

## I. Glya

Her eyes burned in acid air. With pain she opened them. Left. Right. Slowly, narrowly, cursing herself that she had failed to lock tight her goggles against the smoke.

Her prone body was surrounded by filth on fire. Above, the fetid, smoky air was barely breathable. Glya had to force her lungs to take in tiny tastes of raw heat, had to force her smarting eyelids to remain alert...

...Open left, close. Open right, close. Eyes to find tiny openings into this harsh world, finding lines of sight into a chaos she hoped would not notice the dark outline of her bulky uniform. She had played this hiding game so many times with her father....

...Glya was a child again, peering, safe, from under a pile of innocent leaves....

But this smoldering grit was no innocent child's game. This was no layer of leaves in a cool country yard. It was a dank mass of moldering garbage, burning lightly from incendiary fallout, giving up pale smoke that concealed her position from the enemy.

And blinded her as well.

Glya moved her body slowly, alert to movement from beyond her position. From where she lay she could not see the dangerous avenue that was only a few strides away. She had ducked into this hellish cul-de-sac hoping to find some way through it, and away from it. But there was no exit. She had trapped herself, with enemy near.

Keeping her view-corridor was essential. She raised her head cautiously, ears tuned to the rustle of her own betrayal. Through searing air came a glimpse of yierrie--or was it two?--moving past the opening of the alleyway. The creature paused, raised its weapon with a thought to let fly more death onto the burning rubbish, but changed its mind, if a mind was there to change.

Glya assumed there must be a mind behind that snout, even an intelligent mind. But it was surely a different kind of mind, an alien, murderous mind. Its thoughts were focused on its need to see its human prey dead, and worse, were she to be discovered.

The long muzzle of the yierrie pulsed, sniffing air. The smell of the burn, the chaos of rubbish, and the cling of her camouflaged bodysuit kept her fetid odors from giving away her presence.

Seemingly satisfied, the yierrie moved on.

She moved as well. Soggy paper and clinging waste slid away from her slick suit. She could not stay here.

Movement grabbed at her eye from above. A tele was moving, mounted to the left of the opening that led to the outside corridor. The snooper was swiveling to stare its black lens in her direction.

She froze. Damn! I thought this sector was disabled, she thought. If the yierrie are tuned in, I'm dead.

The tele continued to swing its nose past her position, surveying patches of burning trash. Its view rotated, came to a stop, then swiveled past her position again. This time it snaked around the corner to view the exterior corridor.

She wriggled her wetsuit through debris to the nearest small fire, slipping paper onto its ragged smolder to raise the burn. The tele would have a low-light range; a bright fire would blind its circuits. Things near the flames--things like Glya--would be harder to see.

Taking cover behind the heat, she raised her head to see where she lay.

In years forgotten, her blind alley had been used to receive street garbage from the long-abandoned restaurants on the thoroughfare outside. Before the yierrie invasion, this had been an area of commerce; Towngary it was called. Her mother and father had brought her here for birthday shopping and a dinner when she was barely the age of memory.

Towngary was now as empty as her own family home, not more than a long walk from here. Only the very brave or very foolish had remained in this neighborhood after the arrival of the yierrie. Her parents were gone, lost, anonymous, perhaps in the vast field of picked-over bones at the edge of the city.

They had arrived without portfolio, the yierrie, no ambassadors and no introductions. They appeared one day in a small suburb, a nondescript and sparsely-populated bedroom community at the edge of the downtown. In a single day its population had turned around. Thousands of yierrie. No humans at all.

And none were there today, except their glistening leftovers in the grass that had once been a park.

That grass was overgrown, uncared for, like most of yierrie-held Central City. The garbage Glya wore like a disguise had been left here since the last humans occupied Towngary, nearly a decade before.

Had the tele seen her, clad in debris? If so, the forward party of the yierrie knew she was there. They could be biding their time, working toward a kill.

Yet she guessed this was not likely. The tele continued to scan randomly, not a characteristic of yierrie reconnaissance. Had she been seen, it would have been a certainty that the tele would stare at her, resolutely, intent upon her plastic face as messages went out to troops in the field..

