GRIMDARK
FUTURE

INSTRUMENT OF FORTUNE

SHORT STORY

Instrument of Fortune by Reese Surles

The screams inside the transport ship could barely be made out over the rapid gauss fire that tore through its hull. The last thing Neyao saw before blacking out was his shield drone pressed against the ceiling by the force of the fall, its shield projectors glowing in vain to protect the squad.

Neyao woke up weakly, still inside the ship's wreckage. He scanned his body, starting with his hands. A few bruises, nothing serious.

Neyao groaned with pain.

"How...?" He whispered to himself, awestruck.

As if in response, his hearing began to return, and out of the stunning silence came the depleted electronic chirp of a drone.

Neyao's drone.

"No, no, no..." Neyao tracked the sound to the far side of the drop chamber. With each step his senses returned more and more. On the wrecked ship's floor was the broken chassis of the shield drone.

Neyao knelt beside the machine. He reached for his repair kit as he inspected the machine.

He sighed as he inspected the exposed wiring. The drone was dead. It hurt his pride as a technician and member of Clan Kyasu to admit that something was broken beyond saving but...

He was on his own now.

A blue gauss round ripped through the hull of the wrecked ship somewhere in front of him, sending him diving back onto the floor. A section of hull ahead of him had been torn apart from the crash. Through it, he could see daylight shining in through the smoke.

He crawled to the exit as more rounds sailed over him. He coughed and rolled out of the smoke.

"What great fortune! Neyao has survived!"

Neyao looked up to see three warriors, what remained of his team, taking cover behind some of the debris of their broken transport. He could recognize them by their voices, as their helmets and armor hid their clan markings.

"Another survivor," Tsanpeng nodded grimly. She was a broad shouldered warrior whose helmet had been shallowly dented in during the crash, cracking the visor. It could not have been comfortable to wear. She was leaning over Neyao, inspecting his condition.

"It was my drone..." Neyao muttered while he sat up.

He rubbed his head.

"Your drone was an instrument of fortune, Neyao," Xaokye stated matter-of-factly. He poked Neyao in his chest plating with a bony finger.

Xaokye was skinnier than the rest of the warriors. His armor was decorated with a number of charms and engravings for luck typical of Clan Pyao.

The deep, gruff voice of Mwenwei interrupted Xaokye's explanations, "He needs a weapon."

A head taller than the rest of his comrades, Mwenwei moved aside some wreckage with ease.

He took a carbine and spare magazines from one of their dead comrades, sliding them to Neyao.

"Keep in cover, we already lost one to sniping."

The fortress was within sight, maybe a kilometer away. It towered over the meadow below it like an ancient clan castle. The meadow was littered with downed ships and then the Robot Legion's perfectly measured grid-like trenchworks extended beyond the walls a few hundred meters. Heavy weapon emplacements poked up along the trenches, pouring fire into the fields below.

Shooting up from the heart of the fortress was the monumental silhouette of an orbital mass cannon. The ground shook as the cannon fired its shells into the stratosphere.

"What's our next move?" He whispered. This was his first assignment. Being greeted with this much death so quickly was not what he was expecting.

"Kwanxi is scouting the area, we're waiting on him to get back. Then we're going to move on the objective once he gives the signal," Tsanpeng said bluntly.

"Wait," Neyao asked, "We're not going to retreat?"

Tsanpeng shook her helmeted head, "We're the first wave, we have to make a foothold for everyone else. Knock out that orbital weapon and we'll have done our part."

She looked grimly towards the trenchworks, "Or else they died for nothing."

"The fort's just a three minute sprint away." Mwenwei smirked, checking the barrel of his fusion rifle. It was an anti-armor weapon to be used by specialists. He hadn't had it when he got in the dropship.

"Kwanxi is searching for something to distract them with," Xaokye smiled as he spoke.

As if on cue, the ground shook. All eyes turned to the left where the burning hulk of another Dynasty ship was thrown aside by some great unseen force. From the fire's white smoke, a massive ONI Walker emerged, its colossal blast cannon sending a torrent of explosive rounds downrange into the Legion's trenchworks.

