

[COUNTER/Weight 37: Visions from Windows, Or: The Last Time the Bomb Dropped](#) transcriptors Rexwolf2, wunder_wirker

20,000 years before The Chime met on Counterweight, long before the Golden War against Apostolos, the Automated Diaspora devised a plan to stop Rigour once and for all, and at great cost...

This week on COUNTER/Weight: Visions from Windows, Or: The Last Time the Bomb Dropped Alright, alright. Now back to work!

AUSTIN: The first stellar combustors were activated just decades after the death of Chital, final candidate of Liberty and Discovery. They were lit by [BEGIN: The Long Way Around] a desperate fleet, dropped behind them as they fled at super-high speeds through a carefully calculated escape route. The explosions propelled the fleet further, and though some were lost, the bulk of the Automated Diaspora survived, never stopping to look back at the destruction they left in their wake. But over sixty thousand years later, the next time the bomb dropped, it was impossible not to watch.

[Pause as The Long Way Around plays]

AUSTIN: Hey everybody, welcome to Friends at the Table, an actual play podcast focused on critical worldbuilding, smart characterization, and fun interactions between good friends. I am Austin Walker. ...Unfortunately, I am alone today. Uh, we have not had, for, because of unavoidable reasons like, like some medical concerns, and PAX East, and some other stuff, we haven't been able to record another session since last week's faction game. It's no big deal, Art had a, a unavoidable surgery but he's okay, he's recovering, he's totally okay. So, this week I'm going to do something special because I'm, I'm very weird about making sure we don't leave this podcast feed without something in it for too long. So I've prepared a little look back for the world of Counterweight. Back to the last time that [first few notes of The Long Way Around start playing] the bomb dropped.

AUSTIN: Vision Number One: Defective Appendages [theme fades out]

Two AU from the explosion of the first stellar combustor.

On the morning that the bombs dropped, Aleph Set found himself distracted from his work in the maintenance bay of orbital production station Final Red. He was supposed to be running final checks on a refurbished batch of humanoid mining machines, but his mind kept drifting away to a question he'd never really considered before.

What did it mean to work for Rigour?

Maybe he worked for Rigour because, contrary to Diasporan propaganda, to be human was to work and so, working for Rigour was not an *obligation*, but a *privilege*. Most workers flailed

without strong leadership, but Aleph was integrated directly into Rigour's carefully tuned labour systems. More, he was able to participate in the tuning *itself*. Humming actuators moved components all around him, spinning and stabbing with a dancer's rhythm and a surgeon's precision, transforming dead metal into pulsing nodules of electronic life. Aleph was just one man, a tiny but integral component of a collective organism that could achieve more than any petty individual.

But this first answer was too obvious, too eager to jump into Aleph's mind. He realized that it wasn't his idea at all, but someone else's that had found its way into his voice. He tapped a few buttons on the hovering glass interface, trying to keep up as a new order came in. Twelve more mining riggers needed at Orion 30 by week's end. Client state corporations didn't refer to the machines by their proper names anymore.

They weren't Artemis Excavation Astragali Resource Collectors, they were just Rigour's, *Comma* Mining. The possessive. Rigour's. Who owned them? Rigour did.

And then another thought burst into Aleph's mind. Maybe working for Rigour meant that *he also* was one of Rigour's. That the notion of the collective body was wrong altogether. There wasn't the Gestalt self, where every individual body floats ceaselessly and seamlessly into a breathing, pulsating whole. Maybe, instead of being one massive lifeform, there were two classes of beings, Rigour and everyone else.

That would explain what happened to Nasir Seven, Tamari Theta, to so many others. After years of being his friends, something switched inside of them. They weren't agents of the Rigour body-state anymore. They were just two more prosthetic limbs, replaceable, separate. Tools discarded once used. Even now, at the end of the mile-long production facility he saw them staring at the observation wall, empty vision distant, starlight washing them like utensils, unassuming and indifferent.

They liked music, once. And he wondered if, oh, is *this* the thought that they had just before they became the way they are now? And so Aleph fled that line of thinking and turned towards something new, not because he thought he might be wrong but because he feared what would become of him if he were *right*.

He ran his hand down a glowing beam of light and slid it to the side, summoning a diamond-dusted file and he crawled down a ladder to the feet of a massive mining unit he was working on. It had toes, for some reason, four big black iron digits on each foot. Not quite *talons*, though this specific one had come out of the manufactory with sharp edges that needed sanding down.

And it was as he ran the file over each defect, evening them out as the starlight washed over *him*, that Aleph Set came to his final thought. Maybe it was inevitable that he worked. And that was all there was to it. Sure, some people would flee, or resist, or even fight against Rigour.

Some turned to the Diaspora, others smuggled away towards the Galactic Core, trying to find a frontier not yet exploited by Rigour's apparati. Some worked just hard enough to get the scrip needed to feed those important to them. Rigour hadn't yet stamped out intimacy, after all. And some worked harder, hopeful to grasp something bigger than themselves.

