dreams. "I have preparations to make," Yaz said. "I would have a partner here for you"—his voice was low with some unshared irony—"but you are the only one suited to the task, the only one with the necessary perfection of discipline." For one mad moment, Attavudhra

was tempted to argue with him. The other guards were not as skilled as she was, but that hardly made them incompetent. But Yaz Five of Masks was her captain. It was not for her to second-guess his

orders. She said only, "You may trust me, sir." "Then I will go," Yaz said. He touched one of the mirrors. It gaped wide, wider, widest; he stepped into it, and away. Attavudhra blinked as slowly

as she could, unable to escape the reflection of her own face, its proportions oddly distorted, staring back from the knife-fine surface of the mirror. Did the other guards dream? Or was she singular in her monstrosity? She stared at the mirror that Yaz had stepped into. Had he always looked the way

he did now? Just as he stepped through the mirror, she had seen a strange shadow bisecting his face.

Yaz had not said when he expected the Spider to arrive. The supreme architect did not travel to the dictates of others' clocks and schedules. The city reconfigured itself in accordance with her needs, and

Attavudhra served the city. ? ? ? The silhouette The city housed many stairs, and Riye Nine of Knots had no guarantee that he had found the right ones. He was not entirely real, especially from the left, as though he had been hollowed out on that side. This restricted his ability to descend clockwise, for he had no corporeality to protect him from the outward rush of wind into sky. Riye thought he might be breaking, despite his precautions. He had had his left leg replaced with an illegal prosthetic, carved and fitted from the fossil of a deep-diving leviathan. He regretted disturbing the dreams of something so long dead, and fracturing it from its proper position in the sloughed-over earth. Yet it might be the only part of him that endured long enough to deliver this warning. Fossils had voices distilled over eons of sleep. Riye hoped that, if the rest of him disintegrated into the spaces undergirding all matter, the fossil-song would rouse every dream in the city younger than itself. He had sung, once, with his own lungs and words. Not as one of the great harmonists who tuned the city's uppermost tiers against the wind's harpist touch, countering the vibrations at resonant frequencies that threatened to unmoor the city from its foundations. Riye's aspirations had been other. Now that his voice was a harsh, shadowy thing, given to distorting nuances, he found his thoughts drifting into snatches of counterpoint.

The Spider ascends, said the city's thousand thousand voices. But the Spider's ascension would make her vulnerable. Riye had reason to believe that someone planned a coup regardless of the threat to the city. He was not the only broken thing moving in the tiers. No guards had yet apprehended him in his headlong descent. Riye despaired. Of course: he was fading, and they had no attention to spare for anything but the Spider, even a murderer who had escaped one of their dreaded prisons.

Riye had tried speaking with a citizen of the 239th tier, with no success. The woman in her high-collared silk coat and baroque pearls had looked through him, imperious in her conviction that a man with half a face would soon cease to exist. He had not dared look into mirror or window or water since then, fearing that his own gaze would precipitate his disintegration. How the 239th tier woman could be blithely confident that the Spider would fix the city's growing fractures without interference, Riye didn't know. Then again, Riye had dismissed rumors of the prison experiments until he became a subject himself. And perhaps it was simply that citizens did not care what happened to prisoners.

Riye reached the base of the stairwell. He was no longer breathing. The air's necessary elements circulated directly through his system by virtue of his exposed left side. This could not be anything but a bad sign, but for the moment he meant to take advantage of it. He had memorized the map of the city in his past life of depredations. This tier was known for its physicians and apothecaries. Indeed, the quarter through which Riye must travel to reach the next set of stairs was modeled after the chambers of the human heart. There were drummers in the streets. In his past life, Riye had known the dancers who danced to those drums. No doubt they still feared him. Fear, at least, would have been a taste of normalcy in a city increasingly unstable. For the drummers' beats scattered into arrhythmia; the dancers upon their balconies stumbled or swayed. The cloud-light that reflected from the city's convex mirrors raised smoke rather than diffusing heat. Limping, Riye did not expect to find a barrier to his progress. But there one stood.

"I have been waiting for you," said Yaz Five of Masks. He was resplendent in the uniform of the city guard, with sleek, polished armor and grey cloth so rich it was almost blue. Riye lifted his head. "Captain," he said coldly. The captain

was wearing Riye's face. ? ? ? The poem Eskevan had not expected to spend so long pursuing the stray line of a poem. Ordinarily, lacunae were one of his easier duties. Poetry was flighty. If it felt unappreciated, it loosened its verses to fly across the city. Coaxing them to come home was rarely difficult. But this verse was already unusual. He had sent a message to the master archivist that he would be late. Given the city's small disruptions, it would be a matter of no great import. Already the verse had led him through what must be half the shallows' graffiti and crumpled broadsheets. His tome was full of the same relentlessly repeated line, with increasingly creative errors of spelling or grammar:

