

The Shape of Things to Come

The Fulcrum in the Void - Interlude 3

By Erin O'Brien



Three weeks into the hunt for Hiroaki Yeo, Team Cerberus and their escort bivouacked deep in the woods of Gyantse, nearing the border of Brock prefecture. The going had been slow; the tanks had difficulty keeping up through the copses of huge spiral-limbed trees and iron-tough bushes. The two Grendels spent a significant amount of time clearing a path for the tanks and troop carrier. Even James Olivieri's massive, four-sectioned Trundle, the supply golem, had been better able to navigate the changing terrain than the heavily-armed hoversuits.

The camp was sprawling. Only two sentries were posted, since the chances of Insurrection finding them this close to Brock was extremely low. Some of the soldiers had chosen to sleep in the troop carrier, but most had set up their bivvy bags wherever they could find a level piece of ground.

James and Kiva sat across from each other, close to a portable camp radiator. Dia sat to the side, a little farther away, because she did not like to be so close to the heat. It was two hours into half-dark. The larger sun, Fortuna, had set, leaving only small Faustine to cast a four-hour amethyst twilight on Hertha before she gave over to the deep violet night. The little heater pumped out as much heat as a physical fire would have, and also boasted a globe light to offer soft illumination in a significant radius. James would have preferred a real fire, but all the Herthan burnables nearby were of the highly toxic variety. He figured burning it would probably melt their eyeballs. The still-awake soldiers sat at a separate radiator quite a ways away. Their laughter and banter carried across the camp, a stark contrast to the pilots' brooding quiet.

Kiva fiddled with a Kados. He pressed the yellow button to activate it, then turned the knob to "hot". He set it on the ground next to him. Over the next five minutes, the machine would collect a half liter of water, condensing it from the moisture in the air. Once collected, the Kados would heat the water to almost boiling. An old-fashioned French press sat next to the Kados, with coffee grounds waiting inside.

"Why don't you just use instant? The caffeine is the same," James pointed out, breaking the silence. "I can't believe you packed an OE French press in your Grendel."

"James," Kiva said, his voice dry, "I prefer the pleasures in my life to actually *be* pleasures. I bet the peanut coffee they drank in the American Civil War was better than coffee crystals."

"Sybarite," James accused, with a smirk.

"Oh, that's a big word," Kiva cocked an eyebrow, "For a *Westie*." People from Westdown, a neighborhood in Kinnomori City, where James grew up, were stereotyped as uneducated and simple laborers. Kiva and James were close enough to joke about it.

“Ha, there he is. Dia, you hear that? I think he’s still in there somewhere,” James pointed at Kiva and flashed a grin at Dia.

“Careful,” Dia said dourly, “If you call attention to it, he’ll go back to sulking.”

“I have not been sulking,” Kiva protested. James and Dia both laughed. Kiva scowled, then forced himself to brighten. The three chattered aimlessly for a few minutes. The Kados beeped, and Kiva poured the hot water into the French press. Another few minutes passed. Kiva, beginning to grow exhausted of the light spirit around the heater, distracted himself from the conversation by pouring coffee into his waiting mug.

James grew somber when he felt Kiva’s cheer begin to plummet into melancholy. Close as they were, James knew Kiva’s moods very well. Kiva’s guard was down, and he was focused inwardly. James knew it would be difficult, but it was time to tackle the issue head-on.

“Liam,” James was one of two people outside Kiva’s family who was permitted to call him by his birth name. “You have to talk about it,” James said. “N really talk, this time. You gotta sort some shit out before we see him.”

Kiva angrily dropped the mug to the ground; it tipped and sloshed steaming coffee. At the touch, the lobes of grass retreated into the dirt with a reproachful squeak. Called grass for convenience, the thin tubes had a hole at the top and base for respiration. They behaved somewhere between Earthen plants and animals; they would retreat from discomfort and could even change locations, albeit slowly. The grass was noisy, but any Herthans used to the outdoors had grown to ignore the whistling and screeching while walking over it. Kiva glared at James, murder in his eyes. James held his ground.

“No choice, Liam. That look won’t stop me. It’s time,” James repeated. He hoped Kiva would understand he was pressing out of affection and devotion, not to pick a fight.

“The fuck do you want me to say, James?” Kiva growled. “I’d just be whining about things I can’t change.”

“If you won’t talk, then I will, and you won’t like it,” James matched Kiva’s tone.

