

The Future as a Roll of the Dice.

By

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Author's Comment

I wrote 'The Future as a Roll of the Dice' as an exercise. Please understand it is very much a work in progress. Despite running a couple of spelling and grammar checkers across it, you might still find the odd mistake. I apologise in advance and will work on correcting such issues.

As I mentioned, this is an exercise where I wanted to practice two powerful figures confronting each other, a battle of wills, if you like, told mostly through subtext. I plan to return to it now and then and work on it some more.

Whether the story ends up being part of a larger work, or I simply leave it as a short story, I don't as yet know. Only time will tell. In the meantime, I hope you enjoy it.

Glenn

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He knew the goblet hanging down beside the chair was full to the brim and in danger of spilling, General Kiine-shi paid it no attention, lost as he was in the flames, flaring and dancing in the portable fireplace. Some rose slowly in a twisted dance, rising to the tent's roof and exiting through the hole set there for that purpose. The crackle, snap and pop from the burning wood held him in its sway.

Yet he was oblivious to the sweet scent rising from the fire and filling the tent as the wood burnt, and to the sound of the tent straining against its restraints as the wind grew in force following the setting of the planet's sun. The exotic material of the tent bounced and strained against the ropes holding it in place. The wind howled softly outside, adding its own voice to the sound of the fire and carrying with it as a passenger the cries of pain, of death from his soldiers in the medical tent a dozen steps outside.

Behind him, his staff and servant eat and talked in hushed tones, glancing his way every now and then. Senior Commander Linden-shu pulled his jacket, his rank insignia and

military awards sparking in the light from the orbs floating near the roof, closer to him. The tent was warm, not hot but comfortable, yet he acted as if he were chilled.

Without warning, a cold wind blew the flames about. Kiine-shi turned from his contemplations to face the entrance, standing abruptly, spilling a measure of his wine, as Emperor Kendo Bauohan entered. He was closely followed by his personal bodyguard, who took positions around the tent and stared with deep suspicion at Kiine-shi and his staff. Close behind the Emperor was Leax-ano, the Emperor's chief advisor and confidant.

'Your Majesty,' Kiine-shi said, in a tone that suggested both long familiarity and surprise at the presence of the Emperor.

The emperor strode into the tent, joining the general at the fire. He was a figure of legend, wearing a military uniform that struggled to contain him, that was bedecked with gold and silver and rare jewels. In appearance, his awards suggested he had won many battles and had a long history in the military. The floating globes brought out the best of his dark blue army uniform, the broad red band running down his trousers. The cloak, too, added to the martial air; dark blue, with a red border and the imperial emblem sown in silver thread taking up most of the space. There were jewels there, too. Firey reds and yellows, deep blues and greens. The weight of the thing alone was impressive.

At his right hip sat a newly minted sidearm and a short sword with a jewelled hilt on the left. His black hair had been blown about by the wind but gave his creaseless face a mildly haggard look. In build he was athletic, lightly built and a man who moved like a dancer. His successes in the ring were ring was renowned, till he took the steps to the Golden Throne. A solid comparison to Kiine-shi, who, while taller, was of a more solid, muscular build. When Kiine-shi moved, he did so with certainty and purpose. His hair was short, his long face, lined, scarred around the right cheek.

Kendo Bauohan tugged at his cloak, pulling it and folding across his left arm as he approached the fire. Kiine-shi's staff hurried to their feet with a bumping of the table and a rattling of glasses and cutlery. Kiin-shi moved away from the fire, indicating the solitary chair. Kendo Bauohan gave the briefest nods and settled down, while the general moved to the side of the fireplace.

Mimicking the general, Kendo Bauohan started deeply in to the flames, though his hands were held out before him to catch the heat. He was still, and the general watched him, ignoring Leax-ano, the emperor's bodyguards, his own men. Kiine-shi was reading his old friend, much as he would do when they were playmates together at the imperial palace on their homeworld.

'I'm going to have an Imperial Triumph,' Kendo Bauohan said to the burning wood.

The silence in the tent grew deeper. Linden-shu and Commander Mansh-sjm exchanged glances.

'After all, Kiine-shi, this is a glorious victory,' the emperor continued, 'for me.'