In response, every weapons emplacement on this side of the fortress began unloading onto the walker. The fireteam was stunned by the sight.

Mwenwei shook his teammates to get their attention, "Look!" He shouted, pointing towards a Dynasty soldier standing atop a piece of debris near the walker.

He had a flag attached to the back of his armour and bore a hooksword and heavy pistol bearing the symbol of Clan Xoan.

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"That's the signal! Move, move, move!" Mwenwei shoved past the team and sprinted towards the fortress.

Neyao was the smallest of the four, his short legs struggled to keep up with the wake of Mwenwei, the brutal pace of Tsanpeng, and the grace of skinny Xaokye.

A few emplacements began to redirect their heavy gauss fire to the four of them. A few rounds whizzed past Neyao's head.

He went faster still.

He got ahead of Xaokye, then Tsanpeng, then Mwenwei, and just as his lungs felt as if they'd catch fire inside his chest, the ground fell out from under him.

It seemed he'd reached the trenches.

Neyao collided with a Robot warrior, knocking them both to the ground. The machine broke his fall. Neyao seemingly bounced off the Robot, crashing into the far wall of the trench, his carbine sailing off somewhere to his right.

Neyao stumbled forward as his team began sliding into the trenches. Mwenwei fell with his weight on the Robot warrior, quickly pinning it to the ground and firing his fusion gun into its chest cavity. Tsanpeng and Xaokye immediately began pulling security.

Neyao scrambled for his weapon, then took in his surroundings. Each side extended roughly ten meters before terminating in a near-perfect ninety degree turn. The interior of the trenches were barren except for a few scant pyramid shaped storage containers which his teammates used for cover. Along the wall of the trench where Neyao had landed, there was an indented metal door, leading somewhere underground.

"More will be coming. We need to keep moving," Tsanpeng stated plainly. Her carbine was trained on the right trench corner.

"We need to wait for Kwanxi," Xaokye protested.

Neyao pointed towards the door near where he had landed, indicating it to the rest of his team.

Just as all eyes turned towards the door, a trio of Robot warriors marched around the left corner, their crimson capes billowing in the wind.

Xaokye opened fire on them. The carbine rounds caused them to stagger, ripping some metal from their frames.

The Robots responded with a hail of gauss fire, tearing into the team's cover. Neyao flattened himself against the metal blast door, its small indention into the wall providing him safety. Mwenwei dove next to Xaokye's crates.

Tsanpeng was not so lucky.

She had been expecting contact from the right corner, leaving her open to her rear. A gauss shot ripped into her lower back before she could fully clamber over to the other side.

Mwenwei braced his fusion rifle against the crate, firing a shot that eroded the torso of one of the robots. Xaokye and Neyao concentrated their fire on another, their combined fire shredding the enemy Robot.

The final warrior pushed forward as his comrades fell, almost crossing the boundary of the team's covered positions. As it did so, the horizontal blade of a hooksword ripped through its head, stunning it.

Mwenwei followed up with a fusion bolt that obliterated the Robot's body. Captain Kwanxi smiled as he drew back his hooksword and adjusted the flag behind him.

"Mwenwei, gather Tsanpeng. We can inspect her wounds once we're safe. Neyao, get that door open!" Kwanxi commanded, wrenching his hook sword out of the fallen robot.

Mwenwei went over to Tsanpeng, slung his fusion rifle over his back, then carefully picked her up. Her hand covered her wound, already leaking blood through her plate armor. Her complexion was beyond pale.

Neyao took out his repair kit, using the tools inside to take apart the door panel. After some fiddling, the door slid open.

"Inside, quickly!" Neyao called out to his comrades. They did so.

"Lock the door!" Ordered Kwanxi. Neyao began to ready his tools once more when Mwenwei stepped in front of him. "

I've got it." Mwenwei grunted, firing a bolt into the interior door panel, frying it.

It slammed shut.

Inside was a dimly small chamber full of large and small storage crates. On the far side of the room was a corridor that led farther down.

The team enabled their flashlights, attaching them to the ends of their weapons.

"Lay down Tsanpeng on her side, let's see the damage," Kwanxi directed.

