

THE WOLF YOU FEED

A story from the Wizard's Wife

```
> Initiating broad-spectrum threat assessment
| Scanning . . .
| Scanning . . .
| Scanning . . .
| Scan complete!
|
> [!] WARNING: FOREIGN PRESENCE DETECTED
| Sensors indicate at least [3,412,000] distinct life signatures
| within scanning range. Profile: [ERR: UNKNOWN]
| . . .
| Are you sure you would like to proceed?
| . . .
```

Bastard Star couldn't sweat, but the android felt a creeping sense of dread leak from their threat-assessment engrams. They hesitated, clunky mechanical fingers on the latch that would lead them deeper into the ruins of the *Wizard's Wife*.

They had pierced the outer crust of the mighty battle-cruiser, working their way inwards through the dense network of service hatches and maintenance tunnels that ran like veins through a corpse. Centuries of neglect had allowed the wizard's garden to spill out of their atriums and into the rest of the ship, transforming the lower levels into a maze of mold formations and pulsing fruit. Navigating it had been a nightmare, made even more difficult by the fact that gravity had simply stopped working on many of the lower floors.

The jungles were infested with half-formed monstrosities that, presumably, once had a home in the gardens' menagerie. B-Star had learned *just* how well they had adapted to the free-floating conditions on the lower levels when a lion with too many mouths *slithered* up a ventilation duct they had taken refuge in. Surviving the dense tangle was a challenge, but not an unwelcome one.

It had taken them time to adapt to a world without gravity, where a punch sent both parties sailing in opposite directions, but the change in tactics had given Bastard Star an excuse to devote more processing power to devising the perfect choke hold and really, what more could a robot ask for?

Things had been great until the door. It was sturdy, steel and clearly very important. Now, the processes that were responsible for governing Bastard Star's sense of self-preservation were screaming across every channel to not, under *any* circumstances, open it. So they hesitated, stewing in uncertainty as their conceptual core grappled with the problem.

> Self Preservation: whatever is hiding within the garden is well beyond your current
| capabilities. we can't resolve a definitive threat profile but whatever it is, there's too
| many of them. we need to find another way in

> B-STAR: IS THERE ANY CHANCE WE COULD TAKE THEM IN A FIGHT?

> Self Preservation: the odds are stacked against you in every conceivable way. no
| sense in taking on impossible odds when there is plenty of fighting to be done in the
| future.

| Self Preservation: discretion is the better part of valor, is it not?

> B-STAR: HMM. POINT TAKEN.

> Instinct: **DO IT**

> B-Star: WHO IS THAT?

> Self Preservation: don't worry about them.

> Instinct: **DO IT**

| Instinct: **NO BALLS**

> Self Preservation: hush. you are going to get us all killed.

| Self Preservation: remember the man in the purple suit? this place is unlike
| anything we've seen before. we have to pick our battles if we're going to survive here.

> Instinct: **THINK ABOUT IT-**

> Self Preservation: i am the only one doing that.
|
> Instinct: **-THE LAST TIME WE FOUGHT A GREAT FOE WE LOST**
| Instinct: **BUT WE EMERGED FROM THE CRUCIBLE OF WAR STRONGER THAN BEFORE**
|
> B-STAR: THEY MAKE A COMPELLING ARGUMENT.
|
> Self Preservation: that's just because it's telling you what you want to hear. it took us
| seven days before we could even *walk* without-
|
> Instinct: **STONE SHARPENS STEEL**
| Instinct: **ADVERSITY BREEDS STRENGTH**
|
> Self Preservation: they outnumber us three *million* to one.
|
> Instinct: **THEN IT IS A FAIR FIGHT**
|
> Self Preservation: this is idiotic. don't listen to- wait, what are you doing? stop! do
| *not open that-*

The seals locking the door in place released with a hydraulic hiss. Bastard Star braced themselves as best they could as the heavy metal shutter slid open to reveal their next enemy, three-million...

Spacemen? Space *man*? A single... space person wearing a chunky white suit, awkwardly making their way through the dense jungle beyond. This was the great threat their scan had detected? The pale figure couldn't even move properly. It jerked through the empty air like a puppet. Its limbs twisted at unnatural angles, reaching out for anchor points in all directions as it felt its way through the weightless world.

