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about 2,400 words

Emet; Or, The Modern Golem

By Tito J Davis

Lights raked across the last trees who stood out dressed in jade against the granite frame of the park square. The sound of rain on leaves is the most peaceful sound in the world, Ilan reflected. The perpetual night was still but for the wet pattering and the shuffling of the crowd, hidden in the darkness.

"I don't see them," the speaker's amplified voice crackled in the night.

The crowd crept in silence behind the flashlight line of the council Razing Party as it approached the meager wood.

"Don't begin the raze until you can be sure you won't hit any Gardeners on the way. Only way they delay this build any longer is to claim we knowingly ran one over."

"Knowingly..." the respondent trailed off. The lights scanned what little canopy it could reach from outside the trees.

Ilan felt the dual pull of the Gardener of After Earth. He should be in the trees with his brothers and sisters. Theirs was the burden of preserving the spirit of earth as a symbiote with the soul of humanity. Grow green wherever humanity landed in the cosmos. Ilan had passed the knowledge to his son as his father had passed it to him, and ever on since the Arkship. The opposing pull was to root himself to the spot, keep him in the observing crowd, and survive to continue the teachings.

He watched the search lights in desperation, trying to memorize the shapes of the leaves, the way the large drops slid off them into the soil and leafbed below; the smell of damp fertile soil.

He didn't see his son in the crowd, and was glad Emet wouldn't feel the trauma of watching the last great work of the Gardeners' labors torn down. But without his son to witness, and few other Gardeners left at all, it would fall on Ilan to remember Yavanna Park.

The razing party advanced. They were silent at first, their footsteps muffled by the rain, but the roar of their hewers soon drowned out all other sound.

Even drowning out thought, for Ilan; he went away inside.

When the Arkship was loaded, all that time ago on the edges of memory, the seeds of his tradition were planted. The philosophy of the Earthbound stated Man and green life were symbiotes in more than biology, but also in spirit, and so a select group was chosen to maintain green space for the people of After Earth. For a long time, these chosen were respected and thanked for their work. The philosophies of the Earthbound were still taught and held, both on Ark and off, for a time.

As the population grew once again, as it was never allowed to do on Ark, the demand for artificial structures increased. Homes, places for craft, for food. As the demand increased, more green space had to be sacrificed. Gardeners resisted, and were met with disdain. People asked, "do they not want humanity to grow and thrive?" Soon disdain turned to violence. As disdain and violence grew, and green spaces shrunk, the Gardeners resisted, but waned with the greenery.

There were Gardeners in those trees. Ilan's eyes followed the scanning lights, trying to catch sight of his siblings of Tradition. If he, and a small handful of others, survived, perhaps there would be sympathy for the remnants. Sympathy bred listening, and listening bred learning, and the Tradition would continue.

A fight might leave little sympathy. Ilan prayed that this last stand would remain peaceful from their side. As peaceful as the sound of rain on leaves.

Wood cracked like a bolt of lightning in the night, and Ilan knew it had begun. He returned his attention to the trees. He would remember.

"Stop." The voice was sharp. The lights had ceased scanning and were fixed on something on the carpet of fallen leaves and pine needles.

Ilan's legs shook as he crept forward with the crowd. His muscles felt stiff with anticipation and horror. There were dark shapes there. The forest green of the Gardeners' robes looked black in the night. A myriad of black masses dotted in white. The white of Cagatha, a fungal pair for these trees that encouraged growth, and when eaten, deadly.

Ilan didn't remember turning, he didn't remember if he took a final glance back at the trees, he was running home as fast as he could. Emet would be home.

He arrived with no memory of the journey, only leaves and fungus speckled dead in his mind. Inside, where it was dry, his drenched presence felt obscene, but he trailed his uncomfortable intrusion deeper into the home across the stone floors; prints of black mud and drippings from his coat and hair trailing after him as he searched for his son. He knew where he'd find him.

He descended into the basement, below ground, and saw the yellow glow of bare bulbs illuminating hunks of metal, gears, and the green of his son's robes. Ilan was almost ashamed not to be wearing his as his brothers died, but not more ashamed than he was afraid.

Emet did not look up from his work at the noise of his father's entrance.

"It's done, Emet," Ilan told him, "They've started the raze."

Emet's fingers worked furiously typing out code, a small screen displaying emerald text consuming his attention.

"And the Gardeners there," Ilan continued, a stone in his throat, "They've taken the Cagatha."

Attention still on the screen, Emet finished the line he was writing and stopped. Ilan stared, and wondered at him. Here was his son, robed in the greens of their ancestors, employing learning as foreign to them as Gardeners as the world they tried to preserve was to the current generations of After Earth. He'd never seemed as interested in the art of growth as Ilan had wished, not as caught up in the privilege of the knowledge as he'd been.

Finally Emet spoke, "Did you watch the raze?"

"No. Just as they began."

"Could you not have been brave?" His voice was low, almost a whisper.

Ilan wasn't sure if he was referring to standing in front of the razers, or joining in the fates of the other gardeners, but either implication set his fury alight. "For what? To die and leave the world with no Gardeners to teach the new generation?"

Emet matched his volume, "But you could sit and watch the tradition die all around you!"

"No! If there will ever be another tree grown it won't be from a descendent of those in the trees. That was cowardice, not bravery."

"Then fight, fight if you're not willing to take your own life."

Ilan's look was hurt, and dark. His voice lowered. "You don't know what you're saying. What good does that do anyone. Fighting will turn everyone against us for good. They'll hunt us down rather than only hurt those in their way. Then it will really be over."

