

The Fall of Ekset City

Fiction

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Ekset City was on fire. Flares and napalm and hammers and bullets and the angry minds of angry men were tearing through three hundred years of architecture and three thousand years of culture. At the center of the city, a bonfire engulfed the seven pillars of Ekset. A frightful horde of humans paraded through, warming their hands on the pyre of victory and sacrificing every trace of goblin culture to the consuming flames. Black smoke rose up so thick and high it fought against the glory of the sun.

We watched for a moment from a boardinghouse balcony. Perhaps a moment too long. Every book and painting burned was another failure. There were two of us tasked with the preservation of an entire civilization's worth of art, and an army of men stood in our way.

"Why seven pillars?" I asked. I was the photographer. Micah was the expert.

Micah answered. "Four for the villages and three for the tribes—one for each culture that fled to this purgatory rock. That's what Ekset means, in the most common goblin tongue. It means purgatory. Ekset was a place of waiting. They were waiting for us to leave them alone."

I turned my back on the square and we made our way across a walkway to the building next door.

I snapped high-resolution photos of the walkway and its construction to pair with the livestream of our helmets. A cellular modem in my camera dumped the pictures online as fast as I took them in case we or our cameras didn't make it home.

"The buildings and rooms are interconnected without locks and often without doors," Micah told me. She was speaking as much to any viewers we might have online as she was to me. "The only private property, inasmuch as that word applies, are each goblin or family's small havens, used for when a goblin desires privacy."

"There's no crime?" I asked.

"There's crime," Micah told me. "But the Eksetians are more...I suppose you could say they're more 'crime tolerant.' Sometimes their things get stolen. Sometimes they steal them back. Sometimes goblins fight—no more than in human society—but a lot of crime, especially property crime, is just, well, accepted. The same way we might accept a head cold."

The next building had yet to be pillaged, and I set about photographing as fast as I could.

"This is a sort of a library," Micah said, moving to the low shelves on the walls and skimming through book titles. "Really, more of a communal bookshelf. It breaks my heart I can't save every book here." She picked out seven books, wrapped them in paper, and thrust them into her pack. I focused on the paintings.

They bore every bit of the breadth of style as you can find in human art—from expressionist to modern to surreal to baroque to classical—but most every piece was nearly three-dimensional with layered paint.

"Shaping the paint with one's claws is every bit as important to the Eksetian artist as color and style and brushwork," Micah said, leaving the books to join in my admiration.

She cut one painting free of its frame, rolled it up, and jammed it into my overfull pack. I'd scarcely noticed the one she'd chosen—an obese goblin, crudely rendered. Instead, I was lost in a scene of three goblins in the rain, one

as tall as a human. The rain was drawn with thick clear gel, leaving the viewer with the impression of staring at the scene through a thick, crudely-made window. The joy on the creatures' faces came across, through the rain and across species lines. I was mesmerized.

The sound of boots came up the stairs.

"Gotta get out," I said.

"No time," Micah said. "Hide the camera." I put it under my coat.

Seven people came into the room. Two had shotguns, one a rifle, and four just bore sledgehammers and crow-bars and other things I'd really rather not get hit with. Seven people out of the seven thousand who'd stormed the city and driven out the goblins.

They were in farm clothes and city clothes and outdoors-man clothes and had motorcycle helmets and hardhats and even scraps of sports armor. The blue star of the Human Association was sewn to every jacket. At the sight of them, fear and anger sloshed around in my head, but the practiced dispassion of years of war journalism won out.

"Afternoon," I said, and I bent down and tore books off the shelf at random, casting them to the ground.

Neither of us wore the blue star, but Micah took my lead with the books and they must have bought the ruse, because they tromped back down the stairs as loudly as they'd come.

Micah found a laptop somewhere, and I turned to her just in time to see her bring it down on the edge of the cabinet, cracking its case.

"They already left," I told her.

But she reached into the guts of the smashed machine and pocketed the hard drive.

"Gold," she said. "There might only be a few hundred computers in the city. We're lucky we found one."

"Goblins use technology?" I asked. I'd taken the assignment on a gut feeling alone. I'd never even seen a goblin, but I bore them no ill will. Being tasked to help the refugees preserve their culture, well, it just felt right. But I didn't know much about them—I'd assumed them primitive.

"Goblins use computers the way people use fireplaces," Micah told me. "They understand them, they just only use them for cute aesthetics or when nothing else is working."

We left the building, down into the street. People were swarming over the quarter, dragging every bit of flammable culture towards the fire and smashing the rest as best they could. We kept our heads down, moved along the grand boulevard as quick as we could. Our packs were full, our batteries almost dead.

"How'd it start?" I asked.

Micah turned and made eye contact first with me, then the camera embedded in my helmet. "The same as it ever has. Goblins lived here because they had nowhere else left. Humans drove them up to perch on the ridge of a mountain not an epic mountain, not a tall mountain, but an ugly one, a squat one. A goblin mountain, I suppose. They moved to an ugly mountain in an ugly scrubland, gambling humanity would leave them alone. It worked, even. But this place can't support much of a population. A few young goblins started moving into human cities. There was a fight. I don't know who started it. A human kid named Florian Simms and a goblin kid named Thik-thak both wound up dead. Human Association put Florian's face on every news site in the country and here we are."

"And the Eksetians?" I asked. I knew she'd been in contact with them.

"In the woods. Out to sea. Underground. Scattered to every wind, chasing rumors of other goblin cities and towns and tribes. My contacts went underground to ancient vaults a hundred miles from here. And that's where this stuff is going to go." She adjusted her pack. She was hauling at least her own weight. "Come on. One more stop and then we'll get out of here."

We turned a corner, bent under a goblin-height arch, and came out into a hidden courtyard. Ahead of us was rubble, the blasted-out ruins of some great structure.

"I wish I could kill every person who's ever worn the blue star," Micah said, looking at the mess before us.

"What was it?"

"An orphanage, you could say. A kind of communal foster care home and a temple rolled into one. Goblins revere difference where we revile it—near as I can tell, that explains the incredible morphological variation found in such a small population. Huge ears? What a stud. No nose? No problem. Orphans in particular were special, even kind of popular. And growing up here as a human, well, I couldn't have asked for a better life."

We stood in silent respect for too long. We drew too much attention to ourselves, and a handful of armed humans stood watching.

With wary eyes and a few guns aimed at our backs, we walked to the edge of the city and drove away.

“What will you do now?” I asked as we sped off across the scrubland.

She didn’t answer.

Three weeks later, mixed forces retook the city from the militia. Helpless, hundreds of miles away, I watched Micah’s livestream. Another week still, and a coalition of human governments bombed the city into ruin. Micah died in the city she’d lived in.

Sometimes at night I lose myself in a print of that painting, of those happy creatures in the rain, and I forget I’m only supposed to hate human society and not the human race.

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