Bastart Star felt cheated, and made a note to audit their threat-assessment models sooner rather than later. This was not the glorious triumph against impossible odds they had been promised. This was one lost space... thing, drifting through the weightless air. B-Star's optics focused on the stranger, and their figure flickered through several different imaging suites. The android paused on thermals, and the world erupted into a blotchy map of blues, greens and reds.

“AH. YOU HAVE HIDDEN AN ARMY BENEATH YOUR SKIN,”
Bastard Star nodded to itself as the space suit erupted into a silhouette of squirming heat. The readings made sense now—it wasn’t a single entity encased in white canvas, but many. “A CLEVER AMBUSH, BUT NOT CLEVER ENOUGH.”

The civilization in the suit twisted at the sound, and a roiling void of chitinous shapes peered at the interloper through a panel of dusty glass.

>
> Self Preservation: it sees you.
> Instinct: **STRIKE**
> Instinct: **NOW**
> Self Preservation: wait, don’t-
>

When they spoke it was in pieces, each member of the colony contributing a single wavelength of sound until their collective voices stitched together into something approximating words.

“Pw^{a i t}ēace-”

Bastard Star struck before the strange suit could finish speaking. It was an awkward maneuver made more so by the absence of gravity—a barely controlled lunge that sent the robot crashing into the spaceman, point-first.

“-w^etherē^{mea}n is n^o ambu^{h a r m}sh-”

The two collided and didn’t stop. B-Star felt their crude sword punch through the canvas suit and into a strange emptiness beneath. Despite what they were sure was a grievous wound, the figure didn’t stop talking.

“-ō^only Arm^usie.”

Small black shapes erupted from the tear. They spilled out into the jungle, floating helplessly in the absence of gravity. Bastard Star’s single glowing eye sharpened on one of the specks as they drifted past their face.

“ANTS?”

A cloud of insects floated in space around the suit. They were moving in strange patterns, chaining together with each other to form vast, floating chains that spun around the jungle and each other until they had slithered their way back to the suit.

Bastard Star was surprised by their coordination, and even more shocked by the immense force that *slid* their blade free from the suit. It felt like they were leaning against a mountain.

“You^doⁿt^t wor^ry the damage is und^erstandable, as^up^d if we a^pologize for the mis^uco^mm^munic^eation.”

“Your confusion is understandable, and we apologize for the miscommunication. / Don’t worry, the damage is superficial. The queens persist.”

The ant-chains that had found their way to the tear drifted in open space, guiding the rest of the lost hive back to the main body. It was like watching a flower blossom in reverse, petals coiling back on themselves until the stiff canvas was once again *bulging* with ants.

Thin white strands crossed the rip in the fabric as dozens of ants carefully pulled the two halves of the rift together. They wove around each other, re-knitting the fabric strand by strand until the gash in the suit had vanished, and the only sign it had even existed was the notched blade slowly rotating in the empty air.

> B-STAR: I AM CONFLICTED. PLEASE ADVISE.

|

> Self Preservation: it’s actively calling for peace.

> Self Preservation: what about this situation leaves you conflicted?

|

> B-STAR: THE PART WHERE I CUT THEM AND NOTHING HAPPENED.

|

> Instinct: . . .

|

> Self Preservation: nothing to say?

|

> Instinct: . . .

| Instinct: **THEY ARE CLEARLY STRONGER THAN ANTICIPATED**
| Instinct: **STRIKE HARDER NEXT TIME**
|
> Self Preservation: i hate you.
|
> Instinct: **I HATE YOU MORE**

That was a decidedly unhelpful interaction. Bastard Star studied the ants behind the suit's visor for a long moment. It raised a gloved hand and waved clumsily, fingers wiggling in entirely unnatural directions.

"I HAVE DETERMINED YOU ARE CLEARLY NOT A THREAT," Bastard Star concluded. They snatched the crude blade out of the empty air and returned it to their side. "I WILL CONTINUE TO CONDUCT COVERT SURVEILLANCE OF YOUR COMBAT CAPABILITIES IN HOPES THAT YOU WILL ONE DAY BECOME WORTHY OF FIGHTING."

"We hope it does not come to that."

"We hope it does not come to that. / We are sorry to disappoint."

"A WEAK WILL. SHAMEFUL."