'Yes, your majesty,' Kiine-shi replied. 'The Sadu's fleet is in full flight with elements of our fleet in pursuit. They won't make for their homeworld, but just in case I've tasked a squadron to blockade it. Tomorrow they will sue for peace. You can name your terms.'

'Sue for peace?' the emperor said, as might a man chewing on something distasteful.

The wind picked up momentarily, carrying the cries of the wounded into the tent.

'Can't you do something about that noise!' he snapped, waving a hand from side to side as if as a command. 'How can I order my thoughts?'

Behind them, Linden-shu and Mansh-sjm and Conso-abe, looked at the general.

'They are your soldiers, Kendo'y. They fought the battle for you.'

A sour expression crossed the emperor's face. A burst of anger flicked into his eyes, then his face became set, his eyes locked on the flames.

'I don't understand why you pitch your tent so close to ... that,' he said.

'A reminder of the cost of victory, your majesty.'

Kendo Bauohan snorted and glanced at the general, casting him a derisive look before returning his attention to the fire.

'You are stuck in the old ways, general. These tents, the navy could easily carry better, more solid building.'

'These tents are quick to set up. Cheap to make and transport, and this new weave keeps out the cold, and absorbs pulse weapons' fire better than anything else.'

The emperor nodded.

'Of course, as you say,' he replied. 'I want prisoners to lead my Triumph, spoils, carriers and carriers laden with spoils. It must be spectacular.'

'Your majesty?'

'If you don't have the prisoners and the spoils, may I remind you, general?' Leax-ano said, 'you have their homeworld under blockade. And as you may be aware, an Imperial Triumph requires complete capitulation.'

Kiine-shi glanced at Leax-ano. A tall, thin creature, appearing to not know his last meal. His eyes had a hunger in them. Those green eyes marked him. Most of the army and the majority of the wounded and dying were of his cast.

As Kiine-shi appraised him, Leax-ano was assessing the general.

'But ...' Kiine-shi said.

‘Compete capitulation,’ Leax-ano said.

‘No terms,’ Kendo Bauohan added.

‘Your majesty.’

‘Three days,’ Kendo Bauohan said and stood up, dropping his cloak and fixing Kiine-shi was an icy stare. ‘Sunrise, sunset. Sunrise, sunset. Sunrise, sunset.’

The emperor’s tone was formal. Loax-ano and even the emperor’s bodyguard nodding in time. Linden-shu’s right hand went to his sidearm, while Mansh-sjm’s face was grim and he clenched his fist. The commander of the emperor’s bodyguard, sensing something, slipped his pulse rifle from his shoulder. Conso-abe, glanced at Linden-shu and Mahsh-sjm and briefly shook his head.

Kiine-shi was silent for a dozen heartbeats, his face stone. A blood vessel on his temple throbbed and his face went a deep red. But then he repeated the phrase just as formally.

Kendo Bauohan smiled, a twisting up of the lips. The expression was absent of warmth, his eyes calculating. Then his expression changed, becoming dreamy. His mouth opened as if he was about to say something, then the wind picked up, carrying with it the cries of the dying. The moment passed, and the emperor was cold again.

‘I’m returning to my ship. I can stand those ... I have affairs of the empire to attend to. General, you have three days.’

Standing, Kendo Bauohan made for the exit, but then paused, turning slowly, a sly look on his face.

‘Kiine-shi, your wife, Teesa, and your children, Marsk and Neetta and the boy, his name is ... Tonbei, that’s it. Tonbei. They travel to Andechrom?’

Kiine-shi chuckled and smiled at Kendo Bauohan.

‘Yes, your majesty. With all the celebrations in the capitol, Teesa thought it best if they returned to our homeworld, and it is high time they learnt of their ancestry; where they came from, where they are going.’

Kiine-shi’s face went blank as if a chill wind had blown the expression away. He and the emperor stared into each other’s eyes, each testing the other’s resolve.

‘Your daughters, of course, will marry well,’ Kiine-shi stated. ‘And your son, Maki, it must be almost time for him to join the army, just as I did. Put him under my command, old friend. There is much that I can teach him. Or do you have other plans?’

