

Now is the Seventh Winter Since Troy Fell

By David Vickery

An unclear scene under an unquiet sky. It shifted into sense as Duncan Metcalf, first Governor of Bryd, arrived. Four Noorins were standing apart from the corpse. In their low susurrations a trained ear could hear that plangent sense of loss for the life that was gone; but all Metcalf heard was that uncanny bell-like sound of the Noorin vocal chords singing his arrival to each other.

“Bloody children’s comforters,” he grunted, pushing their bloated shapes aside roughly. Then he looked upon the face of the dead.

Two hours later he sat in Lydiatt’s office.

“Here,” said the doctor, handing over a half-full tumbler of imported whisky.

“Think I need it?”

“Ferguson was your friend...” There was an unfinished air about his phrase.

“Well, we’ve all got to go sometime. Here’s to him,” Metcalf cut in almost savagely, and drank.

“And besides....”

“Besides what,” said Metcalf.

“You know what it was like? It was like food pinned with a fork and then smeared across the plate.”

“Thanks. I really needed to know that.”

“I only meant –”

“I know. Some psychopath.”

“Has to be,” said the doctor, speaking through his raised glass.

A wolf on this world of sheep? thought Metcalf. And suddenly he badly wanted to remember something, but it wouldn’t come.

Another hour and he was turmoil and bliss in the arms of Alcida. Able to close his eyes and ease the rawness beneath the lids. He sought out the coolness of her upper arms, resting his chin on their soft pillows. He lay across her, digesting that timeless after-moment.

“Funny that there’s no word *coolth*. Like warmth,” he said, his eyes still safely closed.

“What?” Her voice was dusky, soothing. Pity she’d only arrived on Bryd four years ago. It meant three years wasted for him.

“Ferguson died today,” he said in the same even voice. Felt her squirm under him.

“Duncan! No!” she said.

He pushed her gently down again, guiding her hands to his temples.

“Or should I say was murdered,” he continued. “Anyway, I think we can rule suicide out.” And at that he burst horrifyingly into brief laughter. But his laughter was full of the contrast posed by Ferguson’s body: part of it, the head and upper torso, untouched and immaculate as though he might wake from sleep that moment. The rest, raw mincemeat.

Alcida. Warm and reassuring as womankind must be in such hours. Heard his laughter change to broken sobs but felt no change in his shaking body.

But such weakness was for private moments. The next day he was back at work. Bryd was usually the definition of quiet and peaceful, its small colony of traders and settlers happy enough to pursue the tenor of their life. Now it was quiet all right, but its peace was shattered.

Metcalf left his city office at twelve and input the coordinates of the Governor's residence into his car, a frown on his face deepening as the vehicle drove him silently through the silent traffic. Ferguson had been his right-hand man. But it wasn't his loss or even his death that really unsettled him – the occasional knifing happened even here, particularly after a late night at the Palace – it was the savagery of it. Such slaughterhouse tactics would raise an eyebrow on Earth, let alone on this backwater...and there was something else disturbing him, something he badly needed to remember. Unaware of time passing, he looked up to see the car moving slowly up to the house. White against the turbid grass of Bryd.

Unusually, his son was in the big room. He glanced over as Duncan entered, no pleasure in his moody face at the encounter.

"Back from another day at the office," John said.

"And you, I suppose, have just got up after another hectic night at the Palace?"

Metcalf flung himself into his black recliner and cancelled the selection playing on the house system.

"Where else is the son of the Governor supposed to spend his time?"

Metcalf said nothing. He input a code, chose a performance. In a moment, unearthly music filled the room. Soothing but not sufficiently distracting.

"Someone's got to spend your money. And where else is there to go on this fleabite. What are we doing here anyway?"

"I'm governing this fleabite. What you're doing is anybody's guess."

"I'm going out," said John. "So nice to see you again. We must have more of these little family discussions."

The door closed behind him. Metcalf walked through into the dining room where Mary waited. He fiddled with the system controls, redirecting the sounds.

"I heard about Ferguson," his wife said in her monotonal voice.

