

# Necessity

Vasileios Kalampakas

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Sousuke pulled down his visor. A freezing gust of wind buffeted against his face suddenly; it made him swivel around like someone had slapped him, lose his balance and fall on his back, fresh powdery snow going up in a small silver cloud around him.

Bjorn laughed with hands crossed over his chest and a carefully constructed grin on his face. Once Sousuke was back on his feet, he slapped him across the back and started walking towards the crawler, shaking his head. Half-way there he paused to pick up the surveyor unit; he brushed some snow off his beard, powered down the panel, folded the telescopic legs and placed the very expensive piece of equipment across his shoulders.

A glimpse at Sousuke almost struggling to walk upwind; another shake of the head, and a laughter.

Everyone laughed at the new guy, that much was to be expected. It was actually a sign of good mental health. Practical jokes and a tendency to make fun of every little thing were commonplace, working this far north of civilization. Except

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Sousuke had been stationed in Field Zeta for three years, no rotation. It hadn't grown on him; it made him sick.

Three weeks of leave each year, that was it. That was his lifeline with the world that despite the climate change and the Big Melt of '33 and the Disconnect of '35, still had beautiful warm beaches filled with young girls in miniscule bikinis. Even in Hokkaido in November.

Three hours by helicopter to Spitsbergen, then a four-hour flight to Murmansk to the Roskosmos SSTO. From there on, it was a three-hour suborbital flight to almost any place on Earth. And still, when it came time to buy that ticket, he always flew to Sapporo. He somehow always wanted to see the half-sunken family house at Nemuro, the cherry tree orchards sitting right beneath the surface like dead corals.

He put on his best effort at a smile and gave a thumbs up to Bjorn. He suddenly wished there was some other way to go about it, but he had committed himself. Everything was going to change, soon enough. Perhaps even overnight and hopefully for the better. It wasn't for him to fret about though; he would do his part and then they would either fail or succeed. There could be no middle ground, no chance at negotiating or talking things over once it went down. Not even if they wanted to. No failsafe, no human factor. Except himself, of course.

Bjorn shouted at him from the relative comfort of the crawler, a lit smoke already in hand:

"Don't just stand there! Come on! Checkpoints, more checkpoints!"

For a reason that was wholly above and beyond Sousuke's understanding, Bjorn seemed to relish in the job of running around in a snow crawler in the undecided day or night of the Arctic, searching almost blindly for thorium deposits in

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the faceless white desert of the Arctic. Perhaps it was the rush of discovery, or the associated finder's fee. Perhaps it was just Bjorn being Norwegian. Robots might have been able to do the job better, cheaper, and a whole lot warmer for any humans involved in the process. But they couldn't be trusted, not like regular folk itching for a chance to live the life. Anything that could transmit and receive couldn't be trusted these days. The Disconnect had made sure of that.

Sousuke jumped inside the crawler, closed the door behind him, reached for his thermo and poured a cup of almost scalding hot tea. He didn't sip, he just held on to it for the warmth. Bjorn started the engine and focused his attention on the control panel, waiting for the 'Engine Ready' sign to light up. He drew a puff from his cigarette and offered Sousuke one, purely from habit. Sousuke shook his head, still wearing the heavy fur-lined hood: real fur, an overpriced luxury, never mind banned by the UN, or what it lately voted to call itself the Earth Coalition. As if the name 'United Nations' somehow offended the Big Three.

He relaxed a bit into the seat, stretching his legs. The cabin of the crawler was spacious, but spartan. He'd turned an empty display socket into a small sort of basket. There was a small nook somewhere in the plastic that doubled as a cup holder. Sousuke placed the cup there and closed his eyes for a moment. The engine revved up suddenly, making the crawler lurch forward like a startled beast. The tea spilled; Sousuke looked at Bjorn who simply shrugged and drove on through the snow.

"There's more where that came from, no?" Bjorn said with a mischievous grin.

"You could have asked," replied Sousuke tersely. Bjorn retorted in an equally dry manner, "You could have offered

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me one.”

“I thought you didn’t like tea,” said Sousuke with a frown.

“Still,” came the bleak answer.

Stan passed on the borsht and instead made his way to the pantry. His wrinkled nose gave away the fact that the smell put him off. Sergei shrugged and dug in heartily, though rather noisily. Miki and Elaine were sitting at one table, playing a rather convoluted version of chess, involving dice and an imaginary toroidal chessboard.

They were heavily absorbed, and didn’t take notice of Stan eating away at the snacks they’d brought with them from their last trip south: goat’s cheese and garlic bread from France, and smoked salmon from Finland. They didn’t even notice when Stan sat down next to them, pretending to watch while stuffing himself shamelessly.

Bjorn entered the small but comfy mess room, all red-faced and smiling. Sousuke followed close behind, his thermo in hand and a sore look on his face. Stan took notice and asked after swallowing a mouthful:

“What’s with Takahashi?”

Bjorn gave a shrug and made his way to the toilet, while Sousuke ignored Stan and vanished in the small kitchen. Stan downed another bite of cheese before talking to practically none other than himself:

“What’s with everyone? Not enough snow? Too much white in your day? What is it this time?”