Was there, Kendo Bauohan wondered, the slightest stress on the word, “I”?

But Kiine-shi’s face was hard and cold, like stone now. More than that. His face became distant, as though the general, like a boat cut adrift on the lively ocean, was now lost to him. Grunting, the emperor swept out, followed closely by his bodyguard. The last to leave, casting Kiine-shi a crafty glance, was Leax-ano.

The moment Leax-ano passed out the entrance and the flaps closed, Linden-shu pulled the knife at his side and tossed in onto the table where it clattered.

‘He sits in his ship safe in orbit eating dainty tidbits and drinking cold wine while we fight and die for him,’ he said, disdain coating every word, ‘and he declares himself an Imperial Triumph as though he fought in the thick of it!’

‘Yes,’ Kiine-shi said simply, watching the flaps of the entrance giggle lightly in the wind.

‘And he dares to force the old ways on you! Forces you to make an oath so that innocents will die and he can have his parade!’

Linden-shu picked up the knife again, gripping it so tightly his knuckles were white. Mansh-sjm nodded, but Conso-abe was silent, glancing at Kiine-shi, then the exit.

‘That is treason you speak,’ Kiine-shi said. There was no emotion in his voice. He might have simply commented on the strength of the wind, the chill of the night.

The sound of Linden-shu’s sharp intake of breath overwhelmed the crackle of the fire or the sad whisper of the wind.

‘If your words, your sentiment, came to the ears of the emperor, that would mean your execution. But not just yours, your entire line. Annet-shu, your wife and those two beautiful daughters I played ten-ball with last summer. And your parents on both sides and any of your siblings and their children.’

Kiine-shi turned to face him. Conso-abe and Mahs-sjm nodded. Linden-shu followed, after a moment, though bitterness touched his face. He sheathed the knife.

‘Still listening at doors, Leax-ano? The night is bitter. Come inside, the fire is warm.’

Leax-ano pushed the flaps aside as he reentered, though he paused just inside the tent. Pulling his cloak about him, Leax-ano looked at each of them, then approached the fire. Glancing at the swirling flames only briefly, faced Kiine-shi, giving the Kiine-shi’s three aides a cursory glance.

‘Wine for the emperor’s advisor. The best we have,’ Kiine-shi called.

Conso-abe rose and quickly filled a fresh goblet from a small barrel. As he passed Kiine-shi, the general grabbed his arm, spilling a drop or two.

‘Conso-abe, my aide. He is my arms and legs. Without him, I cannot move.’ Indicating Mahs-sjm, my lungs. I cannot breathe without him and Linden-shu my heart. With these three, my strategies, my plans ... my guesses are turned to certainties. With these three,

the emperor gets his victories. I would harm these men no more than I would harm myself. What words pass here, in this tent, remain.'

Leax-ano glanced at each in turn, searching them, as if seeing them with fresh eyes. He took the goblet, drank deeply, then looked into the eyes of the general.

'He's jealous of you,' Leax-ano said, watching Kiine-shi for his reaction. 'Of your many successes, of your relationship with your men. He knows, oh he knows, they revere you.'

'Please sit down,' Kiine-shi said. 'Compose yourself. Conso-abe another chair.'

After they were seated across the fire from each other, Kiine-shi said, 'I taught him how to fight. We were boys together. Playmates. I taught him the sword, how to get the most out of a pulse rifle without wasting the charge.'

Kiine-shi's face became grim, his eye vacant as he stared into the flames again.

'When I was eighteen and he seventeen, there was this day, last time I saw him before entering the army.' He grinned broadly, a light came into his eyes. His expression looked out of place on his lined face. 'Such a day. We had swum and trained with swords and hand weapons and dined, drank the best wine. Played in the beds he'd arranged under the cooling shade of an ancient tree. We had our fill of everything.'

The smile softened, then changed. Becoming more complex.

