

The First Arrow Was Light, But the Second Went Deep

by Michael A. Stackpole

He was in pain. It was not the first time in his life he had been in pain, but it was the first time he acknowledged it and embraced it. He embraced all of it, even down to the tingle of the nanites furiously knitting his tissue back together. They would work quickly and he thought, for a moment, they would be too quick, for the pain was something he should have to endure.

He had come to that tiny rock because he knew enlightenment waited there. Among his people, the seeking of illumination could sometimes be treated as a passing fancy — an idyll for times when physical and emotional needs had been sated. He had felt that way for countless eons, barely acknowledging the mysteries that he now felt compelled to solve. But that had been an earlier time, when Seyal had yet been beautiful, and the Shi domination of reality had gone unquestioned.

And unchallenged.

The cold from the floor in the asteroid's chamber seeped into his body. He welcomed that sensation, too, as it reminded him of that moment, that nanosecond, when Seyal shifted from its orbit and escaped the liquid plasma fury of a star exploding. For that moment he and all the others were beyond existence, in an absence of heat and light, sound and life. Even suggesting the duration of that sensation had been the subject of heated arguments among the Shi Crowns, for it was believed that as the planet shifted, time and space merged into a single dimension. Time and space lost their definitions — literally ceased to exist, and then snapped back into their old roles with catastrophic results.

His eyes remained closed, but he did not need to see to know the sign of the catastrophe still lingered. A huge glowing-blue scar had been ripped through the fabric of reality, and energy in a legion of forms streamed through after it. He could almost feel the impact of quantum particles on his body.

Their impact on his mind he felt most decidedly, as if millions of tiny needles caressed his psyche. They pricked and tore, triggering emotions and sensations that he had not known before. He believed that his ancestors might have known them — the people who evolved to become the Shi, but they had existed so long ago that many refused to believe they ever truly lived. They believed the Shi had created them as a fiction to justify their domination of reality, for as they had risen to power, so others might. It was the Shi right and duty to maintain power, which meant doing whatever needed to be done to defend their position in reality.

A shiver ran through him, and a second triggered by the surprise at the first. He had never shivered before, not that he could recall. He had felt cold, but had refused to shiver and acknowledge that the harshness of the universe had any power over him. He had used the power of his mind to shape ice into armor and wore it in defiance of the cold.

Eventually the cold had surrendered and, ever glorious in victory, he had let his armor melt and caress his body as the fluid flowed to the ground. He dimly recalled some sub-species of creature collecting that water, drinking it, because, in their tiny minds, it was a blessing from a god. He had let them drink, had accepted their praise, and then destroyed their squalid little settlement because . . .

He could not remember why.

It didn't matter. He needed no justification for what he did. Reality was his to do with as he pleased. So it was for all Shi, and those who did things well became Crowns — first among equals.

They were the unquestioned pinnacle of life.

Unquestioned, of course, until the Quay revolt.

His left arm twitched as a nanite reconnected nerves. The sword blow had opened him from shoulder in toward his midline, rupturing organs, severing muscle and nerves, parting bone. Rent arteries and veins had spilled fluid, causing his vascular pressure to collapse. Had the nanites not been able to repair that damage first, while he had lain unconscious, he would have died.

He contemplated death for a moment. It was not unknown among the Shi. Indeed, one of the four warriors who had accompanied him on his mission to the asteroid lay dead in the darkness. He'd felt his subaltern die and savored the unusual piquant sense of his passing. What had been part of his consciousness for a very long time had gone away. He could feel the void and might have even been moved to mourn, but that ability had long since been lost to him.

The sense of dread he'd first had when his people found and enslaved the Quay returned. He amended his feeling, reshaping it, from dread to foreboding, not wishing to confuse it in the least with fear. When he'd seen the creatures — bestial and savage, with no true knowledge, but a feral cunning and ability to learn, he had known they would be difficult. He had argued for their immediate destruction, but his counsel had been ignored. Indeed, some of his fellows had laughed at his concerns and, through the ages, had even pricked at him by reminding him of his baseless concerns.

They had done so up until the point when the danger could not be denied. For them the solution was simple — they would withdraw all that allowed the Quay to live, for did they not live at the sufferance of the Shi? The gods would hide their faces from their charges, and the Quay would wither and die. It had been an effective way of handling other races in the past. It had been done countless times, because of provocation on occasion, but primarily as an amusement.

He had done it. He had taken a race of bipedal creatures — not unlike the human who had wounded him, though of different coloration and proportions — and raised them up. He had revealed to them secrets and then had used his power to see that their rituals always had beneficial results. They worshipped him passionately, offering sacrifices, engaging in wars in his honor and raising great monuments to him.

And then he had abandoned them.

Their rituals no longer functioned. When the sacrifice of one person produced no results, they offered two and then four, then whole villages and cities. Those who had offended the god were destroyed. His monuments drowned in blood. Wars erupted as factions tore the world apart, and always, always there were the tiny voices, the innocent, who pleaded for his return.

Without him, they all died.

This was what the Shi had expected of the Quay, but in their case, there had been one simple difference. The Shi had not hidden their true nature. They had trained the Quay for technological tasks and

had assumed the beasts had no true understanding of what they were doing. As a result, when the gods abandoned them, the Quay did not die.

They became angry. They recreated the means to leave the worlds on which they had been left to die — poisonous worlds too unpleasant for the Shi to endure long on them. The Quay rose from those venomous balls and struck at Shi colony worlds. They raided and pillaged, seizing the means to expand their revolt. Had they been smarter, they could have worked with other species to let the whole of the universe rise against the Shi, but the Quay's single-minded devotion to revenge precluded that.