"Yes, it was terrible." The maid appeared with the dishes.

"He was a fine administrator."

"One of the best. I'll have to upgrade Stanley. He's very capable, of course –"

Mary interrupted with her hand over her eyes. "Must we have this music?"

"It suits my mood. Don't you like Bartok?" he smiled.

"You know I don't. Can't we at least have it down a little?"

Duncan did not immediately reply. He was staring like some imbecile Noorin at the shining tines of his fork. What was that Lydiatt had said? Like food pinned with a fork and then smeared across the plate. A meaningless phrase came into his head: *the executioner claw*. His forehead ran with a dozen tiny streams of sweat: that feeling again: who was he? What was he trying so hard to remember?

"Duncan!"

His head cleared. "Sorry, miles away for a moment." He pressed the dampen volume control. Manic timpani died suddenly.

But at the end of the meal he was looking through the liqueurs. The sight of one bottle gave him a brief sense of nausea – yet hadn't it once been his favourite?

"Cointreau," he said to the maid.

"You never have that, dear," said Mary, looking up.

"There's a first time for everything," he answered.

When the small drink came he held the glass in his hand for a while. The colour of water but more viscous. He swirled it in the glass and it left a slick trail. Then he raised it to his nose. That intense oil of oranges. The fragrance caught him, filling him with a need to know. Something almost grasped and then lost. His wife's faded hair and brown eyes seemed unfamiliar. He needed to speak.

"Smell that," he said, offering his glass.

"I can from here," she said. "Your sense of smell was never very developed, was it?"

Nor your sense of touch, dear, he thought.

After lunch he got up and went to his study. He locked the door and put all calls on hold. Then he searched through his desk until he found the small key he was looking for, which he used to unlock an equally unobtrusive safe. Inside were two containers of tablets, the red and the black. He felt intuitively that he'd never seen them before – and yet they were somehow familiar. Was that possible? Anyway, he knew what to do: he opened the red tablets, paused for a second and then took four.

His hands were shaking as he secured the safe. Now something was to be unleashed inside him, something of which he was totally ignorant. *Only take these if something potentially life threatening happens*, they had said. Who had said. Well, it didn't matter. Something had happened to Ferguson. And if those pills could prevent the same thing happening to him, he'd put up with any consequences.

The consequences started the following day in the arms of Alcida. That was not surprising; the odds were in its favour. What was surprising was the intensity of his reaction, easy smiling pleasure transformed to pain the sharpness and speed of cramp racking his whole body. Panic searing his brain. Synapses ablaze.

He rolled off her and onto the floor, his screaming drowning hers. Amid the pain his body shape was changing, growing thinner and more sinewy. His executive's waistline pared away until not a gram of excess fat remained. His skin darkened. He could feel muscles grow taut after years of slackness. Razor chisels scythed bloodily from his right hand. There was pressure on his neck, too: but no, it was Alcida, holding on to him, trying to haul him back from whatever hell he'd been pitchforked into. He looked up at her. His vision seemed to be responding to different frequencies. The lighting in particular, a pleasant warm red a minute ago, was cool and lurid. Her body looked flaccid and too white, her eyes in shock all wrong, the sight of her breasts a scourge to his stomach. He crawled like an animal to the bathroom, slammed the door and hung limply over the bowl for what seemed like an age.

Then the mists cleared. He looked down at his naked body and it was as it had always been. He cradled his right hand with his left: no razors, no slits for them, no blood. And then came the realisation. The red tablets had loosened the chemical bonds of the black tablets, the DCHs, the long-term memory blockers. That razoring hand was the famous executioner claw of Cenobius. He smelt again that pervasive oleaginous orange that reeked like invisible smoke from the pores of every native of that world. And now that once proud and warlike race was extinct.

No. Not quite extinct. He was Cenobian.

He stood unsteadily, hands pressed to his face as though to shut out any more revelations, Alcida's pounding on the locked door beating in his ears. He was Duncan Metcalf, first Governor of Bryd, administrator, colonial representative, and that other image was a nightmare, the name quite unpronounceable with human vocal chords. But as memory returned everything switched around. Now it was the name of the

Cenobian that came easily to mind and the name of Duncan Metcalf an impossible sound.

