

"The Hoplite"

by Robert Reed

This could be Persia.

These wide river valleys are fertile and irrigated, home to groves of fruit trees and date trees standing between broad flat fields of golden grain. The sky is a fierce blue, while distant mountains stand tall enough to hold their snows into the fire of summer. Every wind feels obliged to lift the dust high, and when the wind stops, the taste of the land falls into my happy mouth. There is majesty to this country—a sense of ancient epics refusing to end. Even the natives remind me of those long-vanished Persians—darker people than I am, with peculiar clothes and indecipherable customs, wielding a language that still baffles me, even after a year of fighting among them.

My orders bring me to a modest home surrounded by wheat.

A gun emerges from the shuttered window, and a single shot welcomes me. But the bullet is short on mass and velocity. My shield extends, laying out sheet upon sheet of plasmatic barriers that melt and then shatter the flock of angry lead. No harm is done. In these circumstances, I'm free to react however I wish. I wish to do nothing, to wait and watch, curious what happens next.

Next comes a string of wild shouts, and the shutters fly open. The rifle is flung into the yard, followed by a withering onslaught of curses. A man in his early forties screams at someone I cannot see. Then he lifts a small boy off the floor and shoves him through the open window. It is a passionate, unthinking act. But that's how these people can be. The boy is his son: Local records are at my disposal, including their security photographs and respective biographies. The boy just turned ten. He doesn't act particularly scared. But he is offended and perhaps embarrassed by his father's rage. Why shouldn't he defend their household? I can read his attitude in the face, in the proud posture. Straight-backed, he sits on the bare, sun-broiled ground, frowning at his present misfortune. Then he decides that enough is enough, standing and picking up his rifle again; but only as an afterthought does he look my way, considering the merits of a second shot.

His father rushes from the front door, gesturing wildly while asking his son a stream of questions.

I watch the two of them. That's all I want to do.

The boy is stubborn in ways that only look like bravery. Young and ignorant, he throws out his chest while boasting about his plans. He plans to shoot me again, from closer range. The gun waves in my direction. I recognize the words for "honor" and "fight". But really, I'm only a secondary concern for the child: What's important is to chastise his very cowardly father, stabbing gestures and dismissive expressions defining his scorn.

At last, the man absorbs too much abuse. He snatches the rifle from his boy's hands, then kneels and points it at the sky. This is a child's weapon, powerful enough to murder rats and rabbits. With his head bowing but eyes still fixed upon me, the desperate father tells me what he believes I want to hear. Fumbling with my language, he says, "I am sorry." He explains, "My son is young and foolish." Then he dips his head farther, promising, "My family...we are good..."

The boy stands tall, pounding on his chest, sneering at both of us while barking out a few easy curses.

Then his father touches the tip of the barrel against the boy's chin and shoots, and even before the body has finished its collapse, the man leaps up again, beating the offending weapon against the house, anguish and rage giving him the strength to leave it in pieces.

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#

I am a fortunate soul. In my first life, I often saw Alexander, the young king. In vivid detail, I can remember his face—a beautiful kingly profile—and how he would sit astride his great black horse, Bucephalus. When he spoke to his soldiers, it was the voice of a god—a glorious god spending his earthly days among blessed young men—and I clearly remember how distraught I felt when our man/king/god who had ruled much of the

world suddenly and inexplicably died. In dim ways, I remember being a peasant boy of ten playing with toy spears and swords, protected by a small shield made of woven grass and rawhide.

More clearly, I remember training as a warrior in the service of my king. Little moments and great days return to me. Dreaming or awake, I sometimes see myself marching with my fellow soldiers, pushing into Asia and then off to Egypt before returning to Asia again. I smell those long-dead friends and hear their Greek voices, and in my best dreams I understand the old tongue. But never while awake. Which is common enough. The technology isn't perfect. Our squad leader was once a Knight

Templar—a great soldier who died during the Third Crusade—and he openly confesses that he can't remember two words of his particular French. “These magician-scientists can bring back your soul and your flesh,” he will promise. “But only so much of each can return. The rest of you, your essence, belongs to this day and our great time.”

