

# BEWARE



**T**he Titans are killing us all, and I feel powerless in the wake of the destruction. I suppose they must feel powerless as well. Those without power or purpose in their own lives are the first to seek power and dominion over the lives of others—I pray that death overcomes me before the inclination to become like my enemy does. To become like them would be the voluntary act of choosing to be a plague upon our environment. I would be pledging myself as an agent of imbalance and disruption, like an oil spill with an agenda—how the Titans have survived so long and so mightily in this manner is baffling, to say the least. Some of those in the hive—both male Maters and female Maintainers—have chosen to dedicate their entire lives to the study of the Titans and their tendencies, psychology, and sociology. One such dedicated being is my closest younger male sibling, Weijia, who is startlingly brilliant. It was the theory he researched, and the data he recorded and published, which first provided our hive with tangible answers regarding rumors that the flora and vegetation we’d pollinated for centuries was now taking our lives. Truthfully, even I was skeptical until I saw it for myself, and then I had no choice but to obey what my eyes were telling me. I didn’t want to lose the familiarity of tradition, nor the ease of the habitual. It’s tradition and habit that form so much of the ground we stand on, but once they’re removed, standing is no longer an option—we must learn to fly. We must face our fear of the fall in order to create a favorable future. At its most persuasive fear is paralyzing, and it’s hard to walk—let alone fly—when you’re paralyzed.

“This is it, Arlen, this is where it all became clear to me.” Although I’d never been, I’d heard of this particular field and that it was one of the mating congregation areas of a nearby hive, and often visited by the Maintainers as well for pollination. It was the middle of the day and the sun hung almost directly overhead amidst a soft, cloudless coat of blue sky. As I flew away from Weijia’s side, below me were deep, green leaves and vegetation on the ground in varying stages of roundness, reflecting colors of both bright orange and green with orange splashes—it all seemed as it should be.

“Weijia! Are you sure this is the place? Everything here seems perfectly—”

“Don’t!” I’ve never regarded my younger male sibling as much of an accomplished flyer, but he was off and immediately next to me just as quickly as I’d seen in any of our stealthier counterparts. “*Don’t*—don’t touch anything. Everything you can see *might* kill you, but everything you *can’t* absolutely will. This place may be aesthetically inviting, but the Titans have layered it with toxins that will shutdown your brain in less than one Sun movement.” I hover above the deep, golden-yellow flower that I was one small motion away from landing on. Its petals extend out in five separate directions like broad sunrays, as if it were a miniature reflection of the light giver it opens itself up to and reaches towards for rejuvenation—this, according to Weijia, could’ve killed me. How regrettable it is when that which creates life and beauty in the world can be used to create the exact opposite, yet, how shortsighted one must be to assume that one creation holds more value than the other—these two rival thoughts often leave me divided.

“But, what about the Titans? We all know that they touch and ingest these same fruit, and I imagine they aren’t poisoning *themselves*.”

“Isn’t it funny how at times our imaginations cannot imagine what is already a reality? For reasons I have yet to discover, sadly you’re wrong. They *are* poisoning themselves. Now, does it affect and kill them as swiftly as it does with us? It doesn’t, but, from the tests that my team have run to validate my suspicions, what they’ve covered this vegetation with is poisonous to all who ingest it. The poison just reacts in different ways depending on the animal. I’m sure the Titans’ size assists with their longevity.” If I wasn’t hearing this directly from Weijia, I would’ve assumed that what I was being told was either a purposeful deception or grossly misunderstood, but it was obviously neither.

“So they would kill themselves just to kill us?”

“Not only us, remember, *countless* other insects are affected as well, but, the short answer is yes, yes they would, and they are.”

“But, don’t they know that our work benefits them?”

“I can’t say for sure. I would think that with their apparent intelligence that they must know, yes, but then if they did, how could they justify putting our lives in danger? I don’t know.”

