



Union: An Abridged Version of Love

Jason Dowdeswell

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Once-loyal soldiers begin questioning their vicious leader's decisions in the gripping science fiction novel Union.

In Jason Dowdeswell's space opera *Union*, a military tyrant risks rekindling a war with an enigmatic alien race.

Day, a driver who is unaware of her true origins, is on an assignment when she is attacked by a giant who turns out to be a waxen—part of a powerful experimental race of indestructible soldiers that dominates among the planets. This strange waxen explains Day's origins to her while she lies dying in her damaged spaceship. The scene frames the rest of the story, which is truly the waxen's story—interrupted only by brief, interjected questions and opinions from Day.

Day learns that Waxman, the leader of the waxen, is a military tyrant who usurped his way into power. Waxman is intent on dominating the worlds. He uses every resource available to create an army, intending to use it to annihilate the Shrie Shrie, mysterious aliens prone to wreaking havoc and then vanishing. Indeed, only the haunting Shrie Shrie portal remains as evidence of their race—and as an ominous reminder of the possibility of their return. But Waxman's plans are compromised: two of his most loyal soldiers, Iran and Kayanai, have become suspicious of his rule after a traumatic episode in an earlier war.

Kayanai distinguishes himself among the central cast. His sense of turmoil is absorbing: he battles with his building anger and feelings of helplessness. For instance, when he is mocked for the frequent baths that cause him to shrink but that also serve as his only means of escape, the novel notes that

bitterness began growing in Kayanai. He did want to bathe. He wanted to shrink till he disappeared. He was so sick of death. But the bitterness rising in him was not despairing, it was angry. That night, he did not bathe.

The secondary waxen cast fleshes out this grand drama further. They include attention-seeking Genjai, who follows Waxman blindly, and Jevan, Kayanai's romantic interest. And the story is often moved along because of the actions of Tan, a figurehead ruler installed by Waxman to bear the people's scorn on his behalf. But the cast's constant bickering undermines the book's tension, as do the antics of Iran, Kayanai, and Gengai, who tease each other and jostle for Waxman's favor.

The fast-changing backdrops and vast battle scenes are enlivened by minute details, as of changes in characters' facial expressions and other small reactions. However, a few incomplete sentences create gaps in the narration, and Genjai's name is sometimes misspelled. Further, the book ends with quite a few unanswered questions, as if laying the foundation for a possible sequel.

In the tense science fiction novel *Union*, engineered soldiers facing a probable war wrestle with issues of blind loyalty, greed, and limiting fear.

GABRIELLA HARRISON (January 19, 2024)

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