

Post Historic

It is hard to dig with the quetzalcoatlus flock harrying us day and night. Vulture like, they are not supposed to seek living prey, just those baked corpses they come across on the plains, or the festering remains of other creatures rotting on the boggy floors of the primeval forests: young sauropod, hypsilophodon, lycaenops, whatever they can find. But they circle above us regardless and relentless, as if they are waiting for an inevitable fatality.

The wing span of these beasts is awe-inspiring, and I should have been grateful for the opportunity to have observed them with greater rigour: however, our team has been set other tasks, and I work diligently to ensure that our focus remains on the mission appointed us. It is hard to ignore their presence though: in a bipedal position, the creatures are near to the 10 foot mark. It is quite remarkable.

We have been excavating a site of mineralogical interest on a peninsula that lies in a south-western region of this gelatinous land mass. It is hard to differentiate one's bearings in such a blob of tufted Maastrichtian geography – and acclimatising oneself to three-dimensional movement has proved to be a nauseating experience. Neither my colleagues nor I were able to walk in a straight line or converse rationally for the first three days following our arrival. Adjusting to time as a physically distinct element to latitudinal reality has made a mockery of such mundane matters as dressing oneself, cooking, dreaming. To return to the matter: it is pyroxene and plagioclase that my team have been specifically tasked to study. There have been mumblings from on high, I gather, that these two ignoble rock forms played more of a role in the rise of the mammal than previously supposed. And, perhaps of greater

relevance, there are a number of cradle-planets that just don't seem to be able to grow them, no matter what chemistry is brought into play. Strange, indeed. No matter: our task is to record and measure, and that is what we are undertaking to the best of our ability, no matter the...distractions.

Lucas fell yesterday, climbing from the trench, anthropometer in hand, and one of the quetzalcoatus dropped like a stone from the sky to squat just a few feet away from the dug-out pit in which he lay. As I approached, shouting and waving a mattock, its long neck snapped round and waved, snakelike. It regarded me from down the length of its beak with black pebble eyes that darted and snapped restlessly. It did not fly away in angry alarm, as I had expected, but watched me for a moment, over the pile of spoil between us, and tiny comprehension seemed to flicker in its gaze. I shouted again and it finally took off: huge, thickly veined wings beat the air downward in hot draughts to carry its otherwise thin form higher and higher into the dry sky. Its shadow loomed large above me, and then receded as it re-joined its flock in their never-ending aerial loop around our site. The incident un-nerved me, I will admit. Such an encounter had not formed a part of our briefing.

Lucas was fine, although I wonder, had he been alone, whether that quetzalcoatus would have attacked him, despite the insignificance of his injuries. I have been sure to note this in my field journal, as it suggests our previous knowledge of these particular beasts has been incomplete. It is a mystery, for other teams have been sent to this location: scouts from nearby Turpha 5 were the first to visit New Rome, and a group of physicists from Saturn's Sister, not to mention the hordes of palaeontologists from across all eighty three systems who have had their applications approved over the years. Although it strikes me, as I write, that we are the first human team of pre-archaeologists to have been dispatched. Could there be a connection here? In the extensive records and files that the previous delegations have amassed, quetzalcoatus have been recorded, always, as scavenging creatures that, despite

their enormous size, have been fearful of the incoming teams. Why is our experience so different? What is it about our small crew that they find so provocative?

Of course, we are forbidden to erect any protective fields to cover our site or our nearby sleeping quarters, for fear of introducing potentially harmful elements to the ecosystem. And, so, our nights, too, are haunted by the drag and waft of great wings overhead, and the regular brittle snap and shriek as a pair fight, colliding in brutal mid-air savagery so that we find the canvas of our tents splattered with gore come morning. We are, all of us, beginning to look forward to the end of our assignment with great anticipation.

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There has been a discovery here in New Rome. I hardly know how to record this, and I can only imagine what the wider implications will be once we return home. I wish to God that I had smuggled here a temporal receiver, so that we could at least get a message out. My brother had urged me to, upon learning of my assignment, but I am not one for breaking the rules. And, it is true, I did not relish the thought of the necessary surgeries.

Lucas, Hannah and I had spent the morning digging in the south west trench. We had mapped the samples we had taken in all five dimensions, and were preparing to break for lunch. Caleb will no longer leave the shelter of his canvas, and has had to be sedated. We had collected a number of the best samples for analogue imaging and moved to the northern corner of the site where we planned to dig a fresh pit. As Hannah roped off the area, two quetzalcoatlus fluttered down from the great turning wheel of their fellows in the sky and crouched nearby, watching us. Lucas hefted a stone at them and they shuffled back a little, unhurried. We are growing accustomed to such behaviour, but it is unnerving nonetheless. We kept one eye on the pair as we began using picks and brushes to make an initial exploratory sweep of the area. And that was when Hannah, pulling her draw hoe carefully

across a corner of the site, let out a small noise of distress and dropped to her knees, both hands coming up to cover her mouth. Lucas and I hurried to her side, both, I am certain, sure that she had sustained some unseen injury.

I reached her first, and I saw the skull she had uncovered. Teeth and threads of hair adhered to the bone and it was, without a doubt, human. I heard Lucas behind me draw up to a sudden halt, and suck in his breath as he, too, first recognised what he saw, and then understood its implications. For we all knew that, of all the teams that had been sent here, no members had been lost. There had been no fatality, no unclaimed and un-recovered body that could account for this find.

And none of the teams sent here, but ours, had been human.

And that was when I turned around and saw that there were now thirty or more of the quetzalcoatlus on the ground behind us, watching our group in silence. At last I realised, as I pulled my weapon from my belt, that they reacted differently to us because they recognised us. Humans. Our species was not new to them. Ancient people must be here now, somewhere. Unseen from and undetected by history and the investigative parties that had come previously, and why should that be otherwise: neither the planetary sphere nor the local habitat had been scanned for the presence of homo sap life forms. Why should it have been? I thought of the implications of this as more of the quetzalcoatlus plummeted from the sky to join the creatures that were slouching towards us in leathery waves. I wondered at the origins of these humans, and whether they would survive the meteor impact that was due to wipe out the dinosaurs in fifty-six thousand years. Or would they would be artificially reintroduced at some later point. And by whose hand. And even when, having driven twenty or so of the quetzalcoaltus off with a low frequency ion beam, a beating wing knocked it from my hand, and even when I registered that both Hannah and Lucas had disappeared in gluts of blood and

bone, I couldn't help but think of the marching soldiers from the original Rome, that ancient region of Old Earth, when it was in its empiric prime. Of how their armour must have glinted in the small sun of the now dead planet as they marched into newly conquered territory, and of how many must have left their own blood and bone in the soil of the settled land.

My mind spat out a final thought as the long shadows of the beast crept up my legs, my chest, my neck: when in Rome, do as Romans do.

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