

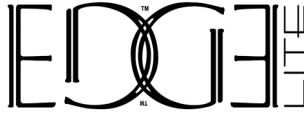
The Last Iteration

by Mel Arthur

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* * * * *

Begin.

Images flashed in Elise's brain like a strobe. Boots — no, a flat shoe. A hand held out in welcome. A woman running. A man's shy smile. All in motion, so just when she thought she'd spotted something she could identify, it flashed away. It was intensely disorienting. She was angry, but she did not know why. Something important. Something she did not want to let go of. A woman laughed. A man shouted. She was running. No, she was arguing with someone. No, that wasn't right. Or was it? Nothing made sense, and every scene that flitted through her overwrought brain pushed her further and further from what she wanted to remember.

It was gone.

She opened her eyes, and the world was white.

Her head was still swimming, so she took care when sitting up. Beneath her hands the ground was cool, flat, and featureless. It wasn't stone, nor wood, nor anything she could readily identify by touch. She scratched her fingernails against it, concentrating on that one limited sensation while she slowly got her bearings. It felt natural, yet unnatural at the same time, which made no sense. She reached out to touch the wall beside her and found it composed of the same strange material.

She was sitting on the floor in a narrow corridor. The walls were tens of meters high and she could not quite tell if what she saw above was roof or sky. It was as white as the walls, but it seemed faintly backlit, like an overcast day. She cautiously rose to her feet, bracing herself on the wall.

"Are you all right?" someone asked behind her.

She turned sharply and found a man standing not two meters away. She didn't know him, but there was something familiar in his faintly confused expression.

She asked warily, "What is this place?"

He smiled and said, "*That* is a very good question."

Chapter One

Under normal circumstances, Hanian liked white. It was simple, it was clean, and there was a certain symbolism of purity that he'd always found appealing. Sayal's white-on-gray uniforms were more or less the worst possible choice to keep clean or to provide camouflage in Askaïen terrain, but there was something stirring about rank upon rank of freshly dressed troops moving across a parade ground like a well-ordered snowdrift. Back when he was young and eager and thoroughly under Pyred's spell, he had dressed in white even out of uniform. The good guys always wore white and you couldn't look decent in it unless you were meticulous, which he liked to show off.

In hindsight, he'd been something of a twit.

This place, however, was too much white. The floor, the random walls and barriers, and even the sky, were unrelieved shades of it. Right about now he'd kill for a little red. Orange, perhaps. Blue, green... Who knew you could miss color so much?

Too much white. And too still. There was nothing but walls, although there were certainly a variety of those. They spanned from meandering curves no higher than his waist, to towering cliffs that blurred into the bizarre, blank sky, to sharp-edged and open-roofed corridors. There were even caverns here and there, symmetric enough to give the impression of being man-made. But there were no other souls around who could have made them. Just Hanian, wandering around, and growing less anxious and more bored.

He'd been exploring for days, and while he was fairly certain he hadn't doubled back on himself, he could only base that conclusion on not seeing familiar shapes in the walls. There were no other signs of direction. No landmarks of any kind.

The sky went dark in ten hour cycles, more or less. He'd counted that off on the second day and confirmed it the next. Counting seconds wasn't much entertainment, but it kept his mind busy and that was important. His mind was not to be left to its own devices even under the best of circumstances, and waking up in a big white maze full of nothing was not helping.

He'd been on a flat plain since shortly after what passed for morning. It was not an improvement over the twisting corridors he'd traveled the day before. At least in the corridors he could pretend there was something to travel toward. Here, on the plain, it was all too obvious that there was a whole lot of nothing. He amused himself by counting the distance, taking measured paces. He was a big man and could comfortably span about a meter per stride. It was moderately less monotonous than counting seconds into minutes.

Twenty clicks into the day, he thought he spotted something in the distance. He could tell it was moving, and toward him.

He quickened his pace, but he wouldn't run. He wasn't quite desperate enough for contact to let himself look foolish. And the other figure was coming toward him anyway, so they'd meet in the middle. No running. And a tight rein on the giddiness rising in his stomach. He was too relieved to see another person; he had to be mindful of his dignity.

He thought the other person looked small, although it was hard to gauge size relative to the emptiness around him. But the closer the other came, the clearer it was that he or she was a lot shorter and slighter than Hanian. A woman or a child, which was just as well. He would be glad to have company, but it was always better to know you had the advantage if you needed it.

