

“STARS, LIKE WATCHFUL EYES” EXCERPT

(3W3M COMPETITION)

written by Y. Lu
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PAGE 1 (4 panels)

Panel 1

Large panel. Establishing shot of a towering cliff face surrounded by verdant flora. Incongruously built into its rock is a balcony... in which we can make out a small, vague figure standing casually (HALBETH the royal exile). In the foreground – in front and to the side of it all -- there's a dazzling waterfall. It's populated by a school of alien fish swimming *up* its cascade. It's situated so that someone standing on the balcony can see it in the distance.

Basically, the panel is a gorgeous vista on Therra.

SWYFT (no tail, electronic)

Sublime.

Panel 2

Our first good look at Halbeth: Male in late 20s, currently wearing the sci-fi version of expensive summer casualwear. He's also sporting a small comm device on one ear, but it doesn't necessarily need to be visible yet this panel.

The panel is a close-up on him from the front. He is aiming what looks like the much more unwieldy cousin of a sniper rifle over the balcony rail. The gun's muzzle is unusually large – the size of a fist. One of his eyes is looking through the scope, the other closed. A smile plays on his lips. Behind him are the open balcony doors.

SWYFT (no tail, electronic)

The sous-chef used to be some minor Institute drone. He's developed this chemical process...

SWYFT (no tail, electronic)

The food's taste somehow permeates *into* your mouth tissue. I could taste it for hours after.

Panel 3

Halbeth from behind now. He's firing his gun, which we can now see is aimed at the waterfall in the background – in the far, far, far distance. We see a big projectile zooming from the gun towards the waterfall.

SWYFT (no tail, electronic)

I never expected to say these words as a compliment, but I wanted to bite off and swallow my tongue!

SWYFT (no tail, electronic)

-Sigh- *Sublime*... I don't know how you're getting by with only that *Nutrados* make-do.

HALBETH

Oh, I've found a workaround.

Panel 4

Close up on the waterfall. One of the fish is being slammed into by the projectile, which it turns out looks like some clockwork butterfly. In contrast to its predatory purpose, it appears incongruously delicate – ornate and filigreed (though maybe that's not evident yet in this panel since it's, you know, slamming into a fish).

SWYFT (no tail, electronic)

To get real meat? On **Therra**? If the authorities there find out –

HALBETH (no tail)

-- I'll just shed another skin.

HALBETH (no tail)

I mean, isn't that the great thing about this... twilight life? Lives?

PAGE 2 (6 panels)

Panel 1

The butterfly, carrying the now-dead fish in manipulators, is in the middle of flying back to the balcony at incredible speed. It's traversing the huge empty space between.

HALBETH (no tail)

You and me, Swyft... We're free from the prison of identity. Of **names**.

Panel 2

The butterfly (with fish) is flying lazily past Halbeth at the rail, past his shoulders, towards the balcony doors. He's not even looking at it as he speaks to it; he's enjoying the expansive view.

HALBETH

Just as we're free from the prisons of geography, custom. Free from everything else that encloses the rest of them.

HALBETH (tiny text)

Straight to the kitchen, please. Recipe 7.

SFX on BUTTERFLY

chmm

SWYFT (no tail, electronic, tiny text)

Free to speak forever without getting to the point, apparently. Don't forget that one.

Panel 3

Close-up on Halbeth's face, tilted back, eyes closed. He's just basking in how great life is.

HALBETH

We're free to explore all the worlds, and in doing so, our hearts as well.

HALBETH

In a life like this, anything is possible.

Panel 4

The living room of Halbeth's current residence, on the other side of those balcony doors. The decor screams luxury suite. There are almost no personal belongings, though, as it's a temporary residence. Also, there's a potted plant that has fur instead of fir.

The butterfly (with fish) has now gone into the living room from the open balcony doors, which are in the background behind it. It's zipping towards the off-panel kitchen.

SWYFT (no tail, electronic)

"Life." Speaking of which, that reminds me... You'll need to move soon.