The Spider ascends. The poem had led him to the city's nexus. Eskevan eyed the massive gates and the guard with apprehension. Still, he had his duty. He approached, trying not to notice the guard's discouraging expression. Surely the tome would convince the guard that the poem had to be restored and examined for its portents. "Sir, I—" he began to say to the guard when a voice keened out of the

nexus. Eskevan clutched his head. The guard shuddered and looked ill. For a second, Eskevan saw two people where the guard stood, one taller and one shorter, both deadly. Since the guard was distracted, he waved his lensgear as a badge of identification and ran into the nexus. Surely a single poem could not be the cause of all this? ? ? ? The gate Attavudhra was as alert as ever when the song came out of the gate, high and low and everywhere at once. She was no musician, but she knew the sound of danger. Attavudhra had not thought to have another use for her pistol-bow so soon. She shot at the small man in a librarian's coat as he stumbled toward the gate. To her astonishment, a streak of white-and-gold light wrapped itself around the arrow, slowing its momentum so it dropped to the ground before the man. Then the light leapt forward to wrap her pistol-bow. Agony nearly blinded her, but she did not relinquish her weapon. "Read it!" the man said, scrambling away from the arrow, which had turned black. Out of the corner of her eye, she did: *The Spider ascends*. Nevertheless, Attavudhra drew her sword. She had her orders. A wind howled out of the gate, bringing with it one man standing, triumphant, and another, half in shadow, slumped to the ground. "Captain," Attavudhra said wonderingly, for the man on the floor shared his face. "Don't listen—" cried the man in shadow. Instinct told her the shadowed man was a greater threat than the librarian. She drove her sword downward. The man rolled, escaping the blade by a handwidth, and Attavudhra saw that he was not quite whole. "Stop," said a dry, whispering voice from her left—from the gate. Attavudhra froze. The Spider stepped out of the gate. She was a stooped woman with dark hair. The sockets in her face were empty and scarred over. She wore gloves that were cut off at the first knuckle. At each fingertip was a tiny glittering eye. "Guard and captain, librarian and silhouette," the Spider said. She raised her hands, fingers questing: an eightfold gaze. "Attavudhra," Yaz said warningly. "Your duty is to me," the Spider said to Attavudhra. For a second, Attavudhra stood frozen between two loyalties that had once been one. Then she thought of the city with its roads unraveled, its libraries mired in unindexed words, its foundries filled with rust and stagnant water. The city must survive. She blocked Yaz just as he attempted to stab the other man. Yaz's eyes narrowed. "There's a better way than the Spider's," he said, his voice silken and persuasive. "We have had enough of chaos, of imperfections and flawed young recruits and emergencies in the middle of the night. We have had enough of a city that sways every time you breathe in the wrong direction, and that depends on a single architect for its stability. There's a better way." Attavudhra realized he was speaking not to her but to the Spider, and said nothing. Her sword caught Yaz's shoulder and slashed a bright red line. Elated, she cut him again. The Spider watched, unmoved by their struggle. The librarian, who had gone unnoticed, flung the lensgear at Yaz Five of Masks. The lensgear glowed when it hit him and made a sharp, loud click. Yaz screamed and shattered like porcelain before reconstituting into a thing of shadows and broken arteries across the floor, sewn together only by a tendon here, a rope of intestine there. The man in shadow struggled to his feet. His missing half flickered, growing steadily more solid, although his skin had an unnerving translucent quality. "Let the silhouette speak," the Spider ordered. "Your captain has been carrying out human experiments," Riyen said. "He stole some of my skills, although he could not help but take my face as well. Other people vanished in pieces. I was the only one lucky enough to escape." Yaz's voice spoke, horribly, from the floor. "You were almost the perfect murderer until we caught you. The world had no more use for you, except as part of something greater." Attavudhra remembered the guard she had seen, the peculiar double image. She lifted her hands: for a second she saw the ghostly hands of two women, one pair slender and dextrous, one pair broad and strong. "What am I?" she demanded of Yaz. But she already knew the answer. "You were my latest creation," Yaz said. "You were the perfection of my hopes. If all things could be balanced by halves, including people, then so could the city." "You are a fool," the Spider said. "People are not to be sacrificed for the city's symmetries. It is the other way around. If something does not suit the citizens, then the city is what must be adjusted." She added, "It is much harder to change people than it is to change things." "Then I am not a person," Attavudhra said, chilled. "Yes and no," said the silhouette. His face was whole now. "We are all built from broken things." So it was, she realized, with the city. "The city

requires a new captain," the Spider said. "Will you step into your superior's place?" Attavudhra stared at Yaz's bloody remnants. "He still lives." "There's a remedy for that," the murderer said.

"It is my duty," Attavudhra said, glancing at the Spider for her approval. The Spider nodded. With several strikes, Attavudhra severed Yaz's remains. ? ? ? The cobweb "Come here," the Spider said to the woman. She knew Attavudhra's name, and Eskevan's, and Riyen's too, the way she knew every detail in her city. She laid her hands on the new guard captain's head. "I must realign the city, but I cannot do it alone. Will you assist me?" "Of course," Attavudhra said. She looked at Riyen and Eskevan. "They saved the city." The Spider inclined her head. "Nevertheless, the fact remains that one of them is a criminal. What guarantee do we have that he'll murder no more?"

"None," Riyen said. "There are never any guarantees where people are concerned." "Quite right," the Spider said. "I am the architect in the city's depths; will you be its conscience in the sunlit heights?"

Attavudhra frowned. "The perfect killer as the city's conscience—" "Perfect no more," Eskevan said in a quavering voice. The others turned to regard him curiously. "The perfect killer wouldn't have a heart. He wouldn't have cared about the city's downfall." "Not strictly true," Riyen said, "but correct in essence." He bowed to the Spider. "I will do as you ask; it is the least I can do as amends." The Spider nodded, smiling faintly. "As for you, librarian," she said, "you have words to set back in their proper places, do you not?" "I do," Eskevan said. He bent to pick up the undamaged lensgear. Three people with which to weave a new web. She had worked with worse beginnings. "Let's begin our work," she said. Together, they walked out of the nexus and into the city.