I knew there had been more reports than usual of Maintainers going out for pollination flights and never returning. As I had become increasingly more involved in community organizing within the hive, I did my best to help those who were closest to the ones that perished, and I witnessed the impact—the disbelief, the confusion, the fear. Moving forward was never a straight line. Calamity—particularly the type that involves the loss of life—can inspire an array of emotions and outlooks that sadden, or uplift, but all are valid. Prior to Weijia’s examinations, when all that we understood was based on hearsay, there were already those who were ready for rash action to be taken. Some questioned why we didn’t attack the Titans by uniting all of the hives willing to defend their families and simply overwhelm them with our numbers—a suicide mission, of course, for the Maintainers who would fight for us all; intending to solve death by going on the offensive against it. Others, like the voices who initially inspired Weijia himself, wanted to know how information could be gathered and provided to those with the honor and responsibility of pollinating, in order for them to remain safe enough to make it back home alive. Discovering the exact cause of the danger or why it had developed wasn’t what they were primarily concerned with; intending to solve death by going on the defensive. Naturally, for many, the *reason* behind these critical developments was their primary point of interest. If the work of the Maintainers outside of the hive had mutated into a position that was undeniably more deadly than it had been previously, discovering the cause of the mutation was paramount and could lead to crucial insight on how to proceed. They intended to solve death by understanding it. Lastly, there was a point of view—veering away from Authorist Futurism<sup>1</sup>—that arose from the hive members who lived for the dead, and who couldn’t handle the trauma of loss. They were choked in a cloud of dismay and inhaled the harsh, blistering smoke of demoralization which impregnated them and gave birth to hopelessness—what could be done? The Maintainers had no choice but to continue pollinating until a solution was found, and as the rumors spread like bacteria, so did the Surrenderist Futurism<sup>2</sup> attitude of “it is what it is.” As far as they were concerned, normalcy now had a new face, and although they didn’t recognize it the only option was to familiarize themselves. They intended to solve death by quietly accepting it. Once Weijia brought his findings back to our family, everyone found something in his material that supported their line of thinking. In a way it helped as much as it hindered.

Weijia nudges me.

“You good?”

“Yeah—sorry—I’m fine, it’s just—”

“A lot to wrap your head around, right?”

“Yeah...yeah, I guess that’s what it is.”

“I have one more place to show you. It’ll be quick.” I know enough about my sibling to know that any sentence ending with “it’ll be quick” refers to something that certainly won’t be, but *will* most likely be interesting. I take one last look at the field of invisible execution, and let Weijia know that wherever we’re going needs to mathematically not take long—I’m dying to get something to eat.



We end up at a large field across from an undisturbed playground, and like the vegetation patch we just left, nothing appears out of the ordinary at first glance. Lush, green grass covers the field on either side of a paved walkway—the left side is adorned with small, white, unopened flowers scattered across it, while the right side is bare. Once the pronounced contrast is noticed, I’m nervous about what it may reveal; Weijia flies ahead of me and indicates that I should follow. When he finally slows the buzzing of his wings and lands on one of the Titan’s wooden resting posts, he directs my attention to an area of hard, artificial soil beneath us, and I’m immediately possessed by a demon of intense

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<sup>1</sup> Authorist Futurism: An Authorist acknowledges that the only thing ahead of them is a blank canvas. They believe the composition to fill that canvas is decided by nothing short of what they want for themselves, their will and determination to create it, and their readiness to see that what they intended may have taken on a different form, and presented a progressive opportunity that they could not have previously foreseen. Authorist Futurism encapsulates vision, action, and fluidity.

<sup>2</sup> Surrenderist Futurism: A Surrenderist accepts that their present forecasted the unalterable events of their future, so that consequently, they would surrender to said forecasted outcome presuming they could no longer affect it—the Surrenderist encapsulates hope, inaction, and acceptance.

nausea. Three members of the hive are on the ground—two clearly dead, one moving so slowly it's like there's a force physically pulling them in the opposite direction of where they're trying to go.

"What's wrong with them, Weijia? Can we help *her*?"

"I'm not sure what's wrong with them. And no, we haven't determined how to help yet—we're still working on what exactly the Titans have done to this place."

"Is it painful?"

"They aren't able to communicate once they're exposed. The poison must attack that part of the brain first—attack their ability to express anything—but that's just a guess. For the time being, I've just been having the information circulated as much as possible to stay away from here." It was horrible. I almost wished he hadn't brought me, but I know that my willful ignorance wouldn't be of any aid to those at the hive who I could help. It's situations like these that make it incredibly difficult to remember and utilize the ideals of the hive. Instilled within us all is the doctrine that good and evil don't exist—the teachings of The Catalytic Principle<sup>3</sup> are explicitly clear—that positive and negative are not inherent, but perspectives of our own invention. This is the wisdom I must cling to now tighter than I have at any time previously. What has happened to so many others, and what is happening to these Maintainers at this moment, is simply a catalyst causing a change—things are changing, and we must adjust accordingly.

