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Warnings We Do Not Heed

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Author's Note: When I was in high school, I took an acting class that played an improvisation game called "Beg, Borrow, and Steal." The theory being every artist learns from other artists by "borrowing" from them. So, when I started writing A Tomato in the Sun, I "borrowed" from a scifi story I once read in which an alien species came to Earth to dine on our nuclear waste. I assure you, the resulting story is my own, written entirely by my own hand. But I did borrow the idea that an alien species could arrive to dine on our toxic conditions. The theme of this story is the juxtaposition between legacy and habit in the face of changing circumstances that lead to unexpected outcomes. And our difficulty accepting.

A Tomato in the Sun

"Fucking bugs!" Old Tom grumbled, shaking his fist at the dozen or so coleopsis perched on nearly every tree branch above his garden. "Every morning it's the same thing with you sumbitches! Y'all crap and I clean. Iye-god, you little bastards, but one day I'm gonna turn Minnie's tomcats loose and let them hunt y'all down! Then none of y'all can poison my nice tomato plants with all your shit. It's enough to make a grown man cry."

It was true, the Coleopsi, or *Trechus arribasi* -- which was the closest Earth's biologists could classify this new alien species -- weren't very fond of tomatoes. In fact, they downright despised them. Something about the acidity in the seeds messed with their internal digestive tracts, causing them to bloat and painfully expel gas more odorous than rotten eggs. Sometimes they even popped. It was nauseating.

"One day, you fucking bugs," Old Tom vowed. "One day."

Occasionally, when the bloat made them pop like soda shaken in a bottle, Tom would smile as he cleaned up the little mess of fragmented shell and goo. "Serves y'all right, you little shits. If I had my way, I'd plant every square inch of Texas with *solanum lycopersicum* just to sell tickets so people could watch y'all blow up and die. Each and every one of y'all."

As it was, Tom was lucky to have even the one acre of tomato plants he did. And that only because his farm was protected under historical preservation laws implemented by the Western Coalition of CanMexAmerica before the turn of the century. His being one of two dozen organic farms still in existence -- and the only farm growing heirloom tomatoes in soil. A protected status assured as long as his produce remained coveted by several small, but highly influential families rich enough to keep him in the green. And keep his one acre farm safe from the new DEI government's attempts to shut him down.

"Them bastards up in Washington may love your crusty, shit spewing asses, but that don't mean I have to no matter how good y'all are for the Earth."

Turns out, *alien Trechus arribasi* -- whom Texans simply called Cyclops due to their single insectoid eye mounted in the center of their shells - loved to dine on toxic waste and pollution. Not just dine, but effectively metabolize and nullify it through digestion. Why in the last four years since the Coleopsi' arrival on Earth, they'd successfully

absorbed enough waste to turn the planet's clock back to a 2050's standard of purity. And in a couple more years, Earth's air, land, and sea would become more pristine than the day God created them. As long as tomatoes and other nightshade variants were kept limited to their exposure.

Which was why the DEI government could give two shits about Old Tom and the legacy of his farm. The centuries of work ground out by generations of Tom's family -- who poured their blood, sweat and tears into its sustainability -- all but disregarded. As far the DEI were concerned, he and his kind were nothing more than anachronistic bigots impeding the safe comfort of their benevolent guests and their invaluable gifts to humankind.

"Alright you little shitheels, enough gab. Time I get my work done." Old Tom began removing the protective covering from each tomato plant section, slipping the grimy squares into basins of soap, vinegar, and water so he could clean the Cyclops' crap coating. He worked diligently for the next hour -- quick as he could before the Texas sun rose too high and the heat of the day became unbearable. And as he worked, he whistled *God Bless the USA* and *America the Beautiful* and *This Land is My Land* while watering heirlooms, pulling new growth weeds, and picking up any dead leaves fallen to the ground. All while breathing in the richly fetid smell of bug excrement layered over dirt and vegetation filling the sweet morning air.

"Maybe I should start bottling this crap," Old Tom pondered, "so I can ship it around the solar system as a detoxifier. It's certainly smells potent enough. And I'm sure those poor souls on Venus and Mercury would appreciate y'all's bug crap more than I. I hear them air modifiers are having a damn difficult time filtering the planet's carbon dioxide levels down to safely breathable levels -- with most of them Spaniards on the surface trapped and choking from the effect. Or so says the intergalactic news feed."