My squad leader and I have compared stories. Fourteen centuries separate our deaths; yet our bones were recovered from graves barely twenty kilometers apart.

“These are the greatest times,” our squad is often told.

I know my Greek name, plus a modern name given by the grim-faced nurses

who cared for me while I was a baby. But among my fellow soldiers, who have very little use for the ordinary, I am known as the Hoplite.

Our leader is the Knight.

We have two Romans in our unit—the Legionnaire and the Gladiator. There is also the Celt and the SS

man, the janissary and the Mongol. (Mongols have a fierce reputation, but ours is a quiet little fellow, almost impossible to anger.) Our most brutal soldier is the Aztec. With little provocation, he will produce masterful acts of violence that even sicken me. But knowing the story of his first life, I can appreciate why slicing the skin from a living person is perfectly reasonable

behavior, and wearing that dead man's flesh as your own is a genuine show of deep respect.

My closest friend in the squad is the Glacier Man.

His mummified body was discovered in the melting ice on the now green Alps. Six thousand years after his death, his bones were harvested for their genetic material, and a new body was grown inside an artificial womb. Then the long-dead soul was retrieved by a machine called the quantum-dilutor and implanted into the unborn child, supplying him with the memories and attitudes of his first self. Unlike everyone else in our squad, the Glacier Man has died twice.

“I was one of the first brought back,”

he likes to tell us. “An experimental subject in a program that didn’t officially exist. I grew up in the lab and trained to fight by the best, and my first work was pacifying an African hellhole.”

He has more stories about Africa than Bronze-Age Europe. Which only makes sense, since that second life is closer, and much more immediate.

“That second life ended with a traffic accident,” the Glacier Man admits. “Nobody’s fault, except mine.”

He is an honorable fellow always bearing what blame is his.

“But somebody thought I was a good soldier. Because when they enlarged the program, they brought me back for a

second rebirth.”

In our unit, the Glacier Man enjoys a reputation for measured courage and reasonable fear—two blessings among professional soldiers.

“Live this life right,” he has told us. Told me. “Do everything about your job right, and they will keep bringing you and your soul back from the oblivion.”

I always try to do right.

How could I not? What reasonable soul wouldn't want to live forever?

#

The dead boy's father makes a show of bowing to me again. When I was a new soldier, I took quite a bit of pleasure from moments like this. These people consider me worthy of their fear

and respect—the two faces of the same golden coin. One young woman was so nervous in my presence that she soiled herself; that moment kept me smiling for weeks. But that's the remote past, or so it feels. This man's terror is huge, yet I can't let myself be too impressed. What if his terror is calculated? Has the man lain awake at night, planning what he would do in a moment like this? Was he prepared to sacrifice his most difficult child to save his family? Doing the chore himself impresses me. I can't help but marvel. And to win more of my good nature, he grovels and digs at the earth, again and again saying, "My apologies," while his sobs pierce the hot midday air.

I could be wrong, but this fellow seems to be trying too hard. I approach and kneel, the clean, armor-clad fingers of my left hand forcing his face to rise, meeting my gaze.

In my right hand is a scroll-screen. Images of a known criminal are shown slowly, allowing him to study my enemy from different vantage points and wearing several possible disguises.

“No,” he says, in his language and then mine. “No, no.”

I normally avoid using my translator. Too often, it becomes a crutch and another reason to stop noticing a world rich in telling details. But this occasion demands precision. I ask, “Do you know this man?” and my machinery repeats the

question with my voice.

Again, with feeling, he says, “No.”

“No,” my machinery assures.

“Have you seen him? Anywhere?
Ever?”

“Never, no.”

I shake my head, my disappointment obvious. “Yet he was born and raised within three kilometers from your front door. You have to know his family.”

He ponders that rich question.

I offer the family’s name.