But, it was inevitable, Aleph realised, that in a set of *billions*, at least a few folks would work because... well, that's what they *did*. It wasn't destiny, it was probability. When you kick a ball into a field of a billion blades of grass any particular blade has a low chance of being landed upon. But it is *necessary* that at least a few take the hit. It was a frustrating truth. He worked for Rigour because... the way the chips fell, *someone* had to work for Rigour. Maintaining its devices, organising its infrastructure, buying food at the company cantina, all without giving it a second thought. And then, from not so far away, a *flash* beamed in from the observation window. It wasn't *soundless*, but at that distance, at that speed, the roiling roar of this desperate ploy trailed behind the annihilation it wrought. A small victory for Aleph Set. Now, [first few notes of The Long Way Around play] *everyone* would be the grass.

AUSTIN: Vision Number Two: The Last and Final Voyage of the Wayfarer True, Freelance Vessel and Devout Vehicle of the Old Earth Cult [theme fades out]

Two hundred miles and closing from the first detonation of the stellar combustor.

Captain Commander Centra Center grit her teeth as her ship, the Wayfarer True, sped through the void. It has started as a little more than a broad metal tube, held together with magna staples, a smuggling vessel propelled off-world by kinetic force and held aloft by *hope* alone. But bit by bit, she'd added to the tube. Engines first and then crew quarters and a few railgun racks. A kitchen too, at some point, but no chef. And the newest member of the ship, the *bomb*.

She was Earth-born, or so the story goes, had felt the Old Soil on her feet as a child and was a true believer, an Earther, a Terra Firma Girl. And that's how the Diaspora had convinced her and hers to take the task.

"Seven interceptors incoming, Captain." Catalino Christopher spoke calmly. They were *close* and seven interceptors couldn't stop them *now*. Centra Center was an unstoppable force. Christopher knew that she'd drag the damn bomb into the star's heart, even if it meant holding her breath and *diving* the rest of the way there.

"Ready point defense, prime cannons, Cowboy, I wanna see *ten* dead interceptors before the minute is up." The weapons officer just nodded.

Cowboy was the only one on the crew who needed real convincing. The rest didn't need an explanation, it was a suicide mission. It was *the* suicide mission. A Diasporan armada would draw Rigour itself into the core of the one remaining Perseus-Sagittarius star bridge and then... boom. They'd light the fuse and let it go.

If Rigour didn't die from this then, well, what was the point in fighting anyway? Most of the time, a suicide mission needs to come with *plausible deniability*. It needs an alibi. You know, 99% probability of death. That last 1% chance of living is what convinces the last holdouts. After all, they'd survived the shitshow at the Silver Hand nebula. They'd survive this too.

But Cowboy wasn't worried about dying, he was worried about *sinning*. Most of the worlds that would be destroyed by the stellar combustor would be nearly empty. Rigour just didn't *need* that many people on its frontier resource worlds. But here or there, a birthing center, an experimental metropolis, a liberated outpost. And by killing them, Cowboy knew that they'd never make the pilgrimage home to Earth. Was there a worse fate? Well.

With Cowboy distracted, the interceptors managed to swing into a defensive formation, combining their shield strength and fending off a blast from the Wayfarer True's main cannon.

"Goddammit, Cowboy." Centra Center clicked a few buttons and the ship's unified control scheme unfolded around her Captain's chair. Joysticks and flip switches, dials and radios and touchmeters and targeting arrays. She moved so quickly and with such accuracy. Cowboy wondered what someone like her needed with religion.

The interceptors were *gone* then and it was quiet. A solar station in orbit around a bright yellow star. The old ship creaked and the creak held *long*, a distant whine from a foe, realising it had been out-maneuvered. All there was left was to *do* the thing.

"Centra, I—" but before Cowboy could finish his objection, a metal bolt had shattered his sternum. Centra nodded to Catalino Christopher, who lowered his sidearm with a shaky hand. He'd done what she'd asked and he'd wondered how she'd known it needed to be done.

"Cargo Chief, prepare the device and my personal rigger. I'm doing this alone. The rest of you... uh, well, I've never been one for speeches."

She pressed a button on her collar with a grin and the suit's neck expanded up around her head. She wouldn't need more than the emergency breather for this op. The device was as simple as the Diasporans had told her. Plug this end here, that end there and... the *button*. Press. The button.

She could feel... two histories. In front of her. Not just imagine them, but *feel* them. A diverted path for her to choose. And both paths carried pain in equal measure. If she hit the button, trillions dead, now, and then, in the future it would *return*, devastating and *cruel*. Aware that it could be defeated and all the more dangerous for that fact.

But if she *didn't* hit the button, the current path would continue unchecked. Rigour would expand its empire further, and further, and *further* until... until it hit something that defied its material

logic and simple pattern recognition. And then something new, something *inhuman* would spread back through these galactic arms. And she could tell that that new life was beautiful *too*, in its own way. A bubbling mass of psychic selfhood, joyous in its *hunger*. And she wondered suddenly, or *it* wondered—reaching back to her, from that distant potential future—it wondered *what Earth tasted like*. And she curled her toes and felt the hot sand of Earth's beaches, she heard a seagull cawing and the harmonic choirs of the Old Earth Cult.

