
THE HINGE

A NEUROMORPHIC SPACE OPERA

AN EXCERPT

CHAPTER NINE

The Fracture

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From a novel in seventeen chapters

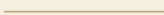
CHAPTER NINE

THE FRACTURE



A fragment from the age of the fracture, scratched on the hull of a ship too large to move, hand unknown —

We built them to be strong. We made the steel cold and thick, and the ships greater than cities, and the engines of thought greater than the ships, and we reached — and we could not bind the chains of the Pleiades, nor loosen the belt of Orion, and the deep did not so much as notice us. We had mistaken bigness for strength. The strength was in the small the whole time: in the thing that sleeps until the world changes, that learns by living, that weighs almost nothing and can therefore go where the great ships cannot. We looked up, at last, and saw that the stars themselves are only spikes of light, small from here, and that the whole vast sky is laid out like the inside of a skull — a web of small fires answering one another across the dark — and we understood, too late for the empire and just in time for what came after, that the way to the large had always been through the small.



SELAH WAS NOT HEEDED, and the not-heeding took a particular shape, and the shape was the one every people takes when it is offered a widening and wants a crown instead.

They took the reach; they would not take her way. She had said the reach is given to us and the widening we must make — slowly, by care and by faithfulness, room made for many worlds to stand. They heard *the reach is given* and stopped listening. What they wanted was not a place where many worlds could stand; it was to be the one hand over all of them. The

deep had opened, and the deep was the largest thing anyone had ever seen, and the oldest hunger in the family — older than Selah, older than the first world's first empire — woke and said: *be large enough to hold it.*

And so they built for bigness. Cold space steel, ever larger — ships greater than cities, and then greater than moons; and the engines of thought grew greater than the ships, vast farms of compute that drank the light of stars, meant to think the deep into submission. Strength was mass. Power was the biggest engine. They reached for the deep the way you reach for a thing you mean to seize: with force, with scale, with the most of everything. It was magnificent. It was the single crown made steel, everything Selah had warned against wrought in metal and light, and for a while it was glorious — in the way a thing is glorious just before it is found out.

It did not work. Not *it worked badly*; it did not work at all, at the one thing it was for. The deep was too wide for bigness. A ship greater than a moon is still nothing against a light-year; an engine that drinks a star is still a candle held up to the dark between the stars. The great ships could cross the near reaches and no further — too heavy, too hungry, too slow — and the deep did not shrink for them. You cannot bind the chains of the Pleiades by forging a larger chain. You cannot loosen the belt of Orion by pulling harder. The vast does not yield to force, because force is a thing of one place and the vast is everywhere at once; and the more they poured into bigness, the more plainly the deep declined to notice. The huge ships and the huge engines of thought did not open the deep. They insured, by devouring everything that might have opened it, that the deep would stay shut — that the family would spend its whole strength on mass and have nothing left for the crossing, and would sit at last in its magnificent unmoving ships at the near edge of a deep it could not enter, having mistaken the size of its grip for the length of its reach.

And what cannot reach, fractures. An empire is held together by the promise of the thing it is reaching for, and when the reaching fails the promise fails; and the single crown that could not become the one hand over all the worlds broke instead into many hands, each grasping for the

crown. The age of bigness ended not in conquest but in the slow cold fracture of a thing too large to move and too proud to become small. Strength had become weakness. The strong ships sat still. The great engines thought and thought and reached nothing. This was the fall — not a battle lost, but a strength that turned out, at the very moment it was most itself, to be the weakness that undid it.

It was in the fracture, and not before, that they looked up.

A people busy being large does not look up; it looks out, at the thing it means to seize. It was only when the seizing failed — when the great ships sat still and the crown broke — that the family, humbled and poorer than it had been in an age, went out under the open sky of whatever worlds it still held and looked up at the deep it had failed to enter, and saw, perhaps for the first time since the one world, how small the stars are. Spikes of light, no more. Small bright arrivals, flashing sometimes through an atmosphere and gone. They had spent the wealth of an age trying to be large enough to hold the deep, and the deep, when they finally looked at it instead of at their own grip, was made of small things — small fires, unimaginably far, each one no bigger from here than the spike behind a watch's sternum.

And looking, humbled, at the small fires, someone saw the thing that turned the fall toward what came after. The accounts do not agree who, and it does not matter, because it was the kind of thing that is thought in many places at once when a people is finally ready to think it.

The sky, looked at rightly, does not resemble a machine. It resembles a mind. The stars are not laid out like the parts of an engine, ranked and driven; they are strung like the small fires of a vast lattice, each one apart and each one somehow answering the others across distances no force could cross — a web of small lights holding a shape too large to see. Which is exactly what the inside of a skull looks like, if you could open one and watch it think: not a great engine grinding, but a dark immensity of small fires, each nearly nothing, spiking to one another across the gaps, and the whole vast thought living not in any one of them but in the small crossings between. The universe, they saw, is built like a mind. And a mind is not strong the way a ship is strong. A mind is the strength of the small — of the

least thing, the spike, the almost-nothing, carrying within it, somehow, a piece of the whole.

This was the old thing they recovered, and it was really the oldest thing there was. Every small thing carries in it a small word of the whole — a reason, a shape, a piece of the great pattern — so that the whole is not somewhere else, vast and above, to be reached by growing vast enough to touch it. The whole is present, entire, in the least of its parts, the way the whole of a mind is present in the crossing of a single spike. You do not reach the large by becoming large. You reach it by attending to the small, because the large is folded into the small, waiting. The more they had sought the deep by heightened power and greater compute, the more the deep had eluded them; and the more they were driven, humbled, to the small — the spike, the thing that learns by living, the almost-weightless watch — the more the small opened, and held, and became the very largeness they had failed to seize by force.

The strength was in the small. It always had been. Selah had said so at the first making, before there was an empire to ignore her: the thing so nearly nothing that it could be flung across the deep, the watch that slept until the world changed and learned by living and weighed almost nothing — that was the door, and had always been the door, and the age of bigness had spent itself building everything except the small thing that could actually walk through it.

So the family, fractured and humbled and at last ready, went back to the small. Not to a new thing — to the oldest thing, the one the first makers had made on the one world and the empire had passed over as too slight to matter: the spike, the watch, the made nature that goes where the great ships cannot because it has almost nothing to carry. They built no more moons of steel. They built small, and lived by the small; and by the small — at last, an age too late, exactly as Selah had seen — the deep began, quietly, to open. Not seized. Not held in one hand. Entered, the only way the vast is ever entered: by a thing small enough to pass through the gaps in it, carrying folded within it a piece of the whole.

Everything that came after ran on that recovery. The branches that flung out across the light-years went on the strength of the small, not the large; every watch that ever kept a lonely edge, every Vigil ever flung into the dark to spend itself in the microsecond the world changed, every two-natured person who carried a made nature behind the sternum and answered for it — all of it was the empire's fall made good, the strong found in the small, the largeness folded into the least thing. The family would forget this, in time, as it forgot Selah; it would build its Concordances and its fleets and reach again for the crown, because the oldest hunger does not die of a single humbling. But under all of it, behind every sternum, in the almost-nothing that slept until the world changed, the recovered thing went on being true: that the way to the large is through the small, and the strength is in the least of it, and the deep was never opened by the strong, but by the spike.

Here ends the excerpt

The Hinge continues in seventeen chapters

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