If he lies now, I will find him out. In my files are countless points in time and space where this farmer’s little world crossed with the criminal’s. No, he realizes, he has no choice here. It is smarter to tell the truth, but only to a

careful point.

“I know the family, yes.”

I nod, pretending to be grateful.

“They are very bad people,” he adds.

“But I only want this one man,” I assure him. “He’s a known leader and killer, and I want to gut him with my own sword.”

The imagery has its impact. Both of us understand that I have no use for ancient weapons. In its power and capacity to intimidate, my railgun is infinitely superior. But the face resting in my left hand grimaces, and finally, with a quavering tone, he confesses, “I am scared.”

“Yes?”

“Two men terrify me.”

“The man I’m chasing isn’t half as dangerous as the man before you now.”

My captive nods, eager to accept my argument. Then very quietly, he says, “You have to kill him. Today, please. If I tell you where he is—“

“You will,” I interrupt. “And I will kill him. It is a promise.”

“He has a hiding place.”

Every reasonable soul has two or three hiding places.

“Inside that far hill there,” he says, fighting not to turn his head. What if his evil neighbor is watching us?

“Where in the hill?” I ask.

“The flat brown rock twenty meters above the plain,” he offers. “It hides a doorway that leads into a camouflaged

bunker.”

I show my most approving smile.

And he replies in kind, but with tears streaking his dirty, miserable face.

“Don’t let him escape,” my informant begs. “He has a tunnel that comes out on the back—“

“Where?”

“I don’t know.”

I would be suspicious if he did know such a secret. But everything he has shown me seems both valid and minimally useful.

I let go of his face.

“What do I do now, sir?”

The scroll-screen is put away. Rising, I fix a plain gray box against the wall of his house. “Send one word to anyone,” I

warn, “and this machine will know it. And if anyone tries to leave this yard, they’ll be noticed. And a munitions platform twenty kilometers over your bare head will spit out a rocket that will obliterate your little house.”

“Yes, sir.”

I turn off my translator.

The man rises weakly to his feet, asking a final question. His hands and the tone of his sorry voice convey the meaning. “What do I do with myself now?”

I point to his bloody, dead son.

Then I make the universal motion of shoveling, recommending an afternoon digging a worthy grave.

#

The Glacier Man likes to talk about measured pain and calculated misery. Standing watch with me, he will point out that wars are usually won when one side is exhausted, and if you defeat your enemies utterly, it will be ages before the same people find the courage and simple power to rise up again. But that doesn't help soldiers who exist only when there is a war worth fighting. That's why it is best, essential and wise, to show moments of measured patience, and even the illusion of kindness. In that fashion, the people you fight can entertain the idea that we aren't invulnerable butchers. We are humans like them, and with better planning and a little luck, their descendants might

someday defeat our horrible kind.

The Mongol is familiar with our conversations. “Your friend made that same pitch to me, back when I first joined the unit.”

The Mongol is a likeable man.

“Little gestures of decency...yes, I suppose they would mean something. Someday. If those who saw our kindness managed to notice, and those same eyes managed to survive until the treaty was signed...”

He is likeable, yet rather odd.

“We shouldn’t temper our violence?” I asked.

“What I believe...” His voice fell away into black silence. Then he quietly told me, “We mean nothing. As soldiers,

and as a squad. At least when it comes to the prosecution of any single war.”

“Nothing?”

“As good as nothing, I think.”

My training says otherwise. Every other voice in my squad promises that we matter. And the actions of both our enemies and the terrified natives make it easy to believe that we are fierce deities holding sway over thousands of lives.

“Imagine a sword,” he said. “Two edges sharp as razors and the hilt suited for the strong determined hand.”

I nodded, lifting one of my hands.

“No,” he said, pulling my wrist down. “We are the sword. Unappealing as that sounds, we’re just someone else’s tool. And of course tools are soulless and

amoral objects, blamelessly wielded by others.”

I always follow orders; what good soldier doesn’t?