"Aw, hell," she thought. And pressed the button. Its small hum turned to a cry and then—[the first few notes of The Long Way Around start]

AUSTIN: Vision Number Three: Reams of Distant Cloth [theme fades out]

Four Kiloparsecs from the stellar combustor.

A tritone chime rang out in the office of Kadaknath, Diasporan Envoy-Elect of the Far Bridge Sector. Candidate of Independence.

"What is it?" Kadaknath's voice didn't hide that they *chafed* against the assignment. They were a soldier dressed up like a *diplomat*. And so long as they were in their office, they didn't *care* who heard it, least of all their secretary-attaché, Tertiary Perfect.

"A gift, I think?" reported Tertiary, whose own voice carried an easy familiarity with her boss' sullen tone. It instantly brought the mood of the office back under control. Sometimes recognition is all it takes to keep them happy. Tertiary had learned that lesson a long time ago.

Kadaknath sighed to themselves, ran a hand over their bald, russet head, adjusted their dress and pressed the button that unlocked the door. Tertiary appeared and placed a small box made of some sort of synthetic wood on Kadaknath's desk. Pressing a button on the side, Tertiary triggered the box's lid to slide away, revealing the contents in a burst of colour.

Red, and *blue* and *green*, thought Kadaknath. And then they corrected themselves. They realised that those words did disservice. These were not red and blue and green, these were *Brick* and *Sapphire* and *Forest*. The younger civilians couldn't have remembered that there were more colours, once, before the war, before the rationing. This new campaign against Rigour, the Diaspora's old enemy rediscovered, had come at sacrifices material, epistemic, ontological. A few votes this way or that and an *entire* generation would suddenly have to go without *pastels*. What use were they in the face of the unthinking (or was it the *infinitely* thinking?) mechanistic terror of Rigour?

"It's cloth," Tertiary whispered to herself, forgetting to append a question mark to the end of the realisation.

"It is, it's—it's—they're samples." Kadaknath took them out and spread them out across the desk, organizing them into a spectrum as an automatic reflex. And underneath the final swatch, a note.

"A thousand mile-long reams of the finest fabrics, to be sent to the sector." Tertiary was right. It was a gift, a gift from the recently liberated world of—well, the name hadn't been voted on yet. Forty years into the second war, and only recently had the Diaspora struck a blow against Rigour, opening up the possibility for traditional military victory. Kadaknath had led the charge himself, piloting a newly designed war-machine and had integrated a bellicose variation on the synthetic intelligences that helped the Diasporan people manage their democracy. The first of its *kind*. Suddenly, Kadaknath could see a step ahead, move a little faster, fight a little harder. The new weapons didn't hurt either.

Kadaknath's victory led to an alliance with the loose collection of free-booters and rebels and cultists that fought against Rigour's regime. And their second win lifted them from simple soldier to hero. And with their *third* victory, they've been raised even higher, into a position altogether new. It was California Rose, the reporter for the Diaspora's largest public broadcaster, who coined the terms in an accidental rush of purple prose.

"Those great heroes," Rose wrote, "in whom we find the *living ideals* of our democracy. Truth, Equality, Independence. They fly alive and bright and virtuous. Our divine candidates."

And now, the first real gift from those they'd supposedly saved. Reams of cloth in a warehouse somewhere. Beautiful, but it was too late. Kadaknath wondered if the people of Planet *whatever*... knew what was coming. If they'd meant this as a bargaining chip, or tribute, or tithe. Someway to convince the Diaspora... not to press the button.

But it didn't matter. Kadaknath knew that the order had gone out years ago, before the victories had arrived. And at these distances... some orders were impossible to call back once sent. Plus, if their contacts in Sagittarius City Census could be trusted... it just didn't seem like the Diasporan people *wanted* to call the order off anyway. It was only a matter of *time*, until the stellar combustor was in place. And then—

"What should we *do* with it all?" Tertiary Perfect had lifted off a small square of silk marigold, that seemed to lit off its own light, recasting the room's heavy chromes in something softer, more organic. And *then*, for the first time, Kadaknath *felt* Independence *speak* for them, or, no, it spoke *along* with them.

"We'll *build* with it. No more steel, no more concrete, we will build cities that *move in the wind*. We will draw buildings in the air that twist and bend with the needs of the *people*, instead of insisting on what would be *best* for each individual."

And the light appeared then, or so it's said. Through the office windows, Tertiary Perfect and Candidate Kadaknath saw the midday sky light with white fire. The second bridge between the Sagittarius and Perseus arms of the Milky Way galaxy, home to countless stars and even more lives than *that*, was gone.

"For each world destroyed, we will build another, more beautiful, more human." But Tertiary didn't hear her boss' bold claim. She'd read in a magazine once, she suddenly remembered, that the light from the first combustor lasted for *over 20,000 years*. Lines in the sky, [The Long Way Around starts] ribbons, scattered above, day and night. Left behind as reminder... that ultimate success often resembles ultimate failure.