He was the greatest general Cenobius had ever had, and Ferguson – his mind replaced that alien name with the real one – his loyal aide.

And then the last shreds of protection faded away. With clarity came guilt, wave after wave of guilt that all his reward was as nothing against. Now he knew why he'd taken the DCHs, and why he would again as soon as all this was over.

But along with the guilt came an unexpected sense of wholeness. He knew who he was again. All his nonsense about being governor of this Noorin-infested dust speck on the outskirts of nowhere, a mediocrat's job – it was all fiction. And with that thought came a return of his survival instinct. Someone out there intended to kill him. Everything else was secondary.

He unlocked the door and Alcida fell into his arms. He clung to her, glad of the support, but his strength was returning fast. He could see now what had puzzled him sometimes even through the dark glass of male vanity, what a woman like Alcida had seen in him.

"It's all right, all right now," he whispered and let her half-lead, half-carry him back to the bed. "It was nothing. Nothing."

She stood looking down at him for a moment, her golden hair falling over her still-troubled eyes, her pearly skin and pin-up perfect shape once again welcome. He ran a lazy hand over her waist and she relaxed a little.

"Can I get you anything?" she asked. He considered. What he really wanted was a drink called *aorakh*, but that was literally impossible. He smiled up at her.

"Whisky, plenty of ice," he said.

Later, Alcida asleep against him, he thought back to seven years ago. *What had gone wrong?*

Yes, he remembered now. Six or seven high-ranking Cenobians were in that shuttle on the last day. If they'd been high enough before the barrier domed they might have made it. Before Cenobius was squeezed like an overripe orange until not the least pip or pith remained. And he'd been the one who had shown Earth and its allies the way.

He'd always been a realist. Cenobius might have survived another ten years, but it would never have broken the blockade, never returned to its former glory. He'd merely hastened the inevitable – and ensured his survival in the process.

Earth had been more than generous. A generosity mixed with that special contempt for traitors, however valuable. But what was that to him? He had beaten a losing game. They had given him a governorship, and considerably more than thirty pieces of silver to go with it.

Of course, the possible survival of those Cenobians complicated matters. No problem, Earth told him: they had solutions for that. He could choose from five hundred worlds – more, with the stubborn resistance of Cenobius ended. He'd picked Bryd, just because it was so unremarkable. Then there was the surgery they'd performed, surgery such as even someone like Chief Medical Officer Lydiatt, head doctor to an entire world, had never imagined. Not only were he, his aide and his family transformed into human shape, their memories were entirely human too. The records had been altered with the same surgical precision to give them a past before seven years ago. But perhaps the greatest gift was the DCH, a magic potion to wash away his guilt.

It didn't seem naïve to hope that was enough. Even if the handful of Cenobians had survived, finding him would surely be a lifetime's work. But the death

of Ferguson seemed to suggest otherwise. It was true, the Cenobians were renowned trackers and even more renowned communicators. If there was information to be picked up, in any language, they would find it eventually.

But even so, six or seven individuals, even Cenobians, couldn't be that much of a threat. He was here on home ground. He made the rules. He had power. Gently, without waking Alcida, he reached across to his memo pad. Then he punched in STRAKER and an appointment time for the following day. Another hour before he needed to leave. He kissed her hair.

At breakfast he found himself looking at Mary. Hard to believe that underneath that dowdy human exterior were Cenobian bones, built not to carry her present load of fleshy curves but the taut, muscular body of Cenobius.

"Anything wrong?" she responded to his stare.

"No, no. Where's John?"

"In bed, of course," she replied curiously.

After breakfast he stood for a while in the big room. It faced away from the city. He remembered now that he'd chosen this aspect because it reminded him slightly of Cenobius. Its treeless expanse also represented a zone of refuge, with no way for anyone to approach unseen. Even if the detectors were disrupted, the gently rolling fields stretched for miles.