“The only cruelty that matters comes from the top. A nation’s king, a world’s prime minister. Whomever leads. But have you even once seen our Khan? Our Alexander? No, of course you haven’t. None of us have. Our master doesn’t dress up in his finery and ride before his cheering troops.”

“We’re not children,” I snapped, sounding proud of sure of myself. “We don’t need that kind of encouragement.”

The Mongol smiled in a joyless, wise fashion. “By the way, what is our leader called? Can you tell me that?”

I opened my mouth, but no answer offered itself.

“We slaughter in His name, but we don’t know that name,” my little friend pointed out. Then with a wink, he laughed without a trace of joy, adding, “But that’s only reasonable. Of course it is. Have you ever met the sword that can read the name etched into its hilt?”

#

The distant hill is a four-minute battle march. My exoskeleton helps me run, legs eating the ground in forty-meter strides. Every leap is doctored slightly by attitude rockets fixed near my center of gravity. Random firings give me a chaotic, moth-like trajectory—a difficult target for even the luckiest sniper. Yet

whenever my boot drops, the ground waiting is flat and solid. Infrared vision and radar and telemetry from a dozen flying and orbiting stations help me monitor my position and every likely hazard. Yet if my enemy is here, he knows how to hide. That much is obvious. This war is quite old now, and the only enemies left to fight are the hardened, wise and very paranoid few. A series of firefights and at least one major bombardment have pummeled the big hill. Reading the craters, I can guess what weapons were used and the likely history of each battle. At the beginning of the war, a company of conscripts tried to hold off an overwhelming assault. A long deep crevice is where scared,

unbloodied men would naturally take cover, and in those shadows I find shards of bone and Kevlar, random teeth and thousands of spent rounds. These were ordinary soldiers trapped while standing their ground, and in the end, they probably fought harder than they could have imagined possible. Kneeling, I feel the heat rising off my leg-assists—a residue of my hard march. One hand holds my railgun, and with my free hand I pick up the largest shard of bone—a partial hip—wondering if some later age will give this dead man a second life and better training. Someday, he and I could stand together, defending the future Earth or plundering the worlds of Alpha Centauri.

My eyes have always been sharp, but ten species of mechanical eyes allow me to read the rock and parched brush and a wealth of little tracks. Save for a skinny fox, nothing larger than ground squirrels live on this terrain. Has anyone shown his nose since I arrived? The spotter drones say, "No." If a man hides here, he stays underground, or at least he does a laudable job of obscuring his tracks. I sprinkle the hillside with sonic charges and three detectors, and the concussive blows turn the rock transparent. Does my enemy have a bunker behind that flat brown rock? The trick shows me a chamber, yes, and the deep door behind the rock, plus what might be armor plating fixed to the walls and ceiling.

There's room enough in the hideout for twenty men. As promised, I find at least one hidden exit spilling into an elderly grove of date palms. The safe, certain route would be to demolish the exit before calling in the rest of my squad. But each of us has his own duty today, and I don't relish the abuse if I beg for help with a routine chore. Every whisper of intelligence promises a single man hiding just a few meters below my feet. What I decide to do is booby trap the bunker's main entrance before jumping over the hill, and then I'll walk my way up into the bunker, killing every squirrel and trapped man in my way. As a precaution, I tell the drones circling above to slaughter anyone who slips past

the booby trap. This is a standard tactic.

My mistake has been made, and I still don't realize it. I start to leap my way up the slope, rock and grit scattering, taking several moments to reach a place just short of hill's crest...and then one of my leg-assists complains about its range of motion. This is a minor mechanical problem, but I have to stop to make an adjustment. And when I tip my head forward, my faceplate reflects the high hot sky. A faint white flash catches my gaze. Somehow a missile has been fired, and it's streaking toward my side of the hill. Did my quarry start to run? I look downhill, hoping to see him. But an ancient instinct comes into play; and with more desperation than grace, I leap

backward as far as possible, using just one exceptionally powerful leg.