'The sun was setting, the day becoming grey and old. Soon I would leave to pack for the morning's flight. We knew after that day everything would change. My life was the army, Kendo Bauohan's the Imperial throne. We were drinking, holding on desperately to the last few moments. Finally, when we could delay no longer, we stood up. The wine had him in its embrace and he swayed as though in a flower in the wind on an evening as still as any. He looked at me, the sun was behind him and he looked magnificent in its dying rays. A true

emperor. And then he made me swear. He made me swear to protect him. Not the empire, not the people. To protect him, to protect his life.'

'Then your life is forfeit,' Leax-ano said.

Kiine-shi nodded solemnly, while he remained fixed on the fire.

'What do you get out of this?' he asked.

Leax-ano returned a feral grin, stretching his lips to reveal two sets of yellowed teeth. The expression was humourless, as were his eyes. As before, when he forced Kiine-shi to take the oath, they were cold and calculating.

'What I have now. I desire now more,' he replied, sounding like a man determined to convince, to close a discussion.

Once more, Kiine-shi nodded, then called to Linden-shu, 'See Leax-ano to his quarters. Ensure he lacks for nothing. Nothing! Then return here ...' He stared into Leax-ano's eyes. 'Then return here. We have much work to do if we are to succeed, and the night grows whiskers.'

Linden-shu returned, securing the entrance behind him.

'I have two sturdy and loyal men at the entrance,' he said.

'Leax-ano has all the comforts? His needs are met?' Kiine-shi asked.

Linden-shu nodded.

'An evil man, general. He would feed on the rotting carcass of the empire and revel in the feast.'

Kiine-shi chuckled. Warmth momentarily blooming in his eyes.

‘No, old friend. Leax-ano is simply an opportunist. He thrives in a stable empire. He needs this empire to be fit and well. Otherwise, it is his carcass that will supply the feast.’

Kiine-shi came away from the fire, joining his men at the table. Immediately, there was an uplift in the mood. While Kiine-shi sat upright, the others lent forward, watching him closely as if in anticipation.

Kiine-shi drank his wine, pausing between sips, then placed the goblet on the table with a discernible “Thud”. A light came into his staff’s eyes.

‘He would overreach,’ Kiine-shi said, looking deeply into the eyes of each of the men in turn. ‘The Emperor. He will take any and all victories as his own and will slay the able generals, replacing them with his mirrors.’

‘Mirrors?’ Mansh-sjm said.

‘Mirrors!’ Linden-shu snorted, banging the table with a fist.

‘Weak reflections, opportunists, then,’ Kiine-shi replied. ‘I swore a powerful oath to protect his body and soul. Now he forces me to end his reign.’

‘Leax-ano? Can we trust him in this?’ Linden-shu asked.

Kiine-shi chuckled and gave him a weak smile. Reaching out briefly placed a hand on top of the Senior Commander.

‘No!’ he said and started laughing. ‘No! at the first hint of failure on our part or our first reversal, Leax-ano will betray us. He will lean close to the emperor’s shoulder and whisper in his ear.’

‘Then ...’ Linden-shu said.

‘Then to survive, to succeed, we must suffer no reversals.’

‘Then we will remove the emperor from the golden throne, and replace him with a leader such as you, general.’

Kiine-shi looked downcast. He shifted in his seat as if suddenly he had to bear a heavy weight.

‘It’s not that simple,’ he said. ‘If the emperor is ... taken, if he dies, his heir will assume the throne. Denied this, if the heir apparent lives, he will be a thorn in the side of the new empire. His mother is young. She can bear more emperors.’

Silence pressed in on them as they absorbed the consequences.

‘The whole line then,’ Mansh-sjm whispered.

Once more, Kiine-shi assessed them, each in turn.

‘If we are to do this thing, we must do it well. Right to the end. There can be no other way.’

For a long time, the only sound was the mournful cry of the wind, the crackle from the fire.

‘General!’ Mansh-sjm cried, his face pale as a sudden realisation hit him. ‘You must send word to your family. If the emperor works against you, and has your replacement already chosen, he will destroy your line. You must send word to your wife, she and your daughters and son, your mother and uncle they must all flee. It may already be too late.’

Kiine-shi nodded slowly, as though in thought.

‘Send your messengers, Mansh’y. Send them wherever you think best. Have your men seek them out, for my grandparents and all the ghosts of my line. Search and search well, but you will not find them.’

The End.