But now these thoughts gave him no pleasure. Somewhere out there were the last Cenobians.

Seasoned general though he was, he couldn't help a shudder of almost panic. They meant to hunt him down, wherever he went, however he disguised himself. Like vengeful furies.

He dismissed the thought with irritation. He would hunt them down instead. Let the hunters become the hunted. His memo pad buzzed gently in his pocket, reminding him of his appointment, and he left the window abruptly. A few minutes later he had picked up Straker.

Bel Straker was a professional, relaxed but always alert. If a place like Bryd had little need of a fully-fledged secret police agent, it was the first world in ten he'd lived in that didn't. Even someone like Straker needed to step down the pace eventually, move into semi-retirement. But Metcalf was sure he'd lost none of his flair.

Straker sat quietly in the silent car. He was a man who didn't waste words. No doubt the Governor would open the conversation in his own time. Meanwhile he let his cold eyes stare ahead at the changeless landscape of Brydian winter.

An occasional Noorin, leaning against the wind like a stalled box-kite, took the place of trees. There was an intermittent ripple in the waving grasses as some small animal disturbed them, and a similar rare flicker in the almost white air as a bird soared high above them. Otherwise nothing. Metcalf stopped the car and they dropped a few inches to the ground.

"Shall we walk?" he said. They got out. Without preamble, Metcalf began.

"Remember the fight on Cenobius?"

Straker only nodded, but there was an almost warm glow in his eyes. Metcalf didn't doubt that Straker's services would have been in demand at the Empire's hour of greatest need.

"It may well be that a few Cenobians survived the destruction of their world." Metcalf looked over to him. As expected, this provoked a verbal response.

"I thought they were completely wiped out."

“It’s just possible six or seven of them got away, through the blockade,” said Metcalf. “Ferguson’s death the other day – it looked like their work. Or it could have been someone trying to make it look like it. Either way, someone out there intends to kill me. Can you take care of it?”

Straker smiled. “It’ll be a pleasure,” he said.

“I’m sure you’re more than equal to it, but just as a precaution, install some protection in my home, will you?” asked Metcalf as they turned back to the car.

It was three jumpy days later and Duncan sat in Alcida’s apartments. They were drinking an imported premier cru Bordeaux, but despite the luxury the Governor’s mind was elsewhere. Then his memo pad buzzed gently and he upset his glass. A typically laconic Straker message was displayed.

FOUR CENOBIANS DEAD TWO ESCAPED WOUNDED MEET
RESIDENCE WITH FULL REPORT.

Metcalf stood up. “I’ve got to go,” he said, “but don’t worry. Everything’s going to be all right.”

Alcida’s lips touched his. Next time let’s make it champagne,” she said.

Metcalf laughed as he punched the residence’s coordinates into the car and sat back to watch it weave through the traffic. Obviously they hadn’t counted on meeting a professional like Straker on a speck of nowhere like Bryd. Soon there’d be no more Cenobians anywhere and nothing to worry about. Without the DCHs the strain had been almost too much; but he’d soon be back under their wing again.

The apartments were thinning out. Duncan, relaxing in his reclined seat, watched the twin moons of Bryd paling though the now ultramarine sky. Once those last two Cenobians were finished off there would be no reason to stay here. And with all his wealth, there were plenty of worlds for Alcida and him to have fun in.

Finally the car slowed. Straker’s vehicle was parked outside. As he had done since the murder of Ferguson he checked the detectors on the car pick-up, but they registered all clear. Perhaps Straker had even caught up with the last two and finished them for him.

He got out of the car and walked quickly to the front door, input his code and entered. He could see into the big room from the hallway. Rather surprisingly, John was sitting in his favourite chair, with his back to him.

He felt charitable to everyone on a day like this and was about to call out to him when he suddenly thought: *where’s Straker?* Something about John’s still pose flooded his bloodstream with adrenalin. He jumped for the stairs, and as he did so a projectile flashed past him and excavated the wall. Bruised by flying debris, Metcalf was nevertheless up in a second and took the stairs three at a time.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw a long-forgotten lean shape appear round the angle of the big room and he ducked as another missile shattered the stairs behind him. Then he was on the next level, chest heaving but all his old generalship coming back to him. In his bedroom was a handgun – no match for their automatic grenade launchers, but better than nothing.