SWYFT (no tail, electronic)

You-know-who called today. Tells me he has a bead on you...

Panel 5

The living room, similar to the previous panel, but now everything's darker to indicate a time jump. Nighttime. The balcony doors are now closed but shattered, glass shards on the floor. The place is abandoned; maybe there are a few loose papers on the floor, or upturned furniture, to indicate that. The weird fur plant is still there, to help make 100% clear it's the same room.

The mercenary HRI is standing in the room, having entered from the balcony. He's lean and wiry. Both of his hands sport a cybernetic sixth finger, though that probably won't be prominent this panel.

A rope trails from his waist along the floor, through the shattered balcony doors, to over the rail. One hand holds a gun with a flashlight mounted atop, which he's using to sweep the dim environs.

SWYFT (caption)

"He'll be there in three weeks. So you make sure you aren't."

Panel 6

Tiny panel of just Hri's fist, tightened in frustration, its extra digit conspicuous.

HRI (from off-panel)

...Not again.

PAGE 3 (5 panels)

The following three pages are FLASHBACK, so Halbeth has different clothes and haircut. And I'll suggest three tiers each page: 1 panel in the top tier, 2 panels each in the remaining tiers, giving a total of 5 panels. For reasons that will become clear.

Panel 1

A room in Halbeth's personal estate on Heir. It's richly – in every sense of that word – decorated: Paintings, small statuary, brass, etc. But the furniture looks sleek, geometric, modern, to show he has a touch of the unconventional.

Halbeth and SWYFT (fellow royal exile) sit together at a table, talking. Like Halbeth, Swyft is in his late 20s but otherwise dissimilar appearance-wise. Swyft has a nice chair, but Halbeth's using some pet lion-like animal as a giant cushion.

(The table acts as a giant computer screen. It's displaying headshots of various assassins, but that doesn't need to be clear yet in this panel, Mr./Ms. hypothetical artist person.)

CAPTION (distinct lettering)

BEFORE:

SWYFT

Yes, again. From the top...

HALBETH

Sure. First, we stage some huge falling out in public – at the next Rights Auction maybe.

HALBETH

Let everyone know Halbeth and Swyft are now sworn enemies...

Panel 2

Swyft, sitting at a table in an upscale bar on Heir. (We'll label it Bar U.) He's looking at the reader. (At the assassin Hri actually, but the reader doesn't know yet.) There doesn't need to be much of the background visible, just enough so we understand it's a different location entirely.

Built into the table, in front of him, there's a tiny rectangular base surrounding a small mass of roiling mush that's forming weird, random shapes. (He will later use this device to display a solid image.)

HALBETH (caption, straddling this panel and the next panel to the right, so it encompasses both)

"We'll give time for the news to spread. Then..."

SWYFT

I wake up, and there it is in my head. Every day.

SWYFT

The memory of his self-righteous face...

Panel 3

Similar to the previous panel, only it's Halbeth instead of Swyft, and he's sitting in a different bar. This place is more run-down, dimmer. (Suggestion: Wood everywhere, in contrast to iPhone-style curves and sleekness at the first bar?) We'll label this Bar R. (Swyft's facing the assassin WHITE WENDRE but, again, the reader doesn't know yet.)

HALBETH

...looking at me with such unearned arrogance. I need it gone from this world.

WENDRE (from off-panel)

...And who is it wears this face?

Panel 4

Swyft in Bar U, conviction on his face. He's jabbing a data chip into the circular base. The goo is cohering into a replica of Halbeth's face and neck.

SWYFT

Halbeth, né of the Sirrimo Syndicate.

Panel 5

Halbeth in Bar R, conviction on his face. He is showing the screen of a 3W3M version of a tablet. On it is an image of Swyft.

HALBETH

Swyft, né of the Narmouth Syndicate.

PAGE 4 (5 panels)

Panel 1

Similar to panel 1 of the previous page, with Halbeth and Swyft at the display screen/table. Only now it's a close-up on said table, which is displaying the profiles of numerous assassins (headshots, data, etc.).