It was a woman. A short, dark-haired woman, and not as slight as he'd first thought. She was petite but solid — muscled slim instead of skinny. And familiar. He couldn't place her, but he knew he should be able to. She was assessing him right back as they approached each other, and then suddenly she dropped into a wary stance, shifting her weight to the balls of her feet and angling her body to make herself a smaller target.

He stopped, eyebrows raised. She couldn't be serious. She was half his size, but she was unmistakably poised for a fight.

He put the last piece together just as she took advantage of his distraction to slam a booted foot against his knee and knock him off balance. She was Ciega Velhaim. She was *Cezdet*.

He'd seen her photo when they had arrested her, but he hadn't realized she was such a little thing. She spun around him and the heel of her hand connected hard with the side of his head; a burst of color exploded across his vision. She kicked him once more in the back before he managed to react to her sudden burst of violence. This was ridiculous. He could lay her out with one punch.

He just had to catch her first, and that was surprisingly difficult. She clearly had no interest in going toe to toe. She was lightning quick, dancing around him and taking every cheap shot she could find, never close enough or still enough for him to take advantage of his size or strength. If he could just get a hand on her, he could end this in a second.

She tried to kick him in the knee again and he snagged the collar of her shirt, yanking her close. Teeth snapped down on his hand and he let go with a startled cry. He instinctively lashed out and caught her jaw with the butt of his hand, snapping her head back and stunning her long enough to grab her by the wrists and hold her at arm's length so he could put the violence on pause. He felt bad about hitting a woman, but under the circumstances...

She writhed and yanked her arms against his grip. He hauled her up on her toes so she had less purchase to struggle.

She glared at him, nostrils flared. Then, quick as a whip, she swung up, braced one foot on his chest, and slammed the other into his face. He dropped

her and clapped his hands over his nose.

She landed on her ass, and he had the satisfaction of hearing the breath knocked out of her with a grunt. By the time the tears cleared from his eyes and he peered over his bloody fingers, she was a few meters away, crouched and wary again. He prodded his nose tentatively and sniffed. Blood and snot, glorious. Probably not broken, but still.

“What is your *problem*?” he demanded.

She glared at him scornfully. “That is a remarkably stupid question.”

He pinched the bridge of his nose and tilted his head back, peering down to keep her in his line of sight. He’d trust her about as far as she could throw him. He said, “I am not your enemy.”

She gave him a baffled look, like he was an idiot. “The hell you’re not.”

“In here, I mean. Context. I’m trapped here like you. I mean you no harm.”

“Bully for you,” she said with a humorless snort. “But I mean you harm. Well, *more* harm.” She doubled down on the contemptuous sneer, and, because she apparently had not been sufficiently dramatic yet, she added, “I would spend my last breath cursing Sayal.”

“I am not Sayal.”

She scoffed. “Yes, you are. And I’m Cezdet. Welcome to the front line, Tris.” She threw his last name at him like an epithet. Clearly she’d recognized him as well.

“I am not going to fight you.”

She shrugged. “Okay. You’re welcome to just stand there and let me hit you some more.”

That didn’t seem to merit a response. It was hard to believe that, a few minutes ago, he’d been longing for company. There were, it seemed, worse things than being lonely. He tried releasing his nose and was rewarded with a fresh run of blood over his lips. He tasted copper. He sighed and tilted his head back again.

She was pacing now. Keeping an eye on him, but apparently too revved up to stand still for long. Of all the people to run into, this was spectacularly poor luck.

But regardless, she was the only other living thing he’d encountered in almost a week of wandering, and walking away did not seem like an option. He’d just have to talk her down. And keep an eye on her, because he was quite certain she’d leap at the opportunity for another cheap shot if he gave her an opening.

She stopped pacing to turn an angry look up at the sky, clenching her fists at her sides. She raised her voice and demanded, “Just end this bullshit! There is no threat, no pain, no leverage you can find that will make me talk.

Just put me back in the cell already.”

He blinked. “Who are you talking to?” he asked, baffled anew.

She kept her attention on the sky, but shot him a glare from the corner of her eye. “Does this ever work? Do people get so bored they trade their secrets to get out of here?”

“You think this is an interrogation technique?”

She returned to ignoring him. He released his nose and sniffed experimentally. The bleeding seemed to have slowed. He wiped at his face with the collar of his shirt, although he was pretty sure he was just smearing the blood around. His hand was starting to throb as well. She’d bitten the base of his thumb hard enough to draw blood. Most people wouldn’t commit to biting another person. There was just something about using your mouth on living flesh. And yet she’d bitten him with all the savage intent of a trapped animal. He’d have to file that away for future reference. She was small, but she was crazy, and crazy was always dangerous.