“Lay off, James,” Dia interjected. “He doesn’t have to tell you anything.” She wanted Kiva to talk just as much as James did, but she also felt defensive of Kiva’s privacy. She knew what he had lost, because she had lost it, too. Although it seemed to Dia that no one remembered her own loss, and focused on Kiva as if he were the only casualty of Hiroaki Yeo’s betrayal. James and Kiva acted as if she had not even spoken.

“Oh? What could you possibly have to say about it?” Kiva leaned back on the spiraling log he was perched on. He raised his chin high and looked away into the forest. James had grown used to this haughty, dismissive gesture over the years - a holdover from Kiva’s

upbringing as a member of the disgustingly wealthy Tawney clan. Despite his service in the Army, Kiva had still claimed his heritage and served as the head of the family - when he was in town. Otherwise, his affairs were handled by one Mr. Atreus Pace, a long-time employee of the family who had partially raised Kiva. Certain members of the family were displeased with the arrangement.

“Where do I begin?” James’ voice was clipped. “You know what you and Aki have- had- was sick, right?”

“What? That’s ridiculous, it wasn’t-” Kiva snapped his gaze back to James, murderous fire kindled anew. Dia held her tongue, waiting to see where James was going with this.

“Shut up and listen. I always hated it, what he did to you. He kept you on a leash. He’s a control freak with a savior complex,” James continued.

“Hey -” Dia started. She did not care for hearing Aki badmouthed, despite what he had done.

“I -” Kiva tried to interject at the same time, but James cut them off.

“You didn’t want to talk. It’s my turn. I’m not done. Maybe his intentions were good. You do seem to think you need someone to hold you back, but he kept you under his fucking boot. Between Aki, the Army, and having to look after Tawney, you haven’t done a thing for yourself in years.” James could see the rage building, but Kiva kept his mouth shut.

Dia glowered. Kiva and Aki had been so close they sometimes seemed like one person. Despite her closeness with Aki, as his lover, Dia had never experienced that level of connection with him. But she figured James was right; the connection between Aki and Kiva had been more possession than love.

“If he were here, he’d see how mad you are right now. And he would redirect you or talk you down, as if that’s his job,” James cocked his head, “But I don’t think you need that. I’ve spent enough time alone with you to know you’re capable of controlling yourself.”

“What are you getting at?” Kiva snarled. James thanked the Gods of man that Kiva was listening. Dia chose this moment to surreptitiously stand and retreat to her Grendel. She had not set up her bivvy bag; she preferred to sleep inside the cockpit, behind the command chair, on top of the trap door that led to the internals. Incensed as they were, the two men did not notice her departure.

“Just want you to admit that your relationship with Aki was sick. There was something wrong. There always had been.”

"I don't know. It's the only way I've ever known. He's looked out for me since we were seven. He's the only reason I'm not in prison, or worse," Kiva explained.

"I know that, but the thing is, his grip got tighter and tighter. I know what you are, or - what you say you are. But the older you got, the more you learned how to get along in average society. You haven't needed a babysitter in a *long* time," James pressed. "So it makes me think you kept letting him do it because you thought that was an alright way for him to express that he cared about you."

"Jesus, why are you doing this to me in the middle of the fucking woods, on our way to bring him in? If you were anyone else, I'd strangle you," Kiva complained, his eyes narrowed and flinty.

"I know. And don't say things like that to *me*. I'm not afraid of you, Liam. Maybe I'm just trying to prevent a grand gesture from you at the last minute that will leave a lot of soldiers dead?" James opened his hands. Kiva's eyes shifted. James frowned. Kiva was very good at hiding his thoughts, but James had known him long enough to recognize the subtle signs. Kiva's reaction was worrisome. Had he already made plans to the mentioned effect? Kiva broke James' train of thought.

"I knew," Kiva admitted, "I always knew. And I didn't mind. I accepted it. I fought him at times, but... he meant well, and he was the only one who cared about me, until you at KMA. He never meant to hurt me. He thought it was necessary to protect me from myself. When we first drew up the Code, it was necessary. I never would've survived Academy without it."

"The Code?" James had never heard of that, despite having known Kiva intimately since year one of KMA.

"Yeah," Kiva said, sounding embarrassed, "A month or so before we started at KMA, we wrote down some rules for me to follow to the letter, to make sure I wouldn't get in trouble without him there to check me."

"Gods of man, he really is a control freak," James muttered.

"Maybe, but he was right. You remember how year one was for me. Those rules were the only things that saw me through."

"The *only* things?" James said with mock hurt. Kiva smiled, and James realized it was the first time he'd seen that affectionate smile since before the Shinchaw campaign.