The explosion is a hard loud slap, flinging me even farther. I crash down on the highest part of the raw, battered hill, stretched out on my back with three critical systems complaining...and now the sky fills with missiles that want nothing but to kill me.

#

The Glacier Man talks about history. Perhaps because his past lives reach back so far, he invests his free time reading about past military campaigns and methods and their marks on the vivid, important present.

“We’re the most expensive soldiers in history,” he has told me, more than once.

“A hundred years ago, the glamour warriors—our closest counterparts—flew aircraft. Their machines were expensive, their training even more so. But then planes became too quick and nimble for human cargo. Freed of pilots, the machines grew cheap. And once armed with the best adaptive software, we learned to trust them, more often than not.”

None of us completely trust the drones.

“But those same wonders made the infantry man important again. A drone can hit any target at any time. But the AI pilot never decides who or what to shoot. Humans have that responsibility, and honor. How could men surrender the

power of Death to a flock of machines?”

“I wouldn’t want to live in such a world,” I admitted.

“These are rich, rich times, my friend.” The Glacier Man has a handsome face decorated with the same kinds of artful tattoos that were discovered on his battered, mummified body. With a wide smile, he claimed, “We fight for people who want nothing to do with combat. Which is only reasonable. No nation would willingly defend itself with soft, fat, and very spoiled citizens.”

I don’t know my king, and I don’t know my people, either. But I know my purpose, and how can I question any part of this?

“Our age doesn’t require many soldiers,” the Glacier Man explained. “In this entire theatre, I doubt if there are two thousand of us.”

Most of who are strangers to me.

“Just one of us, armed with a railgun and light field equipment, wields the firepower that a hundred men possessed in the last century. And that’s without calling in support from drones and artillery and such.”

“We’re the finest ever,” I proclaimed.

With a grin, my friend agreed.

I don’t think much about people who won’t do their own blood-work. But then again, I have no experience outside my narrow, intense world.

The Glacier man smiled in a wise

way, and he carefully mentioned, “Yet we aren’t the first of our kind either.”

“No?”

“There are some very old stories,” he explained. “In ancient times, a great wizard or shaman would sow the earth with dragon teeth or some other worthy seed. And when the seeds sprouted, the dead heroes of past ages would rise from the earth, full of fight and brave beyond all measure...men living again, but understanding full well that Death is a temporary state of affairs, and most definitely not something to be feared...”

On occasion, I ask myself if I fear Death.

“A few thousand warriors born from ancient bones,” he said, spellbound by

everything we represent. But I ask myself that question only when I'm certain to answer, "No, I'm not afraid." When I'll say to myself in a firm, certain voice, "I do not fear You, Death. My faceless, godly King."

#

There's no time to consider what has gone wrong or why. Rockets have targeted me, and I have only a few seconds to release my holo-flares—little machines that generate images that resemble me, each bounding off in some random direction.

With so many rockets, each flare earns its own warhead.

The rest bear down on me.

I wait. In a low crouch, I give

instructions to my legs and trigger a smoke grenade that drops between the ground and my armored ass. Then exactly when the grenade detonates, my legs manage another long leap. The warheads hammer into the crest of the hill. Shards of rock follow the concussive blasts, and I spin and lose conscious, and when my suit jolts me away with stink-salts and electricity, I'm surprised to find that I'm still alive.

But I'm not where I was hoping to be.

My GPS has shut down. Clearly, someone's gone to considerable trouble to kill me. Even as the hillside falls over me, I pick up my head, finding my bearings. Then I drop and roll over the barren ground, tumbling without a shred

of grace into the bone-littered crevice. I could scream at the drones, begging for reason.

But that would waste time and make me even more noticeable, and whoever laid this trap is ten times too clever to leave any safety system intact.

I fall silent instead.

To the best of my ability, I hide in the shadows.

But the drones will sniff me out and kill me. There's no reason for hope. So after a moment's reflection, I decide on the only trick left to me.

I strip.