This was not Glya's first dive into filth. Several times she had hidden herself in garbage to escape detection, after yierrie had overrun her position. Humans had been struggling forward into yierrie-held territory for several years now, after being pushed halfway out of their own city.

A minute went by, then two. She counted cadence silently, keeping watch on the alley opening. It was still empty of yierrie.

She waited.

A flash dazzled windows on the far side of the street, walls gleamed hot with reflected light. A distant rumble vibrated through her feet. It was a shudder of sound, like heavy surf lapping against a beach. Then came a hint of intense heat, muted by her suit..

Rolling fire. Her comrades were advancing, probably along the nearby boulevard that was the route of the yierrie forward advance.

She surveyed the muck. Somewhere, submerged in alley-slime, should be a large trap door. Fully open, it would rise to half her height, and should cover nearly the entire width of the alley. Open even only a few inches, it might be her only way to safety.

It was a recycling bin. In the forgotten years of quiet civility, when getting out-of-line was crossing a thoroughfare against the traffic, street-cleaning equipment had puffed and sluiced and scraped away each evening's debris, sliding and nudging it until the mess could be made to disappear into this side alleyway. The accumulated playbills,

dinner leftovers, newsprint, and broken containers would roll beneath the hatch to rejuvenation in the recycling chute.

If she could raise the trap, she might be able to find her way home.

Or if the system were still active, she might find her way to be recycled.

Glya slid the tip of her weapon into the muck, hoping it might catch an edge of the door leading to the chute. The enemy would be here soon.

Nothing. The crack of the door was likely caked by gunk. There was little hope she could locate it in the mess.

Suddenly the streetfront beyond the cul-de-sac rose like a ship's deck over a testy sea, its plastisteel surface illuminated by the brilliant light of an explosion. An impact weapon rocked the structure of the street outside, vibrations shuddering walls and street.

As the street surface shuddered and fell back again, Glya raised her weapon. With a single burst, she blew the nosy tele off its mount and sent it hurtling into the riot outside.

Fire meeting fire. Maybe they won't notice how that snooper met its doom, she hoped, as she holstered her weapon. Instinct, not her usually careful mind, had taken advantage of the explosion to rid herself of the unwanted monitor.

Beyond the doorway, the explosive trembling slowed, its fire finding nothing else to ignite. Her fellow humans had launched this emissary of destruction, but it had found no one interested.

None but the tele, which had not expected the pop from its blind side.

Glya probed the garbage again with the butt of her weapon. Nothing.

But outside came something. A high screech rose in the distance, modulating and growing louder from the direction of the distant boulevard. Yierrie were retreating.

Retreating, and in her direction. She moved to the alley entrance.

A dozen yierrie, wearing the colors of special forward troops, dodged on all fours, moving toward her, slipping among licks of fire along the thoroughfare.

Forget escape. What good is life if we don't remember Mom and Dad?

Glya raised her laser and beheaded the first three. Five other yierrie fell, writhing. The others darted sideways, out of sight, moving much like the tiny scavengers they resembled.

So much for anonymity. Now her position was etched in nearly a dozen yierrie minds. A dozen minus three.

She turned back into the cul-de-sac and swept the floor again, looking for the recycling trap.

A thunk sounded behind her, followed by a wet slap.

She whirled with her laser and fired without thinking.

The rolling object suddenly accelerated toward the far wall of the street, trailing explosive fire behind it like an eyeblink of optical illusion...its blast growing smaller instead of larger, as it shot away into the distance.

She fell forward to the lee side of the alley as the weakened blastfront swept partway into the alley.

Only a tick of the clock had gone by. Her body was racing with the artificial adrenaline of the Advance Soldier, pumped into her veins by her bodysuit. Normal

nerves would have been shredded by the blast. Except for the accelerator that now infused through her blood, she would now be part of the lumpy goo on the alley floor.

The weapon had been a creeper, a fuse delay device. Its small but lethal explosive charge was designed to detonate, not on contact, but when it stopped rolling, so it could bounce around corners to catch its victims in hiding. Her own weapons-fire had penetrated its shell, sent the creeper traveling away so fast that its explosion had been retreating, not approaching.