Old Tom crossed through the west portcullis to check his new growth calabash, which he'd carefully pruned back last year. He could see the roots looked strong, but this season's harvest was undersized. Maybe a few inches in diameter and nothing close to the twelve inch deep red heirlooms he'd harvested before the Cyclops invasion. This season just wasn't ripening with the same energy. Which, to an old green thumb like Tom, was both an indictment and insult.

"Don't worry girls," Tom soothed his plants, "I'll figure a way out of this. I promise y'all that. I've got a pretty strong idea what to do next."

Old Tom's One Acre Farm output might've shrunk, but he still intended to fill his monthly quota. It was a point of pride. Not to mention his customers relied on him so they wouldn't have to resort to Earth's store of chemically produced, fruit-like substitutes. Which were edible, sure, but contained such high levels of chemical preservatives they countered what little nutrition the substitutes provided.

What the new DEI government didn't understand was Old Tom had a mission too – which in his mind was much more important than their alien guest's comfort. Old Tom had grown organic hot house fruits since a little boy. Learned at the knee of his Daddy -- and his Daddy's Daddy and his Daddy's Daddy's Daddy. A legacy of cumulative experience dating back more than two centuries to their original farm in Ogallala. That was before the Seven Continents War of course. Before China abandoned Earth to colonize Mars. Before the United Kingdom built expansive, no-soil hydro-silicone herbotic warehouses across the Tyco and Eimmert Craters of the Moon to feed all the English, Irish, and Scotsmen who flocked there. And well before Africa took over Saturn and revolutionized the food supplementation industry by developing edible cotton – those little puffs of augmented nutrition that Old Tom knew tasted terrible, but staved off starvation for the millions of Africans inhabiting the outer rims. Earth, by the end of the last century, had all but been abandoned by most occupants. Except for men

and women like Old Tom who'd lived their entire lives working dirt farms and coal mines and oil rigs -- who were hard scrabble and poor, but hardy enough to resist the extensive pollution that permeated the planet by the end of the 23rd century.

"Maybe I can grind up all that brown sticky shit you motherfuckers keep cranking out, mix it with fertilizer and make homemade glycerin. Turn the whole mess into a low grade dynamite and ship it off to them Estonians on Jupiter who're trying to liberate themselves from Georgian rule. I could probably make a mint."

Spotting several fallen leaves under the south corner Jacaranda tree, Old Tom walked over to pick them up and, as he bent over, groaned from the effort. "Definitely getting old," he muttered putting a hand to his lower back. Only to feel the gust of wings buzzing as a Cyclops beetle he'd uncovered took flight with an angry flutter and bounced off his forehead before flying high up to the nearest tree branch.

"Dammit, you unholy bastard!" Old Tom yelled, slapping the air in front of his face, "I'm just trying to tend my garden!" Tom could feel a murderous rage rising, but knew better than to act on it. Knowing if he did, and intentionally hurt any one of these little shitheels, the DEI government would come down on him like a hammer on a nail. He'd not only lose his farm, but surely be thrown into a deep dark jail cell for violating Earth's latest "foreign visitors" protection laws. Course, this particular Cyclops wasn't making it easier for Tom to resist the impulse. It was now sitting on a low tree branch, staring down at Old Tom with a look Tom swore was contempt. How that one black eye could project such a thing, he didn't rightly know. But it did. And Tom didn't like it one bit. "You're a big fucker, ain't you, you little shitheel. Bigger than most. Shit, I hope y'all all aren't all growing bigger. It's bad enough with the normal sized ones we already got."

Tom hissed at the Cyclops through his teeth and spat on the ground.

"Don't hiss at me, *Farmer John*," the Cyclops spoke back. "I wasn't the one who interrupted your nap."

Tom stared up at the alien beetle and thought, *Did that big fucker just talk to me or am I overheating and hearing things?*

"You're not sick, Old Man. At least not by our standards. And, yes, I did speak to you."

"What the...I must be going daft."

"No you aren't. So stop questioning your reality. I'd like to have a word with you and I can't have you questioning your sanity while we do."

Tom agreed he had a choice here – accept the moment as reality or admit he'd gone round the bend and be shipped off to the looney bin. Either way, this sumbitch Cyclops WAS talking to him.

"Alright, I'll bite. What do y'all want? Don't y'all have someone else to bug?" Tom chuckled at his bon mot. "Get it? Bug?"

"Yes, Tom, I understand."

Now he knows my name? Tom thought. "You know my name?"

"I have ears to hear."