"No, of course not the only things." The smile had even made it to Kiva's voice. James hated to ruin the warm moment to ask his next question, but there was nothing for it. He needed to know.

“What happened in that building in Shinchaw, Liam? All Dia knows is that when you two came out, Aki was as white as you and had blood all over his hands and arms. And apparently you were smoking like you hadn’t a care in the world.”

“James, I can’t really -”

“Yes you fucking can,” James reached his leg around the camp radiator and kicked Kiva’s boot, hard. Kiva looked at James with reproach. James continued, “It has something to do with why he left, I know it does. He wasn’t right at all, those two days in between.”

“The way I see it, this is none of your business. My personal experiences with him have nothing to do with you or the goal of this mission,” Kiva deflected.

“Experiences that end in blood, and a Hertha-wide APB for Aki citing the torture of a woman *are not just personal experiences*.” James stated. Sometimes, Kiva needed to be reminded how the world outside his head saw things.

“Godsdammit,” Kiva breathed. If it were anyone but James, he would not have uttered a word. “Yes, it does have something to do with why he ... did what he did. I think he felt he’d lost control of me. That I was too dangerous to let live, if I wasn’t on a leash anymore.”

“But he was the one with the blood on him,” James was confused.

“Yes,” Kiva said simply.

“Care to elaborate?” James, sardonic.

“No. But I will. I presented him a moral, uh, quandary. His response to it was counter to my expectation,” Kiva offered. He took out a cigarette, put it to his lips and lit it.

“That all you’re gonna give me?” James figured it was, but Kiva surprised him.

“He and I each learned something new about ourselves,” Kiva said, “I was alright with that, but I don’t think he was.” Kiva paused and thought. “No, I know he wasn’t. You know, it can be a shock for people to learn what they’re capable of,” Kiva’s voice had drifted, to become quiet and far away. Recognizing the warning sign, James felt a beat of panic, then reached across to lay a hand on Kiva’s knee. He hoped the contact would pull Kiva back from wherever he was heading.

“Alright, we can leave it alone for now,” James said. “We’ll have more time to work through it on the way.” Kiva nodded, but his gaze stayed locked on the ground.

“Liam?” James asked.

"Hmm?" Kiva looked up. His huge mahogany eyes seemed lost.

"Why don't you sleep in *Angie* tonight? There's room for two. Get off of the damn ground for a bit," James offered. Kiva shook his head.

"That would be improper, on mission," he said, a distant twinge of regret in his voice. James banged his own knee with a fist. Kiva had a tendency to cite rules he didn't care about as an excuse to get out of things.

"This *whole mission* is improper, Liam," James said. "Nothing about this makes sense. Why send you? You're the last person who should be here, even if you asked to be." Kiva looked at James for a long time, lips drawn around his cig. James could see him calculating, the way he had done for as long as James could remember. Kiva was running the potential scenarios, and all the outcomes. James waited, anxious.

"Alright, let's go," Kiva said. He stood, shrugged his field jacket on against the chill of half-light, and strode toward *Angelina* with one hand in his pocket, the other holding the half-burned cigarette. James clicked off the camp radiator, then jogged to catch up. The grass hissed and squeaked in protest as the two men crossed to *Angelina*.

"Decided the risk was minimal enough?" James teased.

"No. The troopers are going to talk. But there's something you need to know that can't be overheard."

"That doesn't sound good," James said. His trepidation was palpable.

"It isn't," Kiva confirmed. He took a final draw on his cigarette, then tossed it to the side.

James bumped the button to lower *Angelina's* entrance ramp. He gestured to Kiva to walk up ahead of him. Kiva ducked his head and entered the first section. A raised platform, directly overhead of the ramp, held the command chair and control center for the Trundle. The pilot would be able to see a 360* view from the bubble atop the first section. At the back of the first section was a small bunk area with a retractable cot. James' gear and personal effects were stowed in drawers nearby. The Trundle had been specifically designed for long overland trips like their current mission.

James brushed past Kiva, and pulled the bed down from the wall. He latched the restraints to hold it stable. With a sigh, he sat on the mattress.

"Come on then, sit," James waved at the empty spot next to him. Kiva did, and leaned forward, elbows on his thighs.

“Heh, feels like year one,” James said, referring to their time as bunkmates at Kinnomori Military Academy. They’d spent a lot of time sitting next to each other on Kiva’s bunk. “Too bad we don’t have that flask.”

“James,” Kiva said, breaking the reverie, “I want you to remember that I really did try to keep you from coming with us.”

“I know you did. And I want you to remember how I told you I would go anywhere you go. Until I can trust you’re in your right mind.”