In infantry school they practiced that response to the yierrie's favorite weapon, time after time, seeking the rolling target with the soldier's laser. Fifty per cent was a good average.

When the game is real, adrenalin must make for better percentages, she thought, trying to calm nerves that were still charged to a fever pace.

She stared at the alley floor, now swept clear of muck by the explosion. Running from wall to wall was a thin groove that marked the edge of the recycling trap. In the middle should be the slight depression where a pressure lock would release the door.

She slid her hand along until she felt a bump. A moment later the trap door rose up, and she rolled into the darkness within.

Her last view, before the trap closed again, was of two creepers, rolling casually into the alleyway in search of her death. As she began her slide in darkness she could feel the double-pulse of destruction in the alleyway above, the trap door rocking above her sliding body as though she had fallen inside a massive drum.

Plummeting downward, heart pumping, she picked up speed as she slid. She was on her way to be recycled, impacting upon dark sludge left there by society nearly a decade before.

As she hit, she managed a last thought.

This is better than Mom and Dad got.

## II. Kyrian

Kyrian held his stance in the courtyard formation. His eyes gazed with seeming emptiness into the distance, arms and body so relaxed as to seem flaccid. Yet his torso was suspended at an odd angle, one that could only be held unmoving by an iron will.

The instructor was Captain Crawthot, local terror to the youthful lords-in-waiting. Crawthot wore his field fatigues, the drab camouflage color of a drab sub-corridor. Swarthy face, a damning eye, and a non-official red cap with a feather on its brim.

"Kyrian, you are piece of shit!" he barked in Kyrian's ear. "You tremble like a child on the pot!"

Kyrian gazed with practiced distance into a far wall, impassive to the attempted hostility of his instructor.

It was hard not to laugh, because old Crawthot was a growl without teeth. Rumor had it that his had been a lifetime in the classroom, not on a field of battle. How could it have been otherwise? No real war had upset the country's schedule for more than a century.

But Kyrian permitted no smile, no twinkle, no twitch, no blink of eye, no flutter of fabric. He let his mind withdraw, as it did at times during a class that bored him, or a state function he did not want to attend. Nothing would move, sway, nor betray any agitation of his mind.

Across the formation of several dozen boys in similar frozen poses was Sklafix, his larger cousin, who wavered visibly. The boy's arms tensed, his fingers flexed. Sklafix's teenage mind was by practice crafty, bullying, but seldom in control of his body; or perhaps, more correctly, his mind was in far too much control, and his body was not allowed to become the unmoving small animal, hiding from its predator, which was the target image of this lesson of control.

Crawthot paid no attention to Sklafix; his mouth was at Kyrian's ear. "Dungwort!" he shouted, reaching his face into the distant gray eyes of his target. "You move and you die!"

Kyrian did not move. Five more minutes and we are off to philosophy class, said his internal clock; for he would not have risked a glance at the biological watch inset into his arm.

As they left the field five minutes later, Crawthot gave Kyrian a brief nudge, slipped him a nod and a smile. It was as close to high praise as the Captain would ever give, and inwardly Kyrian felt a small pride grow.

Philosophy class was in another sector of the castlry, but Kyrian knew a seldom-used shortcut. He moved away from the departing crowd and slipped into a dark and nearly empty hall. Above him a trail light went on, sensing his presence with the trip of a laser. As he moved, one trail light would go on, the previous light turn off.

Kyrian was thinking of Crawthot's implied approval, and feeling very good about himself. The reverie was cut short quickly.

"Little dungwort!" a voice cried loudly, from close behind. It was Sklafix, his longer strides rapidly catching up to the smaller cousin.

The bully had followed him into a deserted hallway. Sklafix was getting bolder, and that was not a good sign.

"Like a child on the pot," the larger youth quoted the Captain, adding his own interpretations as he fell into a parallel stride down the long school hallway. Kyrian stiffened, but let no hint of disturbance cross his face.