"Why is only the left side of the field flowered?"

"You really should get out more, Arlen."

"Hilarious. What's wrong with the flowers?"

"The Titans have machines that erase them."

"'Machines'? They kill flowers? *Flowers*?"

"They'll be here soon to finish off the rest of them as well, that much I'm sure of." I say nothing, I just stare at the mutilated area where life was set to bloom. What's there to say about animals who premeditate the extermination of flowers? "Hey, I know how this looks. We're obviously akin to an environment of balance, but the Titans know no balance—if they weren't tipping the scales, they may have no place on them at all. They're the alpha species of this planet, and they're only growing more devious in their methods of survival." Suddenly I'm aware of my own chest rising and falling, and the low, droning vibration from my wings that hum in the key of motion throughout my entire body. The wind blows through the leaves of the trees above me playing the same soothing, swaying song as ocean waves against the seashore. It's an understated similarity that I never took notice of before now, and an immersing reminder that all is connected. "Arlen, I'll be right back, okay?" I nod. Weijia flies down to the three that have been infected and begins taking notes—none of them feel what I'm feeling right now, none of them feel anything at all.

*BRRRGGG!* A mouthful of sharp, ear-gnawing noise explodes from somewhere behind me—the Titans are here, and they brought their machine with them. Weijia flies back up to where I am—again, quicker than I'd expect from him—and for a split second I see an unfamiliar flash of dread cast a shadow over his face like a waning moon. He displays unrest so infrequently I'm honestly unsure of how to react. It's those who are identified as the strongest, brightest, and bravest who depend most on the support of others, for they are the ones pushing themselves beyond the same internal limits they refuse to acknowledge are in their possession.

"There's nothing we can do, is there?"

"There's one thing: we can get that Maintainer out of the way." Obviously, his eyes are better than mine; it takes me a few seconds, but I spot her just as the machine begins its approach in her direction—*BRRRGGG!* It's so loud we're yelling every word now.

"What's wrong with her?! Something must be wrong!"

"The poison has already hit her! Come on!"

Weijia and I both speed off towards our sibling as fast as we can. The wind blows my antennae back against my face, and I tuck my legs tight against my body to maintain my velocity. Other than the roaring growl of the Titans' machine, all I can hear is the vibratory tone of my wings as I push them to carry me farther faster. The low, steady droning that characterized them only a short time before, is replaced by a higher, more intense buzzing that screams back at me in demonstration for demanding the impossible, and moving without fear of repercussion—we're close now. Synchronized, we dive towards the tops of the grass blades and fly directly towards the Maintainer—*BRRRGGG!*—we have to move quickly to have any chance of pulling this off. She's not far in front of us now, carelessly hovering in a small, irregular circle, as if a monster isn't bearing down upon her.

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<sup>3</sup> The Catalytic Principle: Neither right nor wrong exist, there are only catalysts and non-catalysts. Either a person, action, or situation causes change, or it does not. Whether the catalysts are viewed as positive or negative is a perspective of one's own invention to more easily compartmentalize the way in which they are affected.

“All we have to do is get her out of the way! We grab her and keep going!” Weijia’s the expert—whatever he thinks we should do, that’s what we’re doing. I loosen my legs from their previous position and prepare myself for the inevitable impact our maneuver will require—*BRRRGGG!* “Try to time the grab with her flight pattern!” We’re only a few seconds away from her now, and we both extend our legs to hook her and get her out of here. “Looks like she’s heading your way—let’s go!” We both converge to latch on to her, but she’s gone! In one quick, spasmodic buzz, she’s up and over both our heads. Our momentum causes us to collide and I plummet head first into the dirt.

“Arlen? Arlen?!”

“Yeah! Yeah, I’m over here—I’m good!” *BRRRGGG!* Am I good? Something doesn’t feel right with one of my wings and I don’t know if I even want to look. It doesn’t feel like I can move it, it feels heavy, and it *never* feels heavy. What if—not right now, it can’t be—what if it’s broken? I may not be feeling any pain due to the adrenaline—I don’t want to look, I just don’t. I try to move it, but something’s holding it back. I can’t—I can’t move my wing. I take a deep breath—I’m overreacting—I collided with the ground, there’s probably just a rock on my wing, and all I need to do is figure out how to get it off.

“Arlen, where are you?! We have to go, now!”