Sergei looked up from his meal, shrugged and happily continued sipping his soup being a little more mindful of those around him.

“I spilled his tea!” came Bjorn’s muffled shout.

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“All of it?”, asked Stan leaning back on his chair. Elaine momentarily raised her head searching for the source of the small raucus, but gave no sign it was about to ruin her game. Miki took Elaine’s knight, smiled and announced her victory:

“Checkmate.”

Elaine cursed and looked at the chessboard befuddled, before asking rather haplessly:

“No? No way out? If I..”

“No. Checkmate,” repeated Miki, barely shaking her head and asked:

“Did you eat all the cheese?”

There was a confused look written across her features, pointing at Stan with an accusing finger. Stan licked his lips and looked at the ceiling mischievously. Elaine buried her face in her palms, her voice quite heartless:

“Merdre.. Three times in a row.”

Bjorn came out of the toilet, his work suit unzipped, hanging around his waist like a peeled banana. He said then with a lot of sarcasm but just a touch of genuine concern:

“Isn’t it strange that a quarter of the world’s thorium stock relies on a bunch of geeks with a lot of time, a lot of money, and little in the way of spending either?”

Sousuke came out of the kitchen holding a sword. An unsheathed sword.

Stan was the first one to exclaim:

“Wow! A real-life samurai. Just like in those old movies.”

Bjorn looked a little curious when he asked:

“Isn’t that the antique you brought in last time? What was the name for -”

His sentence was cut in half, as was his throat. Jets of blood sprayed Sousuke as he mercilessly and efficiently cut down each and every one.

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Sergei was still trying to smash through a window when Sousuke's blade severed his spine. Stan tried to put up a fight with a shovel that happened to be lying around but his one swing never connected.

Sousuke on the other hand, was flawless - like a machine; Stan's head rolled off his spine like it had been fake all along.

Elaine found out that the door had been locked from the inside - everyone had been too absorbed to notice. Her wound was clean, through the heart; a small mercy of sorts. Miki sat frozen still at the table, clutching at the chessboard. It happened; even some animals never fled - accepting the inevitable, seeing through the falseness of their instincts.

Her evolved brain though had to know, so she asked, with tears running down her face, amidst sobs and silent, muffled cries:

“Why? Whatever the reason, why?”

“Because I hate you, Miki. I hate the whole world.”

“But-”

Her voice died abruptly in her throat with a horrible gurgling sound.

It was just him now. The katana had served its purpose. He didn't know why exactly, but he felt compelled to bury the Fukushima Masamune in the snow, next to their bodies, leaving the hilt exposed. That much custom he observed. There was ample time; he didn't have to start his descent until what passed for evening at this latitude.

He sat down on a work uniform next to the sword, with crossed; he breathed deeply, letting the cold inrush of air revitalize his senses. Somehow with all the people around him gone, he felt serene. He smiled despite himself at the thought that he had forgotten the feeling of serenity; it was ironic that

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he had to kill five people to feel at peace.

He remembered Miki's question then, and he somehow felt his answer was - on retrospect - incomplete. The least he could've done was take a deep breath right then and there and tell her why he hated the world. Explain, make her understand. Maybe she could realise her mistakes. But that would be a different world entirely, a separate strand of chaos.

He knew he didn't need some sort of validation, or acceptance of what he did or was about to do. He had made up his mind. Perhaps even before he had been selected for this task. Maybe his mind was made up when he saw his grandfather's orchard eaten by the rising sea.

Maybe it was the Disconnect that cleared up his mind; freed it from all the digital detritus and the by-products of a society hell-bent on pacing itself out of existence, each soul enslaved by the multiple personas of a psyche that teetered between extinction and self-conflagration without fear or anxiety. Like a demon, the oni in the children's stories that fascinated and terrified him equally; a fateful balance that one, the cornerstone of the human drive to live, experience, grow.

Sousuke felt it was time the world as a whole re-asserted that balance. The nations had failed, time and again; the corporate financial system couldn't sustain the boom-and-doom cycle. Energy became scarce, the global information network took root into people's hearts and minds like a parasite, feeding on the human propensity to dream, imagine, create. The Big Melt changed that.

Within a few months, the world map had become radically different, sea levels rising by 15 feet. Production in many areas was either halted or slowed down to a trickle, a global economic collapse threatened to inflame chaos and anarchy around the globe. That did not happen.

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It came as a shock, but people were getting back on their feet. They tried to organise themselves into small, isolated but self-reliant communities. Life was slowly returning back to the basics. To those that mattered, that seemed to be the wrong course of action.

Nobody is perfectly sure who was responsible for the Disconnect. Every networked device around the world was disconnected, and when it came back online, the world changed overnight.

Computer systems around the world crashed into an unrepairable state, backup copies of data and working software images were destroyed. Any attempt to restore reliable network connections resulted in immediate infection of the systems in question.

Various ideas and theories were put forward, though none managed to explain the how or the why of the Disconnect. After a period of uncertainty, those who still held dearly on the reigns of global power decided to perform what they dubbed 'a paradigm shift'. Thorium nuclear power became the mainstay of electrical power production, alongside the solar forests of North Africa and the Great Energy Reef in the Pacific, named so in memory of the Great Barrier Reef.