Well, her kind of crazy.

She was still berating the sky. She shouted, “You’re wasting your time. It can’t be cheap, maintaining all of this. Wake me up, or unplug me, or whatever. Just let me out! You’ll get nothing from me!”

“You can’t really think anyone is going to answer you. If this was a Sayal interrogation, why would I be stuck here too?”

She turned, and then paused to consider him. “Your nose is still bleeding. You look like a crime scene.”

“What? What does that have to do with anything?”

She shrugged. “Nothing. Just saying.” She added, with a satisfied smirk, “Pride in my work.”

It seemed a little unfair to criticize him for the injury she’d just caused, but this wasn’t a productive topic, so he let it pass. And pinched his nose again.

“Would you consider taking my word that this is absolutely not a Sayal interrogation technique and I am just as lost here as you are?” he asked.

“Like you’re not a plant.” She was overdoing it a little on the contempt. He got the point.

“Why would we do this?”

“Traditional interrogation techniques have proven ineffective on me,” she said smugly.

He hadn’t paid much attention to her story after she was arrested a few months back. Cezdet was an internal problem, not the army’s bailiwick. Caverten had made a big deal about it. And if Han recalled correctly, this woman was a major player and one of Nyoiar’s protégés. Certainly, she was

among a handful of people who could call themselves leaders in the southern rebel group. If she was refusing to talk, it was probably driving internal security up the wall. Caverten might be content to brag about capturing a big fish, but propaganda only got you so far. The longer they had her, the less useful her answers would be. Still, this place seemed like an unlikely solution for an intractable prisoner, and his own presence here was even harder to explain.

He tried again. "Let me get this straight. You have refused to answer questions, so you think Sayal built a giant maze, then dumped you in without warning to wander around. Oh, and also kidnapped one of their own generals and dumped him in too. To what end? In what way does that make sense to you?"

She stopped for a moment, briefly stymied. Then she sneered, "Sayal has more than enough generals to spare a few to decorate their mazes."

There was some truth to that, at least in the sense that they'd been handing out stars like party favors for the past few years. He'd gotten his two for knocking back a rather underwhelming Talay border incursion. And, if he was being honest, for looking the part. Which was all they let him do anymore.

She continued, "And anyway, I don't propose that Sayal built anything. This isn't real. It's some induced hallucination."

"Ah yes. Our advanced mind control techniques. If we could do that, why would we need to *ask* you questions?" He prodded the bridge of his swelling nose. "Sure feels real enough."

She shot him another glare. She seemed to have a ready supply of them. "Really now? And how long have you been in here? I'm going on a week, give or take. Had anything to eat, Tris? To drink? Taken a piss? I flatter myself that I'm on the stoic side, but I think even I'd be a little peckish by now if any of this was real."

His blood went cold. How had he not noticed that? Counting up the seconds and the meters, one by one, and he'd never stopped to think about why he wasn't hungry or thirsty...

"Fates. It's not real."

Some of the acid left her tone. "It feels very real, I'll admit. More than any dream, but..."

"But I've been here much too long to go without water. I'd be dead." He paused, and then concluded grimly, "I am dead. We're in hell."

"Oh, don't get all maudlin. This would make a piss poor excuse for an afterlife. It's, like I said, some kind of hallucination."

He stammered back at her, "We don't have that technology. We don't have anything like that. You have to know that. We must be dead."

Suddenly he didn't feel like he could stay on his feet, so he sat down where he stood, staring at his wounded hand. The Istans talked about a hell like this, empty and colorless. Except theirs was cold. This place wasn't cold, or warm. The air was just still.

"Fuck. That," she declared flatly. "I'm not dead. You be dead if you want. I'm stuck in a Sayal experiment or something, and I am going to figure out how to wake myself up."

He looked up at her. She was agitated, not as sure of herself as she wanted to portray. He asked, "Where were you before you woke up here? Could you have died?"

She pressed her lips into a thin line. "Never mind where I was. We're not dead. Get up."

"Why?"

"Because we're not going to sit here arguing about it. I'm going to keep walking until I find something more to go on. I want you where I can keep an eye on you, so you're coming with me. Get your ass up."

He pushed himself to his feet. At the back of his mind, he knew that he probably shouldn't be following her orders, but he didn't have a better idea, and anything was better than sitting here alone with the possibility that this was eternity.