“Alright!” *BRRRGGG!* I get out of my head, compose myself, and finally look back at my wing to assess the damage and get myself out of this. It’s mangled, my wing is mangled. A hurricane of panic instantly forms within me, decimating any other reasonable thought that may have existed. My wing is a mass of twisted tree roots, and the sight of it awakens the pain, a monstrous sleeping giant—with rose thorns for teeth—that bites into my nerves. This isn’t good.

“Weijia! I might need some help!”

“What?!”

“Help! I need help! I can’t fly!” Think—I have to think—there’s a way to get out of everything, every time, I just have to find it. *BRRRGGG!*

“Hey, are you o—” His eyes connect with my wing, and I assume he realizes the energy necessary to finish yelling his question would be wasted. “Okay! We’ll get you out of the way *first*, then figure out the rest!”

“We have to get her out of here though!”

“And we will! We’re dealing with you first!” He signals for me to do something by moving his head around which, in this situation, could mean a few things. Luckily he’s my closest sibling, because no one else would be able to understand that he wanted them to roll onto their stomach. He grabs my back legs, “Okay! Here we go!” *BRRRGGG!* He’s dragging me, and the Titans’ machine is close enough now that if Weijia had his mouth right next to my ear, I wouldn’t hear a word over the sound of this monstrosity. We’re moving faster than I expected. If this kid has been squeezing in time to work out *and* do all of his science stuff, we can’t be related, because...because there’s just no way.

The power of the Titans’ machine is incredible, it’s like nothing I’ve ever experienced. The entire ground is alive beneath me, violently shaking like it’s attempting to defeat gravity, and rip itself off the Earth piece by piece. I can’t hold my head still enough for long enough to get my bearings—maybe we haven’t moved far at all and this was all pointless. The rumbling continues and continues, and the wind generated from the machine is blowing rocks and pieces of anything that can move in every direction imaginable, but we’re still moving, I’m almost sure of it—I hope. Hopefully Weijia’s okay, and the Maintainer is still well enough that back at the hive someone on Weijia’s team can help her.

“Whoa!” Weijia suddenly places me down and appears directly in front of my eyes.

“Who were you expecting?!”

“Funny! Are you okay?!”

“I’m fine! Are you?!”

“I think so!” My body’s on fire, but I want to stand up and see what’s going on. We must have gotten pretty far away from the machine, because the drastic shaking isn’t as severe.

“Arlen! What are you doing?!” He tries to hold me back, but I move him away with the little energy I have left, and get up tall enough to see through the grass. The machine is close, but it’s not coming in our direction—we’re actually okay. “Hey, just sit and conserve your energy, because I have no idea yet how we’ll all get back to the hive!”

“Who’s ‘all’ ?!”

“I’m going to get her!”

“You won’t make it back in time with both of you! Look!” The machine is extremely close to her and she’s still hovering in an erratic circle, for all we know, she could have another spasm and fly out of the way. I want to help her, and I want Weijia to get her if he can, but it’s not worth two deaths. Weijia may be the only Mater or Maintainer alive

who's smart enough to get our hive and the other hives through this—we can't afford to lose him. Sometimes the best move is realizing there aren't any left to be made; and the most heroic option is opting to save one's self.

"I can do it!"

"You can't, Weijia! Actually think about it!" We both look over at the Maintainer. Time is passing incredibly quickly, but her contrasting movements, like a loose leaf caught in a gentle breeze, almost seem to counteract Time's forward motion and slow everything down. She hovers around in another circle, spasms, drifts up, around again and to the right, then immediately drops in a straight line into the grass and out of view.

"NO!" Weijia's in the air before my brain can formulate a reaction to what happened. I watch him as he flies, and he's not as fast as before and barely flying straight. I'm sure having to drag me here took a toll on him. *BRRRGGG!*

"Damn it, Weijia." Without the Maintainer in sight, Time sprints through my mind to make up for the illusion of its previous slow progression—*BRRRGGG!*—and I can see as Weijia lunges down into the grass to find our poisoned hive member—*BRRRGGG!* All I can do is watch, watch as the Titan and its machine barrel closer and closer to where they are—like watching lightning strike the ground in slow-motion. Yelling is less than useless, even if the machine was silent, the sheer distance would be enough to keep him from hearing me—*BRRRGGG!* It's right on top of them now, and I don't see any yellow and black stripes, like projectiles thrown from a volcanic eruption, triumphantly exploding into the air from the grassy horizon. The machine passes by completely, and still nothing, nothing at all but the colossal roar finally growing softer and shaking the ground less as the machine lumbers into the distance.