Kyrian had much experience in ignoring the larger boy, dismissing the mouth that tried to frighten him, evading the physical abuse that tried to intimidate him. So proficient was Kyrian in ignoring his overgrown cousin that the bully quickly began to recede into a noisy distance, like white noise on a busy street.

Absently Kyrian began counting trail lights as they turned on and off. He melted into himself as they walked along empty halls that connected the classroom area with the palace royal residences. The words of his cousin became disregarded chatter, unrecorded racket.

Crawthot's face jumped into his head again. This was what his military arts lessons were preparing him for. They were his antidote to Sklafix: his means to conquer unproductive anger, to stand impassively beyond himself when confronted by useless hormones.

Although Sklafix was Kyrian's own private bully, his cousin was not the only teen menace in the school. The royal day was often jarred by an undercurrent of verbal barbs, followed occasionally by a hard shove. Mental abuse was anytime, anywhere, because it was expected among the students of the leadership class.

Physical abuse, however, was always just beyond the attentions of the school proctors, because it was expressly illegal.

Kyrian sprawled suddenly, skidding face-down across an empty corridor. The blow had been to his face, but he had caught it with his shoulder.

Sklafix grinned over him. "The soldier watches his blind side," he said triumphantly. "Better stay alert, dirtscum. After dinner..." he gave his own neck a chokehold, as if to dispatch an adversary, and turned back to return the way they had come.

It was over. Sklafix was done with him for the moment. His cousin had come to plant fear, establish hegemony, and set the stage for juicy ridicule. He had no intention to leave bruises or scars that could get him in trouble.

Sklafix was a sizable boy, three years Kyrian's senior, eager to get in his bullying before the victim grew to final size. Kyrian had observed that his tormentor was very egalitarian in his abuse, however, visiting it even more extravagantly on the Lowers in their classes. Hazings, those nasty little abuses of power, were part of the training, the weeding process, the psychology of pretend warriors who might one day put this training to real use.

It had not happened in Kyrian's life, not in two lifetimes of the royal house.

Great-grandfather had last seen real war in the Catalyn. He did not like it. The Domain, he had said, did not want it back.

Most citizens of the Domain had agreed, and so did Kyrian. That same peaceful gene of his great-grandfather runs in me, he thought.

He rose from the floor, watching Sklafix shuffle largely back into the castle toward lunch. Sklafix had evidently caught a different gene in the family line, and not a very productive one. Kyrian almost felt sorry for his tormentor, who bore that recessive trait.

Almost.

At lunch Sklafix sat across from him, stare and smile aimed like a weapon.

Kyrian did not acknowledge, did not even look away from his adversary. Granting Sklafix any existence at all would encourage him, Kyrian knew.

Sklafix Leadermaster loved royalty and his royal status, but this affection did not extend to Kyrian. Kyrian's was an extra heart that beat between Sklafix and true power. There was nothing this larger child of his uncle could do about their grandfather, Craestos, who wore the bracelet of regency, nor about Kyrian's father, Joriol, who actually wielded that power as Regent.

Nor could Sklafix assail the Next-in-Queue, Ksormot. Kyrian's older brother was tall and regal in every way but one. Number Two had renounced the throne...not only his own place in line, but the throne as well. He had proclaimed himself a free citizen, who owed no allegiance to any king, even if that king were himself.

As Kyrian grew he had witnessed many angry moments between father and brother before some neutral family member could hustle the small boy out of hearing.

His grandfather, Craestos, the King; his father Joriol, the Regent; his brother, Ksormot, the reluctant next-in-line: three heartbeats ahead of him, before he could ever reach the throne. If Kyrian could have his way, all three of those hearts would continue to beat forever.

Abruptly Sklafix rose from lunch, removed his plate still half full, and departed without a rearward nod. He moved to the cafeteria door, and quickly was gone.

Kyrian was suspicious. Food was not only a necessity to Sklafix, but was treated more as a religion. A morsel left on his plate meant something very important was on Sklafix's agenda, and his most important work at present had been making mischief for Kyrian.

Kyrian grabbed a crust of bread, sopped up some gravy, and chewed his way to the door. He was still holding his plate, and indifferent to the critical glance of Proctor Wilkoy. Food went into this barrel, napkin into that; lunchware and plates were stacked and scraped for cleaning, and he was quickly on the trail of cousin Sklafix.