"Do you?"

"I do."

Tom was feeling dizzy, so walked over to the patio and sat on his favorite bench to light up a cigarette. Quickly followed by the Cyclops flying down and taking a seat on the table in front of him.

“As much as I enjoy the smell of cigarette smoke,” the Cyclops spoke, “and the other truly astounding smells of your kind -- smoking appears to be one of the most self-debasing habits you humans have invented. You’re essentially poisoning your own bodies from within by inhaling cancer. Cancer that will eventually kill you.”

“Y’all are one to talk. Don’t you and your kind eat toxic shit.”

“Not to us. To us that toxic waste are the fruits and vegetables of our nutritional needs. And believe me, of all the world’s we’ve visited, the buffet of nutrition on this planet has been exemplary. Almost a paradise – which is one of the reasons we came here. Did you know the aroma of your refuse can be detected from near two galaxies away? Out past the Magalona region. Which, ironically, is why most other intelligent civilizations stay away. They all think this place is one big galactic dump.”

“Oh joy. Aren’t we the lucky people.”

“Sarcasm is such a strange human response.”

“Fuck off, bug-boy. Why are you even talking to me? Don’t you have some uranium or whatever to go feast on?”

“Believe me, it wasn’t my choice to approach you. I thought there were better candidates. But the council, in their wisdom, decided you to be the best potential spokesperson.”

“Spokesperson? For whom? Y’ALL?!”

“Yes. We’d like to engage you as our official liaison.”

“Get bent! There ain’t no way I’m gonna speak for y’all. Plus, who am I even gonna talk to?”

“The DEI government of your own country to start. But then the rest of the planet’s other reigning monarch’s. Those oligarchs you call presidents.”

"Ain't no way! One, cause I'm just a farmer. And two, cause I don't like you. Don't y'all realize I'm nowhere near your biggest fan. Just the opposite, in fact. I'd like to see y'all dead and gone."

"I am aware. Which is why the elders wanted you. Their theory being if the most adversarial of humans relayed our message to his own people -- the very messenger who not only despises us, but wants to see us wiped out -- then your fellow humans would surely take notice. Not to mention, you own son -- who is the current President of CanMexAmerica, is he not?"

"My son died the day he left the farm and turned into one of them liberal commie assholes. I have no son."

"That isn't what your genetics suggest to us. We can plainly detect the DNA connection. Not to mention, your son appears to be very alive and well -- living up in the neutral zone. Up in the territory you call Washington D.C."

"Fuck you, my son is dead."

"Ahh, sarcasm again. Well, regardless, we would like you to deliver a message to your son..err...your president. We've tried directly, but despite all the accommodations, political tribes among humans are dysfunctional -- unless you have an attaché to intervene. From our research, we've learned your kind follows a paternal pattern of obedience. Meaning if a father calls, is not a son required to answer? Then you can deliver our message."

"Alright, I'll bite. What message?"

"We're running out of food and need more."

"What do you mean 'need more'?"

“That would appear to be obvious from the current state of your world – which is more amenable to you in purity now than our species. Our food supply is running low. With projections that we will have consumed near 100% of what you call pollution and toxic waste within the next two years. We need to secure our future food supply now.”

“So go somewhere else. Just like y’all did when you came here.”

“Yes, we could do that. But the results are not guaranteed. Many swarms have died in the effort. Not every planet or system has this rich a supply of food close by. Not to mention, our intel suggests you still have the ability to feed us for the next thousand years with your current, inactive supply.”

“Inactive supply? What supply?”

“Your atomic based nuclear missiles. At last count, humans have around 5,500 projectiles housed in silos across this continent. Another 5,800 on the abandoned Russian continent. And a few thousand more in various other places. Those combined would be enough to feed us for a very long time, as I have indicated.”

“You don’t need my permission. Why don’t you just go into the silos and dine away?”

“We could, but that would be extremely wasteful of their potential and not as bountiful. If those missiles were to be launched and exploded instead, the resulting food supply would quantifiably be more than a thousand-fold for each individual missile use. Not unlike your use of fertilizer on your repugnant tomatoes to increase their growth yields.”

“Let me see if I have this straight. Y’all want me to call my son and ask him to set off nuclear missiles, which would cause a nuclear winter across Earth, all so y’all can have more toxic munchies to dine on? And in the process, destroy what remains of the human race? Are you fucking nuts?!”