“Yeah, I remember. Here’s the thing. When I was in hospital, Orla came to see me - you know, my cousin? The good cousin. She told me that ever since news of my injuries had come in, Colm - her brother, if you remember - has been very happy. He’s been active, on the comm a lot, making plans,” Kiva explained.

“So? What’s that got to do with this mission?” James asked.

“I’m getting there. I’m the last of my branch. With Beryllia dead now, there’s no one to stop him. The agreements I made with her died with her. I’m the only thing in between him and all of Tawney.”

“Why wouldn’t he just have you offed, then?” James wondered.

“Well, assassination would be too obvious. I’m sure he’s been planning to end me ever since Aunt B died, maybe even before, but he was waiting for the opportunity. Orla more or less confirmed he’s in the process.”

James fidgeted. He felt his anger building. Unable to contain it, he rose to his feet and started pacing.

“Gods damn it, why would you wait weeks to tell me something like this? Even you have gotta realize I would want to know,” his voice was hot. He could not help feeling protective of Kiva, he had that much in common with Aki. For all Kiva’s ferocity, he was surprisingly vulnerable. The people who cared about Kiva could not help standing between him and harm. As his left foot landed, James noticed Kiva’s face. It was pale, creased with dismay. *Shit, I forgot*, James thought. *He’s been so fragile ever since he woke up. It’s like he thinks everyone is gonna bail if he says the wrong thing.* James sat close, and rested his hand on Kiva’s forearm.

“I’m sorry. I forget you get rattled still. I just care, you know? I’m sure you had a reason for not telling me, and I’m sure it makes perfect sense to you. But it’s me. Why would you keep it from *me*?” James said. Kiva snorted, and a small smile curled his lip.

"It wasn't a complicated reason," Kiva said. He straightened his back, and laid his hand on James'. "I didn't want to scare you."

"Well, that's sweet," James said wryly, "But I would rather know that I need to watch your back."

"That's not all," Kiva sighed. "There's more. And before you get mad, this only came in yesterday." Kiva fished his personal comm out of his pocket and flicked it on. He navigated to his mail and tapped a message headline. Text filled the screen. He handed the comm to James.

Cadet Tawney,

You'll always be Cadet Tawney to me. I was sorry to hear the news of your injuries. Particularly the circumstances in which they were sustained. I never saw that coming. But I am writing to you for another reason. Do you recall the time I took you aside to talk to you about your options? I need you to know a new player has entered, and a new deal has been made. Question it all.

Mama Bear

"Carey? What the fuck?" James lowered the comm. "What does this mean?"

"She called me into her office in year one, to warn me that the Army would be asking me to use my family name to shill for them. She implied there would be negative consequences if I refused. She stuck her neck out to give me the heads up. I'll never know why. But here, she's doing it again. And the way she worded it means it must be something to do with my family - so, with Orla's warning taken into account, that can only mean Colm is the new player," Kiva said, laying out his thought process.

"Question it all?" James asked. "Does she mean this mission?"

"Yes, and," Kiva looked sideways at James, "I think she literally means everything."

"What - the Dominion?" James' voice cracked. "But she's a war hero! She IS the Dominion!"

"Also, if the Army has Colm in their pocket, I'm superfluous. Colm will want rid of me, and so will the Army, to make room for their new arrangement. They only need one Tawney to dance for them. The public will listen to whatever rich asshole they offer. What better opportunity to legitimately, conveniently, lose me than this mission?" Kiva turned his hand palm up.

"What are you saying?" James felt dread creeping up his spine.

"If I were them, I would wait until a vulnerable moment - once we catch Aki - then order the commandos and tanks to take us all out. They can spin it any way they like; Team Cerberus

is so far out of favor right now, no one would stand up for our reputation. Aki was the one they really revered, and look what he did. In the public's eyes, we're all damaged goods. The Army can say we tried to rescue him and run off, and our escort unit stopped us. They'd be heroes. It doesn't have to make sense," Kiva's voice was almost monotone. His certainty was clear.

"Jesus," James breathed. He chewed his thumbnail. "I want to say you're crazy, that the Army would never -"

"Mama bear says they would," Kiva said, with finality. Marion Carey had been their primary instructor at KMA. She stayed with them the whole four years, and earned her nickname through her ferocious protection of her beloved cadets. Kiva had been a particular favorite, and she'd kept a close eye on him. She had also blocked a lot of the pestering and attention the brass wanted to bring to Kiva due to his family and heirship. She'd done her best to maintain his learning environment as free from politics as possible. Now, as the Colonel in charge of the whole of KMA, she had a lot of clout - and a lot of information.