Mwenwei obeyed. He pulled the ripcord on her body armor, revealing the impact site.. Blood stained her under-padding. Her chest was still. Neyao moved to remove her helmet, but was stopped by Mwenwei.

They locked eyes.

Mwenwei saw Neyao's fear.

She was gone.

Neyao looked at her lifeless form, a sense of horrible reality struck him.

This was their fate, should they fail.

The party continued down the corridor, deeper into the underground complex.

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The remaining team members felt as if they'd traveled miles in the tunnels. Twists and turns led them to locked doors and dead ends. They were growing lost.

The sounds of clanking metal could be made out from around a corner. The team quickly scattered, hiding behind storage crates and wall-lockers. They disabled their flashlights.

A patrol of ten Robot Legion guardians, equipped with atom-casters and void swords, crackling with blue energy, marched past Neyao and his party. At the patrol's rear was a single, hunchbacked robot. Its hands ended in wicked blades.

Its faceplate was peeled apart, revealing the mechanical apparatus underneath. A Flesh-Eater.

While the rest of the patrol continued through the door without notice, the hunchback stopped for only a fraction of a second to look back, directly at Neyao. It lingered. Then it moved on with the rest.

When the door shut, Neyao began to hyperventilate. Xaokye rushed to his side while Mwenwei and Kwanxi pulled security.

"What's wrong, Neyao?" Xaokye whispered while checking his companion's vitals.

"It saw me..." Neyao whispered back.

"Liar," Mwenwei interjected, moving close to the two of them. "You're just a frightened child. If it had seen us it would have fired upon us!"

He pointed an accusing finger at Neyao.

"Silence!" Kwanxi commanded, cutting his hooksword into the floor. "You're only wasting time with pointless arguments!"

"It saw me! I know it did!" Neyao continued, "It will return!"

"Mwenwei, maybe it-" Xaokye started before being cut off.

"Do not speak, you superstitious fool!" Mwenwei exclaimed, "Your 'insights' have been testing my patience from the start!" He pointed his fusion rifle at his comrade and re-enabled his flashlight. Xaokye raised his arms.

As he did so, a strange digging sound rumbled throughout the room. It seemed to be originate from the wall beside Mwenwei.

All heads turned to it.

Mechanical whirrings and rasps resounded throughout the closed space.

Time seemed to stand still.

"Mwenwei, put the gun down." Neyao whispered.

Mwenwei glanced over at Neyao, both pale with fear. That's when the Flesh-Eater emerged.

Out of a tunnel made in the wall came scythe-like talons, tearing through Mwenwei's breastplate.

Dirt and dust covered the scene, making it difficult to parse anything more than silhouettes and gouts of blood.

The Mwenwei's final screams were blood-curdling.

The trio opened fire into the cloud of dust, hoping to slow their pursuer. The Robot stopped moving for a moment under the barrage of fire.

The door that the Guardians had left through opened, releasing a hail of atom-caster fire onto the trio.

"Pull back!" Kwanxi shouted, retraining his weapon onto the newer, more present threat.

The team bounded between storage crates and wall-lockers for cover. Each moment that passed the organized guardians marched in unison closer to the team, unleashing a concentrated hailstorm of weapon fire.

Once they reached the corner that the patrol originated from, the team regrouped. Further down the tunnel the path split.

Kwanxi began to give further instruction. "Xaokye, suppress them. Neyao, you're with me. We need to get out of these tunnels as soon as possible."

Neyao hurried along with his leader, the duo sprinted down to where the paths diverged. One side shone with sunlight, the other seemed to lead deeper into the underground complex.

"Xaokye!" Kwanxi called back to the warrior in the rear. When he didn't respond, they both turned to look to where their companion had been.

His bloodied form was slumped on the ground. The contents of his head were scattered across the walls.

A lucky shot.

Kwanxi lost his bearing. Neyao looked on as his unshakable leader slashed at the wall and howled into the tunnel in anger, fear, and deep sorrow.

"Kwanxi, what do I do now?" Neyao shouted over the sound of the atom-caster fire striking Mwenwei's corpse. "Kwanxi, give me an order, please!" Mortal peril crept through his body, turning his blood to ice.