And gave them the power to drive at Seyal and destroy it.

The Shi plan to end the threat had been simple. They created a device that could detonate a sun, wiping out the star system. The Quay could not hide the location of their bases — indeed, they all but sent the coordinates to the Shi as if they were their equals and worthy of meeting in honorable combat. The slaves had been foolish, and the Shi had meant to make them pay.

A word came to him, as he lay there, one he had plucked from the mind of the machine-man who had accompanied his foe in the asteroid. *Hubris*. The pride that precedes a fall. They had indeed been proud, the Shi, and disdainful. They had prepared the weapon and readied it for use, pausing only to celebrate its creation. It was their salvation, and even though he was among those who had opposed its creation, he had celebrated too.

He would have felt ashamed, but he had taken precautions. He and a cabal of Crowns had caused a sphere of energy conversion satellites to be placed around Seyal. Harvesting the energy of the universe had been nothing new for the Shi, and this generation of satellites merely replaced older, aging ones. He and his companions had anticipated dire consequences were the Quay ever to learn the secret of the quantum device that would be employed against them, but even their estimates were too liberal.

They had not thought the Quay would strike when they did. The Quay managed to steal the device. Shi ships had chased them, trapped them, leaving them no chance to escape the Seyal system, but they had reckoned poorly. The Quay, who live in a tight family structure, with clans and tribes prescribing every aspect of life, counted themselves as insignificant compared to the survival of those they left behind.

That, and the chance to destroy the Shi would make those who died immortal in the minds of all the Quay.

So they drove their ship into Seyal's sun and the device, which had been meant to destroy the Quay, proved far better than even their scientists had imagined. Their star was instantly converted into energy which exploded out and consumed planets. In fact, were it not that so much of the energy had consumed a fair sized gas giant between Seyal and the sun, Seyal never would have survived.

As it was, the planet very nearly did not. The energy converters absorbed the energy and, linked as they were, powered a hyperspace field generator that created a bubble around the world. He and his companions had intended, by this means, to be able to move Seyal, but the mathematics required to move a planet were yet in their infancy. In the scant seconds before the nova's energy crisped the world, data from millions of simulations was distilled and pumped into the calculation engines.

Seyal blinked out of existence.

What exactly happened after that was a matter of heated conjecture, with theories abounding from the mundane to the exotic. Most Shi assumed their world had moved through a rip in space/time that delivered them to a distant corner of their own universe. Others suggested that they had traveled to a parallel universe, and used spurious data to support their claim. Yet others said they were in the process of dying and now perceived the world as a hostile place to ease their transition from life to death.

But he ascribed to the most radical view.

In that instant when Seyal jumped, he supposed it ceased to exist. He further agreed that the Shi were so possessed of power, that their outrage at no longer existing forced the creation of a new universe. They reappeared in it, this universe of their own creating. Every bit of it had been harvested from their memories and their hopes and dreams, so it reminded them of their old universe and functioned much like it.

And the differences, they were born of secrets and fears. Not that they mattered, for all that did matter was that this universe was a Shi creation. It was theirs to dominate as they had before. This explanation felt right to him, and he pitied those who found it the most extreme.

But, then, they were the ones who would not admit to what the presence of the Quay and humans here meant. The Quay had appeared in this new universe, their fury unabated, because some of the Shi were weak and felt guilt at how they had treated their slaves. Such moral decay was not unknown among the Shi, but had been relegated to those who were far from the currents of power.

The humans, their presence, created a problem for those who believed as he did. He did not think he could have imagined them, but others clearly had. The humans proved a challenge. They were willing to strike at the Shi, and did not quail from attacking the Quay. This was their universe, after all, and they didn't take to interlopers declaring things were otherwise. Even the half-machine creature had attacked Shi warriors and survived.

The greatest problem remained, and he wrestled with it as his flesh closed and his organs began to function again. In his experience, none of the lesser races should have been able to hurt him as his foe had. He could find only one explanation for why she had been able to, and it trickled fear into him. The only explanation could have been that the Shi, those among them who loathed themselves, or felt bored with their existence, had imagined themselves diminished in this new universe. In essence, as they recreated themselves and reality around themselves, they had made themselves into shadows.

They had cut themselves off from their power and would have to suffer the consequences of that act for as long as they lived.

He considered that and searched himself for the self-hatred that would have allowed him to imagine himself as inferior. He could not find it, so he rejected that explanation. The explanation was inferior and, therefore, unworthy.

His hands curled into fists and he floated upright. He had not imagined himself in any way inferior. Among the humans it was thought that the gods had created men in their image, and this had a prophetic resonance to it for him. As the humans had been created, this thought had been planted in them, since the Shi had created them and the Shi were certainly to them what their paltry gods should have been.

And we are more.

In creating men, he felt sure, the Shi had created a worthy foe. The human sense that the universe was theirs, that they were the most mighty, placed them in diametric opposition to the Shi. Both had no question that they were the pinnacle of life, and these views permitted no quarter.

Is it possible we have created something we cannot destroy? His trio of eyes opened slowly. The humans had a paradox, wondering if a god, being omnipotent, could create a rock so big that he could not lift it. The humans enjoyed puzzling over such things, applying feeble logic to a question that had no answer.

That answer does not matter. He gestured and his staff floated to his hand. *Have we created a creature we cannot defeat? Perhaps. And not. What we have created before, we have consumed, and so it shall always be.*

We are, after all, the Shi.