As Weijia suggested, I sit down. I sit and I ignore the splitting pain that's desperately trying to hold my attention. I can hear the wind blowing through the trees again, still sounding like the ocean, but now it's Weijia and the Maintainer we tried to save who can no longer hear its song. He's dead—just like that—now what? Now that I've lost someone so close to me, do I crawl my way back to the hive and join the others who are in mourning, and voice my layman's opinion on how we should deal with the tyranny of the Titans? What do you take from monsters who take everything?! I fell into the grass and had to be dragged through it just so I could survive this long—what if I was exposed to the poison? What if I'm next to be erased by the Titans?!

"WEIJIA!"

"Yeah?" He's behind me—of course he's behind me—where else could he possibly be? Weijia the Wizard. He drags his feet as he walks to my right, and stands next to me before having a seat, but he's by himself, and he looks the worst I've ever seen him. He's nearly entirely covered in debris, and where there isn't debris, scratches and small wounds are clearly visible. His breathing is labored, he's exhausted, and his eyes are filled with melancholy—I could never picture him being this drained or disappointed. I feel so bad for him it's almost hard to be happy he made it back, because nothing about him says that *he's* even happy he made it back. I tell him I'm sorry, and that he did everything he could have, that he did more than most others could or would have. He sits silently, as do I. After a few minutes, he speaks first. He says the machine will make its way back around to where we're sitting, but he wants to tell me something before we return to the hive. He helps me up and we walk out of the field, across the section of artificial soil, and sit in the grass where the machine has already destroyed the flowers. Weijia informs me why it was so important to rescue that Maintainer before the poison killed her: she would've been perfect to test a hypothesis that he had, and the experiment could only work on someone that had the poison in them, but was still unaffected enough to communicate. Not only does he think exposure to the poison doesn't have to be fatal, there may be a way we could use it to our advantage—just like that, he has a plan. His mind is truly extraordinary.

"So, you can cure this?"

"I think—*think*—that there's a way, yes."

With his head hung low, he goes on to say that for an antidote to be created when the poison is unknown, a sample would be required from that specific carrier. The difficult part would be getting the mandatory amount of blood within the slim window of time when the carrier could be utilized.

"I've done it once, Arlen, but things didn't work out like I'd foreseen. The donor didn't survive the procedure." I know why Weijia wanted to talk to me about this outside of the hive: what he did—and what he was attempting to do

again—is illegal. The approval he’d need from the hive to proceed with testing like this wouldn’t come quickly, if at all. Additionally, there’s the debatable issue of whether or not he’s responsible for the death of the donor even though they were likely to die from the poison anyway. Without participating in his procedure, maybe they could’ve lived a few hours longer.

“But, you were able to save one of them?”

Weijia sighs deeply. “I was, yes, but the procedure wasn’t controlled. I was improvising and it was sloppy, but if I didn’t act, both of them would’ve died. What’s troubling is that the survivor is displaying symptoms that suggest they’ll need another procedure in order to survive any longer.”

“Well, I can stay here while you get back to the hive and do what you can for them. Looks like I’m okay here, right?” Weijia pushes himself to stand up, grunting as he makes his way to his feet. He surveys himself and begins to dust off some of the grass and other debris, then stretches his legs and looks over at the distant Titan machine making its way back in our direction.

“The survivor isn’t at the hive, Arlen, the survivor is right here. I was hoping to find a donor at the vegetation field, or at this flower field, but if I couldn’t find one at either, I needed to make sure I had a donor with me—someone who trusted me. I can’t let the poison kill me, sibling, my work is too important. You were my *last* option, I promise you.” I thought it was an accident that we collided earlier, but it was clearly by design. There’s no way I would’ve been able to avoid touching a flower or grass blade that wasn’t already contaminated and Weijia knew that. He must feel so powerless in the wake of the destruction—with all of his intellectual prowess, even *he* managed to be affected—and those consumed by their position of powerlessness are the first to desire power and dominion over the lives of others. I will gladly die knowing that I never became like the Titans—that I will never be a plague to life on this planet—even if I die by the actions of one who did. I will gladly die knowing that my prayer was answered, despite the fact that it was answered by a false deity. Amen.