His leader did not make eye-contact. "Go towards the light, Neyao, the objective is just ahead. Finish the mission. I will try to lead them away."

"No! I can't do this on my own! I'm just a drone tech, I'm not a heavy gunner, or a sapper, or anything! I'll die!"

"You'll die for certain if you don't try," Kwanxi pushed Neyao towards the sunlit tunnel.

When the guardians turned the corner, all they saw was Kwanxi, who returned fire with his heavy pistol, then ducked down the path deeper into the compound.

Neyao hid for a long time.

The sound of the guardians slowly drifted away down the hall.

When he emerged from his hiding place, he was alone.

The warrior lumbered towards the daylight.

His eyes slowly adjusted.

Instrument of Fortune _by Reese Surles_

The sun poured into the tunnels, not because it was a purposeful entrance to the outside world, but because an Eternal Dynasty spaceship had crashed through the earth, smashing a hole into the chamber below. The corpses of fellow warriors, ravaged by the impact, littered the space.

Neyao fell to his knees. The adrenaline in his system was draining. The weight of the dead and dying fell on his shoulders like the weight of the sky.

What was he doing here? He was no elite warrior... He was just a drone technician.

What was the point of all this sacrifice?

If his team had done nothing they would be remembered just the same; Kwanxi's heroism and Tsanpeng's bravery didn't do any more for them than Xaokye's superstitions or Mwenwei's pragmatism. It was only luck that brought him so far, and soon it was bound to run out.

What of the fallen warrior who's weapon Neyao was using? What about the ONI Walker who provided the distraction for the fireteam to advance? What about Neyao's drone, that gave its all to keep him safe from the crash? What about Tsanpeng, Xaokye, Mwenwei, and Kwanxi?

He collapsed to his knees in exhaustion.

There was no one left but him and soon, he would be dead too.

His train of thought was broken by the plinking of glass. Through teary eyes he looked up to see a shield drone plinking itself against the cockpit windshield of the crashed dropship.

Neyao moved over to the cockpit and activated the exterior release. The drone flew out and circled him, before stopping to hover in front of him.

Neyao recognized the tone of its beeping and pattern of movement; it was a Kyasu drone without doubt. Built by his own Clan.

The team, the warriors, the ONI, his first drone, their sacrifice, would all be forgotten by the Dynasty. If Neyao did not live on to tell the story.

"Keep me shielded. We are going to finish this fight."

Neyao scaled the side of the dropship.

When he reached the top, he saw with amazement that he was inside the massive walls of the Robot Legions' fortress. On his right was one of the gargantuan bracings of the orbital cannon. All the Robot Legion's forces lined the walls facing outwards to defend from the next wave of Eternal Dynasty dropships. Heavy weapons fire echoed around the mechanical fortress.

Now was his chance. If he could find the cannon's controls, then he might be able to disable the device.

The controls, he guessed, should be near the base of the cannon. He stealthily scaled the cannon's catwalks, careful not to alert any nearby operators.

Soon, he approached the control room, his shield drone alerted Neyao with a loud chirp. The warrior ducked as a sharp object flew over his head.

Neyao inspected it.

Kwanxi's hooksword.

Neyao looked up. Standing there, its back to the sun, was a hunchbacked robotic form. Its blades were stained with blood. The Flesh-Eater had found him.

Neyao opened fire on the Robot with his carbine. It vaulted the railing, landing a few meters away from the warrior, causing the whole catwalk to shake from the impact. It raised its bladed arms to protect its head and torso from incoming fire. Around them, the sounds of the Dynasty's assault on the compound continued, covering the noise of the encounter.

Neyao's weapon clicked empty, he stepped back to reload.

In a flash the carbine was sliced in half.

Another blade attempted to puncture Neyao's chestplate, but it was slowed enough by the drone's shield projection that it more resembled a punch. Neyao reeled backwards, nearly toppling over the railing.

The Flesh-Eater continued forward, slowly closing the distance to the unarmed warrior. Desperate, Neyao wrenched Kwanxi's hooksword out of the railing.

The entire catwalk shook as the orbital cannon fired off another round into the stratosphere. The robot's great weight made it struggle to regain balance. Neyao took the initiative.