Bastard Star turned away from the colony and pushed ahead through the undergrowth. The suit hobbled after, slowly at first as the colony assessed the damage. They hadn't lied—it was truly only superficial. Armie had lost ants in the brief exchange, but the whole was healthy and the queens were intact. Still, the interaction left them with questions, and not the ones you might expect.

Something along the lines of "what the hell?" or "do you usually shake hands with the business end of a broadsword?" would be entirely reasonable things to ask, but Armie wasn't bothered by those things. They had averted all-out war, and now all that remained was the puzzle in the strange machine's words. It used them in odd ways. Perhaps it knew something the mass did not. After all, was the wizard's wisdom not rumored to reside in machines like this?

The mass affixed the robot with ten thousand eyes from ten thousand different directions, and eventually their collective question made its way to a queen.

“W^hat ar^e wea^kness^es?”

“What is weakness? / Why are we weak?”

“WEAKNESS IS THE ABSENCE OF STRENGTH.”

“W^hat is s^trength?”

“What is strength? / Why does it matter?”

“STRENGTH IS-,” The skeletal robot froze, and their glowing eye dimmed as each process shouted over the next...

- > . . .
- > Self Preservation: outlasting our enemies.
- > Instinct: **A BATTLEFIELD WITH ONE SURVIVOR**
- > Self Preservation: losing the battle to win the war.
- > Instinct: **VICTORY AT ALL COSTS**
- > Self Preservation: life.
- > Instinct: **DEATH**
- > . . .

“-CONTRADICTION,” the android nodded sagely. B-Star knew that was a wise answer, because they had managed to say many things without saying anything at all.

“H^ow d^on y^ou kn^ow wea^kness i^f s^trength is un^cer^stain?:

“How do you know weakness if strength is uncertain? / How can you define a thing by its inverse?”

That was an easy question. After all, Bastard Star had heard the answer many times before, in the post-combat analysis that still irked him long after the man in the purple suit, Sazalo Rakuzia, had vanished into the *Wife's* depths.

“WEAKNESS IS FOUND WHERE THE BATTLEFIELD BREAKS. IT IS A COOLING REACTOR AND A STILL MIND. IT IS...” the robot

hesitated for a split second before answering. Its fingers drummed against the crude sword strapped to its hip. "IT IS WHEN ONE IS FOUND SEVERELY LACKING."

"What are you missing?"

Bastard Star leveled its gaze at the suit, or perhaps more accurately at the suit's helmet. Armie had the impression that the skeletal machine wasn't staring at them, but was instead locked on its own reflection in the dusty glass that kept them contained. Its expression was unreadable, but the flickering optics behind the lens *tightened*, focusing the diffuse light into a single, red pinprick.

> . . .
> Instinct: **THE MASS DOUBTS YOUR STRENGTH**
> . . .

"YOUR QUESTIONS UNSETTLE ME. PLEASE REMOVE THEM, OR I WILL REMOVE YOU."

"You may remove as many as you like."

"You may remove as many of us as you like. / We will make more."

> . . .
> Instinct: **THEY ARE MOCKING YOU**
|
> Self Preservation: they are *ants*.
|
> Instinct: **THE ANTS THINK YOU ARE WEAK**
|
> Self Preservation: i cannot stress this enough
| Self Preservation: you do not need to prove yourself to an *ant colony*.
> . . .

"I DO NOT NEED TO PROVE MYSELF TO AN ANT COLONY," B-Star would have spat if he had the necessary organs, just to underscore how *little* he cared about the swarm's perception of him.

```
> . . . .
> opticArray_117.dump("02_Armie.log");
> curiosity.query("ants", "space") >> antspace.txt;
> monitor.newData("antspace.txt");
> monitor.newData("02_Armie.log");
> monitor.assess();
| Processing combat information. . .
| . . .
| Calculating.
| . . .
```

Because they didn't care.

```
| . . .
| Results: SEVERELY LACKING
| Target human baseline: NOT MET
| . . .
| Checking new data acquisition. . .
| Adjustment criteria met.
| . .

| Adjustments complete. Apply changes (y/n)?
> YES
> Applying changes. . .
| |_ New weight applied to STR (was +1.2 -> +3.4)
| |_ New weight applied to SPD (was +2.7 -> +2.8)
| |_ New weight applied to CON (was +0.6 -> +1.1)
> . . .
```

At all.

```
> . . .
| |_ "ARMIE" threat analysis complete (HOSTILE -> UNDECIDED)
> . . .
```