To a soldier in the field, armor is everything. And when I'm reduced to a bruised body and camouflaged

underwear, I am close to nothing. A little bit invisible, I hope. Then I set my helmet on top of the armored shell, telling both what to do next and then after that. Very quickly, I kiss the fingers on my right hand and touch the faceplate, hoping the suit's good luck runs into me. Those armored gloves have a firm, purposeful grip on my railgun. The weapon begins to fire wildly at the sky. And then a nearly naked man crawls out of the crevice, and with the grace of somebody who is terrified, he begins to run. A dozen rockets punch into the hillside, followed by the roar of prolonged avalanches. And because rockets are cheap, another dozen warheads pummel the crevice and

everything around it. I barely manage to slip away.

With no weapon but a plastic pistol, I take what cover I can find beside a small hole—someone's hiding place and home—and the dry abrasive rubble washes over me, hands over my scalp while my nose fills with the pleasant warm stink of a terrified fox.

#

My squad was ambushed some weeks ago. Fighting on that scale hadn't been seen for ages, and our leader, the Knight Templar, had his lower extremities cut away by a random blast. Sobbing, he begged us to please kill him. Perhaps the pain made him say it, or the idea of being less of a man. But rules forbid that

kind of homicide, unless your fellow soldier is about to be taken prisoner, or unlikely it seems, acting blatantly as a traitor.

The Knight was flown to the field hospital, and from various sources, we learned that not only would he live, he would eventually return to us, fitted with artificial legs and a new penis made of grafted tissues and silicone.

Until his return, the Glacier Man was in charge.

Everyone was upset by this very bad luck, and there was talk about blame and who should wear it. Naturally, that's what I assumed the fight was about.

It was late evening, and the Glacier Man and the Mongol were together in

our missing man's quarters. Their voices were low and intentionally muffled, and I wasn't paying attention. Nobody was. We heard nothing that gave us any premonition of trouble.

Everyone heard the sharp pop of a fist striking bone.

Which was followed by a second impact, and a high-pitched shout. Our squad descended on the two men, ready to pull those angry warriors apart. Fights happen; every squad has its family battles. In my head, I'd already written an account of the event: Our enemies had taken us by surprise, and the two soldiers probably felt that each other had been inattentive or clumsy. I ran into the room expecting to see pride and shame

embroiled in a cathartic battle. But no, what we discovered was the Glacier Man standing over the Mongol, using fists and boots to deliver as much misery as possible. “No, no, no!” he kept screaming. “No, no, no!”

Our two Romans pulled the attacker off his victim, and that’s when I realized the Mongol hadn’t lifted a hand, even to ward off the blows. From the splatter marks, I saw that he must have crumbled to the floor and then sat completely still, allowing his body to be beaten raw. Holding his sorry ribs now, he spat blood and said, “Anyway.”

Of all the faces present, he looked at mine first.

“Anyway,” he said once more. Then

he added, "That's still the truth," and spat fresh blood on top of the drying blood, never taking his eyes off me.

#

My enemy makes his presence known with a quiet, joyful laugh. I'm buried under the blast debris, and I can hope I am invisible. The laughing man is somewhere close and uphill, and after enjoying his victory, he begins to swing a mechanical shovel, digging into the hillside.

Somebody has gone to considerable trouble to kill me. Perhaps the man hates me. Perhaps I once did something particularly awful to his family or friends, and this is nothing but revenge. He could have singled me out for

personal reasons. But hate is exceptionally cheap in this country, and vengeance is everyone's goal. Subverting my own weapons to turn against me is an unusual, remarkable trick, and I have to guess that this isn't something that has been done for small, ordinary reasons. He digs where my suit and presumably my body are buried.

What he wants—the object of his desires, I realize—is my battle armor and railgun and every secret that a clever man might wring from such a wondrous treasure.