The large blonde head of his adversary disappeared down steps to the lower level, a catacomb of hallways connecting far parts of the castly. Kyrian slipped quickly to the top of the stair, happy he was still wearing exercise shoes, silent rubber against metal and marble.

With most of the school still at lunch, the stair and the lower level were nearly empty of people. By the time Kyrian reached the bottom, his cousin had departed into one or another of the tunnels that opened onto the oval hub.

A guard stood, bored, behind his post, a curled recess against a far wall. During class-time the sentry was duty-bound to challenge and record in his book the names of any truant students.

Whatever his mischief, Sklafix would not want to be later explaining his absence and the reasons for his schooltime wanderings in these hallways. The guard lounged, looking left out of his station, to Kyrian's right. The near station, to Kyrian's left, was empty. The guard at that station should have been looking fully into Kyrian's face at this very moment.

On break. Sklafix had carefully tracked the missing guard's break time. Moments before, his cousin had entered a tunnel beyond the sight of the other guard standing watch.

Two corridor entrances to his left and one to the right were invisible to the remaining guard. Sklafix had slipped away unseen into one of them.

But which?

Trail lights, Kyrian decided. They would be warm where Sklafix had passed, cold where they had not been activated. He moved to his left, reached carefully over the laser trip-beam, and touched the light fixtures at the two openings on his left. Both were cold. The third, to his right, was still slightly warm.

His heartbeat quickened. This must be where his bully cousin had gone. It was a corridor leading into an area of the upper school, adjacent to the student dormitories where children lived who were in the local schools but away from their families.

He followed the Sklafix spoor into the corridor. As far as he could tell, its length was completely empty.

Trail-lights should have been winking before him, winking out behind him, but he was careful not to let them. Lights were tripped by a laser device embedded belt-high in the corridor wall, a few feet from the fixture. He moved swiftly, dropping to the floor every few feet to avoid tripping the light. He rose, checked each bulb, and moved on.

Sklafix had come this way. All these lights were warm.

Kyrian was exhilarated. This was fun! Hiding from his responsibilities in the open air, trailing his abusive cousin on silent feet, these were wonderful moments stolen from his regimented life.

One day he would be ready for his real Explore, and he would certainly make one, even against the new rules of royalty. His family had forged a peaceful existence within this rough-and-tumble civilization, but there would still be excitement available somewhere for an adventure-seeking boy.

However, that excitement could only be guaranteed if he could avoid getting caught by alert Guardsmen, and returned, embarrassed, to his parents.

The next light fixture came up cold. Yet it guarded an empty hall, without doors or intersections.

Could this light be defective? Not likely, here under a castly where computers automatically detected problems and repaired them. He moved to the next fixture and found it cold as well.

No, Sklafix had disappeared somewhere in the ten steps between the last warm light and this cold one, disappeared into cold steel, doorless walls.

He walked back along the corridor, this time paying attention to the detail on its surface. The halls of the castle complex glittered and glowed; murals, designs, colorful student painting projects were everywhere, but were most garish where students could amble privately, art implements at the ready. Generations of young women from the dormitory above this corridor had individually christened its walls with signs of their passage.

Under the paint was one surface feature that ran the length of every hall in the palace system. It ran waist high, a sinuous linear pattern his physics teacher likened to continuous wavelengths of light. Kyrian slid his fingers down the surface, feeling the roll, the rattle, over those constant undulations. The shallow slope of a long wave gradually shortened until the wave crests grew closer and closer, all of the same amplitude. At last the crests were a finger apart, before gradually stretching out again for another cycle.

It was a sine wave, the width of an open hand high, moving from low energy, to high energy, back to low, back to high, in continuous cycle across a thousand castly corridors.

Some of the wall decoration emphasized this long waveform, but most just ignored it. On this run, some of the young ladies had utilized the occasional phallic resemblances in the shorter, higher energy wavelengths, and the mammary contours of the more relaxed long waves. The rest were painted over without a thought to the topography.