Halbeth and Swyft's heads and hands are maybe visible at the edges of the panel; they're examining the profiles.

HALBETH

Of course, there's the question of **whom** to contract.

HALBETH

The right sort, with the right touch.

Panel 2

Bar U again, only we're now looking at the other end of the table, so it's Hri looking at the reader. He's the still, silent sort of assassin, so there's not much visible emotion. His six-fingered hands rest on the table.

SWYFT (from off-panel)

And you're just the assassin to rid me of him, I understand.

SWYFT (from off-panel)

You're... focused. Point A to B. You're a goddamn bullet.

HALBETH (caption)

"Unimaginative. Unable to see through to what's really going on."

Panel 3

Bar R again, only now we're looking at the other end of the table, so it's Wendre looking at the reader. Unlike Hri, she actually has the expressiveness of a human, and she wears a lot of white. She has a drink in front of her; inside the liquid floats a tiny weird fetal critter.

Standing right behind her, in the background, another assassin is talking to someone off-panel.

HALBETH (from off-panel)

Second, you're a known quantity. Some of your newer peers, so eager to make their names, they get into ten kinds of nonsense...

RANDO ASSASSIN (tiny text)

...and that's how I learned, never fire a gun with your foot.

HALBETH (from off-panel)

You're **reliable**.

HALBETH (CAPTION, not balloon)

"Predictable."

Panel 4

Bar U. Hri looking at the reader. He's smiling now, very noticeable on his normally frozen face.

SWYFT (from off-panel)

Also, it's not enough for him to die. I **need** to savor it.

SWYFT (from off-panel)

Keep me up to date as you go. Every lurid detail as you hunt the pus-riddled wretch down.

HALBETH (caption)

"Vain. Willing to share every detail of their progress."

Panel 5

Bar R. We see the three assassin school coins on the table. Halbeth's hand points to the isfunda coin.

HALBETH

And you're isfunda. You're strong.

HALBETH

When his end comes, he'll feel it.

HALBETH (caption)

"Isfunda. **Not** speedy, **not** stealthy."

PAGE 5 (5 panels)

Panel 1

Similar to page 3, panel 1, with Halbeth and Swyft at the display screen/table. Now, Halbeth's lion-esque pet is breathing vapors at his face, which he's inhaling – it's the uber-wealthy's version of a hookah, only living.

HALBETH

I'll tell you whenever your assassin draws near. You do the same for mine. We stay three steps ahead of them.

HALBETH (tiny text)

Fff. That's the stuff...

HALBETH

As long as we're in **this** duel, no one can challenge us to another.

Panel 2

Bar U. Swyft still looking at the reader/Hri. He's shaking hands with Hri, whose hand is reaching in from the bottom panel border.

HALBETH (caption)

"And this duel, we can make sure **never** culminates."

SWYFT (caption)

"Hal, we'd have to use cover identities –"

HALBETH (caption)

"A series of skins, yes. Easy enough to arrange for men of our means."

(Note: I'm using skins to mean cover identities. So Halbeth should NOT look physically different from the present day, beyond his hair and clothes.)

Panel 3

Bar R. Halbeth looking at the reader/Wendre. His stare is intense, earnest, to match up with the caption text. This moment is a big deal for him, and every inch of his face shows it.

HALBETH (caption)

"And we'll be free.

HALBETH (caption)

"For that, I will happily offer to the pyre a name that has only ever been a weight hooked to my heart."

Panel 4

Bar U. Hri looking at the reader. Dead expression again. Before him is the holographic hourglass from DUELS I, now activated.

HRI

And now it begins.

Panel 5

Bar G. Wendre looking at the reader. She's casually working a toothpick. Before her is the holographic hourglass from DUELS I, now activated.

WENDRE

And now it begins.

WENDRE

Best start running, blueblood. Until, one way or *the other*, you get to stop.

END OF EXCERPT

And from here on the characters slowly spiral into paranoia and misery...