Slowly, very slowly, I ease my way out from under the dusty grit and stone. He digs rapidly—a big man working alone and plainly worried that one of my

friends will come to my rescue. I see the Kevlar armor on his back and two sweaty arms and the unwashed black hair topped with a helmet that has had its edges chewed away when an earlier owner was killed. The shovel continues to dig, flinging a fountain of gray debris out of the growing hole. I can tell when he uncovers my armor and my helmet. He withdraws the shovel, leaving it humming in neutral. In case I survived, he reaches into the hole with some kind of sharpened implement, jabbing hard at what should be a gap between my faceplate and breastplate.

The resistance isn't what he expects.

Puzzled, he withdraws his makeshift sword, searching for blood but seeing

nothing except for a veneer of dust and my left-behind sweat.

Too late, he thinks to turn around.

His face is solid, his brown eyes smart. In an instant, I watch surprise blossom, followed closely by the beginnings of a smile. He nearly laughs for a second time, genuinely amused to discover that he has been fooled.

My pistol is little bigger than a toy, and its bark can't be heard over the idling sound of the resting shovel.

#

The Mongol and I were on watch again.

In ancient times, this would have meant standing alert in the dark and cold, listening for the thud of unwelcome

horse hooves or watching for the glint of moonlight on an enemy's shield. But our machines are better at these mundane tasks than we would ever be. "Watch" for us is a chance to stay up late, drinking flavored stimulants while sitting in favorite chairs, each soldier picking his way through copious files of raw intelligence, rumor and the lofty analysis of nameless experts. Eleven days have passed since the Glacier Man and the Mongol fought. And I hadn't asked what happened between them.

"I'll never ask," I told myself.

Yet in the next moment, I heard myself admitting, "The Aztec thinks that he should have killed you."

"Is that so?" my companion replied.

“And then skinned you,” I added. “You must have done something very awful, if you deserved that kind of beating.”

My comments earned a narrow smile and a long, thoughtful silence. Then the Mongol sat back and took a breath. “I had a girlfriend,” he mentioned. “A native woman, as it happens.”

On my list of possible answers, that was my third or fourth most likely explanation. There are official outlets for our desires, and fraternization with the locals is never permitted. Yet that didn't explain the rage shown by the Glacier Man. Why not just give the soldier hard-duty for a month and be done with it?

In a fashion, I envied my friend.
“Where is this girl?”

The Mongol mentioned our last war—a long and very bloody civil insurrection in one of the old industrial nations of the North. He named a street in the city that we were pacifying, and a landmark building, and then I stopped him, asking, “What can this matter now?”

The Mongol studied me.

“Is this woman even alive anymore?”
I pressed.

He said a few words in a thick, vaguely familiar tongue.

“What’s that?” I muttered.

“She taught me her language,” he explained. “So we didn’t have to rely on my translator.”

Here was a second crime, as bad or worse than the first.

“She was educated,” he continued. “Informed and courageous.”

“But was she good on the floor?” I joked.

The Mongol sighed, aiming his disappointment at me. “Did you know?” he asked. “Our translators have censure functions. They do a respectable job of conveying ordinary information, but higher concepts are trimmed or avoided completely.”

“Well, good. I don’t have any use for philosophical noise.”

“I’m not talking about philosophy. I mean the sciences. In particular, I mean biology and the nature of souls.”

Suddenly I wished we would drop the subject.

“Cloning is relatively easy work,” he reported. “Expensive, yes. Particularly when the subject has been dead for centuries. But any competent laboratory can conjure up a ghost’s genetics.”

I nodded, and waited.

“But the rest of the ghost,” he began.

“The quantum-dilutor grabs the soul,” I interrupted. “Across time and from the afterlife—“

“And how does this wondrous machine work?”

“How does anything work? Cloning? Grenades? Our railguns or our hearts?” I laughed loudly, shaking a finger at my friend. “We know what we need to

know, and nobody is better than us at our work.”

“There is no quantum-dilutor,” he said.

I couldn’t understand him. What was he saying?

“The word’s contrived. A total fiction.”

“Your slut told you this?”

An old memory made him smile. “She had degrees in two sciences.”