Emet kept his volume high, "We can't go quietly, how long can we be pushed around before we fight back? We'll die out if we just sit and take it!"

"We'll die if we're labeled a problem and confirm in everyone's minds that we're dangerous!"

A stillness followed his words, Ilan dripping in silence while Emet seethed. They stared at each other until a light on Emet's screen blinked.

"It's ready." He said.

Ilan's eyes raked over the monstrosity his son had been building. Fear enveloped him, but underneath it was a relief, a savage triumph knowing something would finally be done.

At the press of a button the construct stood on two legs. Almost the shape of a man. One word scrolled across a small screen on the forehead for all to see, 'Truth'.

Standing, Emet's expression was stony. He addressed the hulking machine before him, "For years I studied the Book of Creation eschewing rest and health and you are what I have achieved. I am not god, and therefore you have no soul, no life for you are artificial, but you have form. You were given form and nothing else for one purpose, and it is that purpose that you must now carry out."

It did not respond.

"Protect us." He told it.

It did.

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For three days and three nights the construct lived worked.

On the first day it pushed out the hewers, the razing party having retreated for the night as the wood was cleared of bodies. Gardeners came and were admitted, Ilan and Emet among them. Others who approached were sent away, they did not know the words to move him. Then the razers returned, hewers roaring anew. The construct stood at the gates of Yavanna Park and held them. All the first night he held them.

A young boy, in Gardener green, came to Emet as they stood in the trees while the construct struggled at the gate.

He didn't speak to Emet, at first, just looked up at him, afraid.

"There's nothing here to fear," Emet assured him, "Truth has come to Yavanna Park, and it will shield us."

"What is It?" the boy asked simply.

"A strong hand that can protect us." Emet replied, "Always we have served, as I know you know. We have done so thanklessly."

"Why do you serve then?" There was a wickedness in the question, the sounds of conflict not far away punctuated the use of the word 'you', making it stand out.

"Why we serve," Emet corrected him, as the boy wore green as well, and was within the walls of the park, though he was too young to begin his work. "We serve because it's what is right, and nobody else will. Not because our ancestors were chosen, but because we choose it, every day, because we know it is right."

The boy considered this, and took it to heart. He stood up a little straighter, smoothing his robes with his hands, "Are there rules I'll have to follow?"

Ilan was sure the boy knew the rules, but appreciated the question nonetheless. It was wise, and far from not even knowing what to ask where he'd been just minutes before.

Emet explained the laws, and the boy listened. It may have been politeness that kept the boy listening to things he already knew, or perhaps it was the comfort of knowing he was where he should be, but

they passed the night this way, exchanging the teachings of their fathers. Ilan was proud, harrowing though the day was, and in part Emet's fault, he too felt finally that it was right. He was where he should be, and he had taught his son well no matter how it ended.

After a time, the boy had a new question.

"Do they hate us now?" he asked.

"They always did," Emet replied.

But did they? Ilan wasn't sure. It didn't feel that way when he was young. He was even thanked, once. A woman who'd come into the park for a walk on her lunch break had stopped, stooping over him while he turned a patch of soil. She'd been so excited, she'd never seen a Gardener, she said, though she also said she walked in the park often. Probably just never noticed. But she said thank you, she appreciated the park. Ilan wondered about her before realizing how long had passed since then, and she was old even then.

At daybreak of the second day the razers broke through, advancing on the wood with a mob at their back. The Gardeners stood in the way of progress, they said. They poisoned the minds of the youth, teaching them regression and to look behind, never ahead. Torches and hewers alike fell the forest while He shielded the Gardeners within. By nightfall they stood in a graveyard of stumps and ash.

As night fell the wood cleared of invaders. The Gardeners were unharmed in body, but the invaders had achieved their genocide of spirit.

But within the graveyard, sitting in ash and dead soil, were the Gardeners still. Fewer, perhaps, but they were there. At the center of it was Emet and the boy, and around them all of the youngest. They talked of rules, of history, of forests and windswept hills and rivers in mountains. There was once, in the air in old forests, the earthy smell of decaying wood, heavy humidity, and the feeling that everything you touched; grass, bark, leaf, was alight with life crawling and buzzing about. There was once the smell of grain in the air on a rolling farm hill, the sound of high grasses rustling and rippling like the sea. There was once the slap of water on rock, clear water running down the mountain cold enough to make the feet ache.

In the ash they sat and listened, and eventually the elders joined in and told all the stories their ancestors had told them. The stories from Earth, so old and in their scripture, all knew. But personal stories of After Earth came and went down easier, for it was a world they knew, and knew could return.

Working in bushes by the street and the first bugs that come to make their homes in them. Older stories, like the great redwood on the Arkship. And Newer tales of the buried joy of being reprimanded when a growing root cracks a sidewalk.

On the third day, and into the night the construct turned its power against the attackers. Stone walls crumbled like breadcrumbs, glass towers shattered and fell.

Finally, the people of the city begged for an end, pleaded for it to be stopped. Only with a promise of seeds and a return of caretaking

duties, did Emet emerge from the park to put an end to the destruction. He stood before his neighbors, the remnants of the Gardeners, and Ilan; the construct at his side.

He addressed the construct once more, "I gave you a purpose, and you have carried it out. Green will bloom in the soil once again, and though you have no soul, for I had not that to give, you have returned the soul of Earth to humanity. I gave you no life, but I gave you years of my own. I gave you my name!" He erased one single letter from the code of his creation, Truth to death, and it returned to parts. "And now take it back, so that we as humanity can heal. He will not remember this, but we will."

There was resentment and anger, mixed with relief and sorrow, and with confusion and grief, in the crowd around them.