“The efforts would be timed and controlled in seasons to achieve the best effect of potentiality in action, of course. Just like your Earth seasons of planting, growth and harvest. And we’d concentrate each individual launch directly to locations not currently occupied by humans – namely the northern and southern poles of this planet. Which is where we’d take up permanent occupancy while leaving the rest of the planet to your kind.”

“The fallout would still kill us.”

“No. Not if we eat up the aerial fallout first. Humans would be minimally affected as long as you take a few precautions and stay closer to inhabiting lands near your planet’s equator. We’ve purified your lands there already, so humans should be very comfortable and happy near the equator. You could even continue farming your repugnant fruit.”

“No. This was our world first before you shitheels showed up. Why would I help you destroy it in any way? You’d be effectively eliminating the human race, not to mention my livelihood.”

“Your Earth wasn’t doing well before we got here, lest you forget. It was on a doomed trajectory -- choking itself out with its own pollution well before we showed up. In fact, it could easily be said, and it has among your politicians including your son, that we are saving humankind simply because we feed on human waste which, in turn, purifies your planet. One man’s garbage and all. It’s symbiotic. Is that not worthy of us staying? Plus, the alternative would be...unfortunate.”

“The alternative?”

“Have you not considered what happens when we run out of our food supply here on your planet?”

"Sure, you leave."

"No. Not while there is still nourishment to be had."

"Which means what?"

"The only other nourishment, at least the kind we desire for sustenance, can also be found within the human body. Your kind has spent decades, even centuries, poisoning yourself with self-administered chemicals -- smoke, drink, and chemically enhanced foods. Just look at the labels you put on your packaging. Full of preservatives and chemicals. Up till now, we've had enough nourishment in the external world. But if our food supply grows scarce, I cannot account for what my brothers and sisters will do when we begin to starve."

"Are y'all saying what I think y'all are saying? You'll eat humans?"

"Not humans, so to speak. Just the chemical food within your bodies. Course, biologically speaking, none of you could survive the effect."

"Son of a bitch! You cock sucking bugs!"

"I do not, in any way, wish to see such an event come to pass. Neither do my brothers and sisters. Your kind produces such good product on an external basis, we'd regret having to feed on you directly. Thus why our elders have asked us to approach you. I believe our plan is a win-win scenario. You should take us up on our offer. You should call your son and have him meet with us to implement our plan. In time, you'd be seen as a hero and the human race would have a chance to flourish again."

"That's bullshit. You fuckers started all this. We were doing fine before you and we'll do well after you leave. And we'll stomp you motherfuckers if you try to eat us."

"You won't be able. Humans aren't strong enough or smart enough to resist us. In fact, to us, you're nothing more than pets -- domesticated animals who provide a small

purpose. And, as a rule, we don't like to eat our pets either. Unless it's necessary to hold off starvation for the millions of my brothers and sisters till we can make other arrangements."

Tom's anger finally boiled over. "Well, y'all got it all figured out then, don't you, ya' little fucker. All nice-n-cozy. But you forgot one thing. We Texans don't take shit off no one. Not even alien locust motherfuckers who think they're doing us a favor!" And with that, Tom had heard enough. He removed a tomato from his pocket -- the one he'd been saving for a mid-morning snack -- and smashed it down hard on the alien locust shell. He felt the crunch and heard the Cyclops' shriek of pain.

"Oh, you bastard!" the Cyclops whined. "That hurt! Oh, you human turd! You've done it now. Do you think you've stopped us?! We will not be denied even if I die! Oh you pigheaded human piece of Texas shit! You can die for all I care!"

"Viva Texas, you Cyclops motherfucker!" Tom yelled again bringing his open palm, coated with tomato juice, back down on the cyclops, crushing the shell completely and sending goo squirting everywhere. It felt damn good. Something he'd wanted to do for a long time.

When Old Tom sat back to light up another smoke and gaze with satisfaction over what he'd done, punishment was not on his mind anymore. It was the thought of his one acre farm thriving again under the hot Texas sun. And the feeling of prestige at being a successful farmer. Working the land and being the master of all he surveyed. That is until he heard the swarm rising up. Buzzing low and long at first, echoing off the nearby hills. Then rising into the air in a dense black cloud of Cyclops, swarming till the sun started to dim. Casting shadows across his one acre farm with the swarm of over a million alien bugs coming in mass.

“Well, shit. I think I better mosey on back to the house now and make that call to my son,” Old Tom mumbled before quickly standing and heading inside.

The End.