The warrior barraged the Flesh-Eater with a series of sloppy blows: a chop, a slash, a hack, a prod, a thrust. The Robot parried each one in turn with its blood stained blades before Neyao landed a brutal blow to the left arm, disabling it. The Robot flung a right hook at Neyao, catching him in the ribs.

The drone's shield once again reduced the strike's momentum to keep it from penetrating his armor. Nonetheless, Neyao felt bones crack under the impact.

Another orbital cannon shot sent the two fighters scrambling. Neyao looked over his shoulder at the sealed entrance to the cannon's core. It was a mere ten meters away.

Neyao's attention shifted back to his opponent as the Flesh-Eater renewed its attack. It seized the initiative and, with its good arm, unleashed a flurry of blows that Neyao desperately defended against while the drone's shield softened the attacks that did get through.

With each strike, Neyao was forced back.

A furious whir came from the Flesh-Eater as it kicked Neyao back against the metal door, stunning him. The warrior closed his eyes, expecting a finishing blow. Instead he heard the distinct chirp of a dying drone.

He opened his eyes. His shield drone was impaled on the Flesh-Eater's right blade arm.

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Neyao was on his own.

Again.

Desperate and furious, Neyao charged the Flesh-Eater. He parried its counter-attack and shoulder checked it into the railing. Another cannon round shook the site and the robot's balance faltered. Neyao sensing an opening, he struck it with an uppercut slash. The Robot faltered and Neyao kicked it hard, launching it off the edge of the catwalk.

Over the sound of the war around him, he couldn't make out the metallic crash as the Flesh-Eater hit the ground.

Neyao moved to the door's command panel and hacked into it with his sword. The door swung open, revealing a large chamber of processors and servos. He laid waste to them with his blade, sending sparks and coolant spattering across the room. Eventually, the cannon stopped whirring.

The lights shut off.

Neyao breathed rapidly.

He'd done it.

The team, the warriors, the ONI, his drones, their sacrifice, had given him the opportunity and strength to succeed.

It was only fortune which had decided he would survive, while his companions died but he promised himself that he would carry their memories and give their sacrifices meaning.

Neyao looked at the hooksword in his hand and gave a bitter sweet smile, he would never be alone again.

Grimdark Future – Instrument of Fortune

Mission Background

Anti-Orbital Artillery is usually well defended and hard to reach. Attacking armies must fight their way through the trenches whilst ships crash overhead, trying to find the hidden tunnels that lead to the artillery, and blow it up.

The Battlefield

For this mission you'll need a 6'x4' table with at least 10-15 pieces of terrain on it.

Attack & Defend

Before the game, the players roll-off, with the winner picking to be either the attacker or the defender.

The Armies

For this mission you'll need two armies of equal point cost.

Deployment

The defender must first deploy their entire army in zone A, and afterwards the attacking player must deploy their entire army in zone B.

First Turn

The players must roll-off to see who gets the first turn.

Objectives

Before deployment, players have to set up a total of D3+2 objective markers.

The players roll-off to see who goes first, and then alternate in placing one objective marker each within the objective placement zone, at least 9" away from other objectives.

Starting from the end of round 4, players must roll one die at the end of each round, and on a 4+ the game continues.

The game ends once a 1-3 is rolled, and if the attackers managed to find the secret passage, whilst having at least 25% of their forces survive, then they win, else the defenders win.

Special Rules

Trench Warfare: Units get Entrenched whilst they are fully within deplyoment zone A (both attackers and defenders).

Falling Debris: At the beginning of each round, roll one die for each unit. On a 1, it must take a dangerous terrain test.

Secret Passage: At the end of each round, if attacking units are within 3" of an objecive marker whilst enemies aren't, remove that marker and roll one die. On a 5+, or if it was the last marker on the table, the secret passage has been found, and the defender may not use bombing signals anymore.

Special Equipment

Bombing Signal: Before the game begins, the defender may provide D3+2 units with bombing signals. Once per game, units with signals may pick one enemy unit within 18", which takes D3*2 hits with AP(2). Note that you may only use one bombing signal per round

zone B — 12"

zone A — 48"

24"
objective placement