"What do we do?" James asked, resigned.

"It depends on Dia," Kiva stated. "But if we want to live, we're going to have to strike first. And you - I really wish you had stayed home. *Angie* can't -"

"You would really have preferred I stayed, to hear the news at breakfast some morning? That you'd never be coming back, one way or another? You'd rather do this without me?" James swallowed, fighting back premature grief.

"I would have preferred you stayed to live a long life," Kiva said softly. "Even if we survive, we'll have to lose everything that makes us Dominion. Comms, transponders, even have to cut the chips out of our hands. Honestly, I haven't even made it that far in my head. Still stuck on the living through the fight part."

"Moms is never gonna understand. I wish I could - but it's too late. We're stuck.," James admitted, obvious sorrow in his voice. Apart from Kiva, James' family was everything to him. He paused, then said heavily, "But I would still choose to be here. Cerberus is in this together, and I'm one of you, even though I just drive the food truck." His self-deprecation was only half serious. He knew he and *Angelina* were vital - though publicly invisible - parts of the team. Angie carried refits, weapons, ammunition, supplies, and even a mobile repair bay for the Grendels. He himself was no mean mechanic.

"When it comes, it's gonna be a Grendel fight," Kiva warned him. "You'll hate it, but you'll have to stay out of the way."

"We'll see," James smirked. He'd had the same weapons and physical combat training as Kiva. He wasn't helpless.

“If you get hurt because of me, I-“

“What’s this, the untouchable Liam Tawney cares about someone?” James asked, a smile in his eye. James knew Kiva cared a great deal about a great many things, him included, but always resisted showing it. James liked digging at it. Kiva just stared, expressionless. Calculating. He looked away.

“Just don’t get hurt. For my sake. Alright? I can’t manage if you go, too.” The admission was quiet, barely audible.

“You know I won’t do what he did, right? I’ve seen every stretch of you, inside and out, and nothing I’ve seen could make me do that,” James said fervently. “You don’t have to worry so much about doing without me.”

Nothing you’ve seen, Kiva thought. Kiva closed his eyes, and James could tell his mind was in overdrive. Kiva processed, mouth in a grim set. Finally, he came out of it.

“Just don’t get killed, alright?” Was all he said. His eyes were like bottomless pits. James hesitated for a moment, unsure how to react. He went with his first impulse, and threw his arms around Kiva, pulling him close and holding him tight. For the first time since coming back from his injuries, Kiva didn’t offer any resistance. If the troopers were going to talk, then James would make sure their speculations were accurate.

Kiva woke, wound around James, in *Angelina’s* tiny bed. He reached over James to take his comm off the shelf and check the time. He found a message waiting for him, again from Colonel Carey. He opened the message, feeling a deep anxiety.

Tawney,

Take my previous message very seriously. Further confirmation has arrived. Things will begin moving very quickly on my end. I am not sure what tomorrow holds for me. I have attached a file to this message. Save it immediately. Deliver it to Hiroaki Yeo. If you still have any care for the man, know this file is of the utmost importance to him. May all the gods of man look out for you and yours, son. If I survive, I hope to see you again. It was an honor to train you. I’ve never been ashamed to call you my favorite.

Mama Bear

Kiva saved the file immediately, as instructed. For some reason, he resisted opening it. Maybe, he mused, he just did not want to think about Aki. But Carey’s words were troubling. “If I survive”? What in the world could be happening back home? Kiva resolved that he would give Aki the file, if they managed to survive the reunion themselves. When Kiva looked back at his

comm, the message was gone, as though it had never been sent. He turned his eyes to James' curled body in the dim, greenish light cast by the nearby consoles. Kiva thought about waking him, but decided it could wait for morning. He rested his hand on James' arm, grateful not to be alone.

Kiva brooded, coming to the full understanding that the moment the fight commenced, he would have then lost nearly everything he ever cared about. The Tawney family would disown him, his role as a soldier would be finished, and Aki was already irreparably lost to him. All that would be left to him was his Grendel, if it survived, and the man sleeping next to him. Kiva cherished James, but they were both aware James could never make up for Aki's absence. And perhaps he could maintain Dia's inconstant affections, but she had always preferred Aki's gallant confidence to Kiva's violent intensity. She still showed up for Kiva sometimes anyway, and had been loyal to the pair since Academy. At least he could be certain she would stay for the fight, to protect Aki if nothing else.

Much would be lost. So why was he strangely excited about the future?