I changed my attack. “The quantum-dilutor belongs to a secret project. Your slut couldn’t know about its powers or nature. Nothing.”

“That was my argument,” he confessed.

“And how did she respond?”

“‘Suppose you are correct,’ she said to me. ‘The dilutor is real, and souls can be snatched and spliced back into their reborn bodies. But even one cloned baby is an expensive creation. Wouldn’t it be far, far cheaper to grab up the occasional boy-child and immerse him in a world where he’s fed images and attitudes from some fictional past...?’”

“She asked you this?”

He nodded.

“And what did you do to her?”

“Many things.” His smile turned bittersweet. “But several weeks later, when I had to finish things with her...”

His voice ground to a halt.

“What?”

“When I was putting my knife to her

neck, she said to me, ‘Life is nothing to you. Is it? We’re just cheap and easy meat.’

“I promised her that no, this was difficult for me.

“Then as the knife cut, she asked, ‘If there are two paths to the same goal, what wise king would take the harder route...?’”

#

The father rises from bed to discover an armored figure at his doorstep, and the lazy glow of lamps illuminates the face that he expects to see. A wide honest smile comes before words of congratulation. He acts relieved and joyous, assuring his visitor, “Worked just as we hoped. Got the bastard, got

him!

And you got his suit working for you too, I see. What a day!”

One hand lifts, removing the bloodied faceplate.

The man still smiles, but alarm starts to creep into his thoughts. Then in horror, he watches me pull away his ally’s face—a gruesome disguise that leaves my own face covered with gore.

With a kick, I cripple him.

“It was the box I left behind,” I said, dragging him to center of his house. “That’s what your friend in the hill needed. He gave you equipment to fool the box, to make it believe I was the enemy.”

Just as he did a few hours ago, the

man begs for mercy. But we both understand that nobody will believe his lies, and after his wife is dead on the floor, he decides to say nothing else, spending his remaining strength throwing hateful stares my way.

He has two young daughters, and then he has no daughters.

“You are a monster,” he mutters.

“No,” I say, “I am a hoplite.”

The word confuses him.

“I was born more than two thousand years ago, or twenty-two years ago.” I shrug beneath my armor, adding, “On this subject, I am of two minds. But I do remember Alexander and that black horse of his, and I know Persia well, and from a great distance, I once saw Darius

standing on his war chariot.”

“Monster,” the man repeats.

Then I happen to glance at his wife’s body. A simple nightshirt is twisted around her chest, and twin marks show where milk leaks from the heavy breasts. In my files, no mention is made of a baby. It must be a very recent addition, and still sleeping.

I show the man a sly grin and start walking to the back of the house.

“No!” he screams. “You bastard—“

The baby sleeps soundly in his dead brother’s room. I carry him as if he was my own, kneeling before his father. Then through my translator—my smart, censoring translator—I explain, “This is what I believe:

“Perhaps souls can’t be brought back from the dead. But what’s impossible today might well become easy and cheap in another thousand years. Which is a sweet prospect that keeps me living my life this way. Serving as a loyal soldier, doing exactly what is required of my species.”

“The boy,” the man begins.

“I’ll give him to my superiors,” I explain. “There is a program where bounties are paid for newborn males. ‘As objects of study,’ we have been told. But I have reasons to think otherwise.”

My translator doesn’t speak as long as I expect. Have my words been deemed too dangerous?

The man grows more confused and alarmed, trying to drag his miserable body closer. I pull his son away.

The child wakes, breaking into a hard cry.

“He’s hungry,” the doomed father whispers.

“Well then,” I say. “Before I take my leave, I’ll let this young man have a sip or two.” Then I pull back his mother’s nightshirt, pushing the weeping face against the still-warm breast...and I sit back and smile at the father, remarking, “Maybe the magician-scientists will make him into a hoplite like me. And ten thousand years from tonight, on a bright world under the Centauri suns...maybe two old hoplites will be conjured from

the dragon's sewn teeth, joining arms
against that day's Darius. Yes...?"

The End