Kyrian slid his hand along the wall, feeling ridges pass under his fingers: speeding up, slowing down in rhythm as he walked at uniform speed.

This time he did not try to avoid the trail lights, because they were his only illumination on the wall.

He looked at the time. In five minutes lunch would be done, and in eight minutes a crowd of students would brighten this dark hall as they found routes to their next classes. Guards would close their duty books, and a smart truant like Sklafix would certainly want to slip out of his secret place before a hallway full of witnesses arrived to ask questions.

Cousin Sklafix was smart enough to be aware of his time constraints, this much Kyrian would admit.

Forty strides down the hall was an intersection. To the right, feet were directed toward the girl's dormitory; to the left, toward the senior mathematics classes. At each end were stairs that led to the level above, dimly-seen in the dark. He moved to the crossing point and dropped to the floor, slithering under the laser trip-beam in the dormitory direction. Those automatic lights could be fooled, and Kyrian had never felt a need to make their automatic lives any easier.

After a few seconds of non-movement, the light behind him went out. The hall was dark, lit only through the entrance into the distant hub.

Kyrian lay quietly, watching the far wall, the math department-side of the corridor, practicing the silence of his body as it had been taught by Captain Crawthot.

Did this make any sense? Could Sklafix have turned down a different path? Could his cousin right now be sitting outside a classroom or munching on a roll at the snack counter, leaving Kyrian to feel foolish in the dark?

Am I a fool? Kyrian asked himself. Forever there had been those rumors of secret passages and secret doors, stories of routes that led to riches or drew its travelers to ruin. They were sometimes children's tales, sometimes whispered among royalty, stories to tantalize the nation's future leaders with hints of past mystery.

"Knowledge is our most secret weapon, our most powerful defense," the Regent of the land was once quoted, Kyrian's grandfather Craestos. How to move in secrecy around the kingdom was power indeed.

And he had forged one tiny corridor for himself, after his parents had closed up the many others in which he had been discovered. It was a vent to the outside, from a service room beneath the ground-level offices along Catalyn Park. The room housed power conversion equipment, so it tended to become warm. The vent allowed heat to escape to the outside.

The vent also allowed Kyrian to escape to the outside.

It was not the kind of corridor he had envisioned, but it was handy after the Guard discovered his penchant for a little-used door onto Castlry Avenue beyond the gate.

The vent he discovered had bolts, but they were easily loosened. For several years his stroll through the park had been undiscovered by guards, who were not quite one hundred per cent at such an early hour.

But he was in the market for a more useful escape route than a vent window. Sklafix might lead him to it.

Lying silent on a thoroughfare floor in the dark was a first for Kyrian, even in Explore mode. But a remote chance that his older cousin could lead him to a hidden corridor was enough to rivet him to silence.

Thirty seconds before the halls would begin to fill up he would be forced to join the flow back to where he was supposed to be, the philosophy class where he would soon be required for appearance. He checked his timepiece, then returned to thoughts of the future, thoughts of how he might initiate his Explore.

The light caught him daydreaming. He held himself still, as he had in old Crawthot's class. He heard, but was not quick enough to see, the soft return of a door to its place in an unbroken wall. The sound was followed by the shuffle of heavy feet moving down the corridor, in the direction from which he had come.

As footsteps receded, Kyrian extended his head further, able now to see the rear view of Sklafix hurrying away in the direction of his next class. In the distance, lights winked on with approaching foot traffic from the cafeteria, as youthful figures appeared in the far tunnel.

Kyrian rose quickly and moved to the wall. No time now, with approaching traffic, to search carefully. He had chosen the wrong side to spy from, so had only a general idea where the door must be. His fingers played along the surface but felt no seams.

Reluctantly, Kyrian returned along the wall toward the oval hub. This had been only a quick look for the secret door, but he was sure that even when he had time to search for it, the key to opening Sklafix's door would not be easy to find.

But if Sklafix knows about it, Kyrian decided, if Sklafix knows how to find it, it can't take a working physicist to operate the secret. Sklafix is smart. But he's not too bright.

If Sklafix can learn the secret, Kyrian thought, so can I.