He wrenched open the door – and cried out as something fell towards him. Something red and flayed, that oozed and dripped. What had once been Mary, left hanging from a hook on the door. It looked as though her killers had been taken with the desire to see whether she still had Cenobian bones under all that human flesh.

But there was no time for that if he wanted to avoid the same fate. In a second he was rooting feverishly through the door. As he found the handgun and pulled it out, some thrown object knocked it from his hand. Two Cenobians stood facing him,

their taut and stretched features expressionless. Their clothing was torn and one of them had lost part of his left hand; but under the brown bloodstains their musculature looked in as good a tone as ever.

They fanned out to cut off the only door, then, watching him all the time, they threw down their weapons and advanced towards him. In a natural, even graceful motion, they flexed their right hands and armed themselves with executioner claws. Metcalf, backed up against the wall, felt his own hand twitching madly but no answering claw appeared for him. He had sold that along with his birthright.

But downstairs in the big room, Straker moved. One eye had gone, leaving a bloody well in his face competing with his shredded guts to empty him out the quickest. He inched past the disembowelled John to complete a contact on his jury-rigged defence system. His last act. Intense ultraviolet flooded the house from top to bottom.

Upstairs something went haywire in the Cenobians' autonomic nervous system. Their legs gave way and they covered their eyes, twittering like insects. Even Metcalf's surgically transformed eyes were streaming, but he could still see. He dived for the gun and pulled it up into position, but not before the nearest Cenobian, alerted by the sound, had flopped on top of him.

Metcalf, grunting and gasping in the grip of the Cenobian, scrabbled for the trigger. With a superhuman effort he got his index finger around it, shut his eyes and pulled. Nothing happened.

The Cenobian reached over with his claw and began a slow carve of the Governor's upper chest. Warm blood spilled from the neatest incision. At the same time the Cenobian's left hand was grappling with the gun, beginning to bend the metal. Just as Metcalf found and released the safety catch and blew his attacker away in an explosive blinding mist. Two seconds later he was the only living thing in the house.

Metcalf lay on the bedroom floor for what may have been seconds or minutes. Then he eased himself up and stumbled out of the devastated room, down the stairs and dropped the last few feet onto the ground floor. He broke the ultraviolet contact and wiped his burning eyes clear.

A glance was all he needed to verify that Straker and his son were both dead. He turned his eyes quickly away to where a bottle of whisky stood on the drinks trolley. He opened it and poured the smoky amber liquid straight down his scarred throat. Then he went into his study, unlocked the safe and swallowed four of the black tablets.

After all, he thought, as the car drove him, back into the city, I've been hurt worse than this: that time with the Cenobian fleet off Delta Cephei IV, for instance. And then he'd won only a battle. This time he'd won his life. He had a sense of loss for his family, but the euphoric effect of the DCHs was washing all that out of him. The memories of the space battle, his years of hiding, his real name and even the recent violence were becoming more remote by the minute. And his problems were over.

He was tempted to have Lydiatt patch him up, but on reflection it wasn't so bad. Bruises, scratches, one deep cut, but nothing broken. He was worn out, true, but it was a case for Alcida's remedies rather than anything else. And he wanted to be with her, this night of nights. His only stop was at a liquor importer's where he picked up a magnum of chilled champagne.

He opened the apartment door with his own keycard and shut it behind him. He noted with pleasure the soft lights and the soothing music in the background.

“Alcida,” he called. He moved into the bedroom and sank down onto the bed. The sound of the shower came through the bathroom to him. He called her name again, but for that moment he didn’t really care about anything. He had come through the eye of the needle and survived. He closed his eyes.

Duncan Metcalf, first Governor of Bryd, let out a deep sigh of satisfaction with everything, and inhaled with his breath the sweet, refreshing bouquet of ripe oranges.