Space became a real priority for the first time. Miners on the moon launching processed minerals, tugboats hauling asteroids for exploitation near mineral refineries at the Lagrangian points. An extensive network of supersonic maglev trains replaced personal transportation modes and made even intercontinental journeys matters of a few hours. Even though the Alps had melted away, the Himalayas made for excellent skiing. The tropics were delineated anew, and there were new exotic locations for those that could to sunbathe in.

In just two decades everything had seemed to change,



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while it actually remained the same.

Not to Sousuke. Not to the others like him. Joussef at Bilma, Richard at Lizard Island, Jun at Lake Nasihu. At 20:00 UTA, the world would plunge into darkness, and humanity would either truly evolve or die out. Just like so many species before man.

He got up and walked to the service elevator. He depressed the descent button, and watched the various strata of rock roll past him evenly, as if he was walking down the two mile shaft at an easy pace. The main generation facility was a huge natural underground cavern, carefully modified to accomodate the single largest power generation station in the world, an array of thousands of thorium reactors capable of producing energy in the scale of terawatts. Room-temperature superconductors carried it through the rock and across the ocean bed to America and Europe alike. Africa had become completely self-sufficient due to the Sahara Solar Field, and Asia was being fed by the Chinese Empire's fusion stations. Australia and Japan relied on the Great Barrier Reef. Four central locations provided the world with more than enough energy.

But it wasn't free. Nothing, ever, was free. Except for their conscience, their spirit.

They did not expect to be lauded; far from it, there were no misconceptions on how the childish masses of the human populace would greet their vision-come-reality. There would be little in the way of assigning guilt and blame when the whole planet would be just another black spot in the night sky. When each man's reach will be as wide as any kingdom's, past or newborn alike.

The words of Rudi came to mind then, in that bar in Magdeburg: 'The world needs a reset button, and we will

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push it.' For the first time in a long while he smiled for noone to see.

The wall of the corridor was ridden with indication LEDs, a living tapestry of light. The air was stale; it had a heavy copper scent about it. The warmth from the heat exchangers was a stark contrast to the temperature at the surface. A gentle breeze flowed through the maze of valve computers. There was no victorianesque quality to them, he noticed; simply a crude lack of imagination, a persistent lack of taste.

He walked through the maze of interconnects and cabling grids. At times, he ventured a look upwards into the bleak emptiness of the cavern. There was the faintest light coming down from the ventilation shafts, a gray-blue light, its hue reminiscent of dark ice.

After a while, he reached the central distribution hub. From there, he would interfere with the neutron emission mechanism, and turn the whole grid into a giant ticking bomb. Joussef would reorient all the reflectors in such a way as to cause them to melt down, while Jun would simply release the dam's valves over at Lake Nasihu and cause all the water to flood onto the valley. Thinking about how people had turned to people once again because they could be trusted smelled like poetic justice to Sousuke. He laid down his backpack near an access panel, when he heard footsteps and a metallic, clicking sound that faintly echoed barely above the low-pitched hum of the machinery.

"End of the line, Sousuke. Hands off the backpack. Just kick it towards me," said an unusually uncharacteristic voice of a man. Another pair of footsteps could be heard approaching peacefully.

"Who are you?" asked Sousuke with genuine curiosity.

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“I hate it when they try to talk their way out of it,” the man said, scoffing.

“Wouldn’t you?” said a female voice that somehow seemed too familiar to Sousuke. She spoke with a heavy Japanese accent. The realisation hit Sousuke too hard, too late.

“Kaname?” he asked plainly.

“I needn’t to, but I wanted to see you one last time. You realise, three similar yet less civilized conversations are taking place elsewhere. You probably want to know why, and I do want to tell you why. Because I hate you, and your kind Sousuke. You’re kids playing with adults. It’s not about money and greed, or power, whatever your idea of the world’s powers might be. It’s about survival. You’d wreck humanity in your neo-lutheran dream of simpler, darker days. You think we’re alone out there. Would you do otherwise had you known we’re not?”

She sounded accusing, but there was conviction behind those words. They rang true to Sousuke’s ears. He brought a picture of Kaname playing hide-and-seek in the cherry orchard. She always managed to surprise him. His voice carried all his sense of pity and grief into a simple word:

“No.”

“You think you were the first ones, Sousuke?” Kaname asked with a dry throat. Sousuke hesitated for a moment, then replied:

“Yes, we did.. Kaname, was all that necessary then?”

The man with the gun could be heard walking a few more paces towards Sousuke. Kaname tried to sound composed, but her voice wavered slightly:

“Would it matter, whatever my answer?”

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Sousuke managed to snort a laugh despite himself and said: “Necessity is the mother of invention.”

“Ah. Famous last words?” said the man with the gun and placed the barrel against the base of Sousuke’s neck.

“Just the truth. Funny how you learn to trust people.”

The short silence was broken by a gunshot, only to be replaced by a repetitive hum and the sound of footsteps disappearing.