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SCIENCE FICTION, FANTASY, AND HORROR

# Fantasy Scroll mag

ISSUE  
08



Tony Peak • Elise R. Hopkins • Kate O'Connor • Nancy Waldman • KJ Kabza • Simon Kewin  
Aleksander Volkmar • Raluca Balasa • Jarod K. Anderson • K.S. Dearsley

**Fantasy Scroll Magazine**  
**Speculative Fiction — Issue #8 — August 2015**

**Featuring works by Aleksander Volkmar, Elise R. Hopkins, Jarod K. Anderson,  
Josh Brown, K. S. Dearsley, Kate O'Connor, KJ Kabza, Nancy Waldman,  
Raluca Balasa, Simon Kewin, Tony Peak**

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# Fantasy Scroll Magazine Issue #8

**August, 2015**

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# Editorial, August 2015

Iulian Ionescu

**W**elcome to Issue #8 of Fantasy Scroll Magazine.

The summer is here and you're probably resting on a beach, or hiking a mountain, or both. But you never forget about reading, do you? No you don't... And here we come to the rescue with another packed issue, filled with monsters, aliens, knights, spaceships, and dragons.

We start strong with Tony Peak's "*The Light Comes*," a story of struggle in a world where a strange disease takes lives regardless of age. This is Tony's second appearance in FSM and we're really glad to see him back.

"*Minor Disasters*" by Elise R. Hopkins reminds us of the fragile world we live in and how everything can turn to dust in the blink of an eye.

Kate O'Connor's "*White Horse*" is next, following the life of a soldier and his encounters with a magical white steed.

Next is "*ReMemories*" by Nancy Waldman, a moving story about a future where

humankind can record, store, and manipulate the mind's memories.

Alexander Volkmar's story, "*Gunman on the Wall*" reminds us of the constant need to believe that things are better on the other side.

Next we have two shorter stories: "*The Magister's Clock*" by Simon Kewin, and "*From Mutsumi*," by KJ Kabza. This is KJ's second story in FSM.

It looks like Issue #8 is the issue of second appearances: Jarod K. Anderson's story "*Making Ends Meet*" is next, a story built around a creepy workplace.

"*Haze*" follows, by K.S. Dearsley, an intricate story of intergalactic politics.

We conclude the fiction part with Raluca Balasa's "*For the Heart I Never Had*," a story of brotherly feud and love.

Before jumping into the non-fiction section, we have another installment of *Shamrock*, the graphic serial story by Josh Brown with art by Alberto Hernandez. Follow Shamrock's adventures as she continues her journey of revenge.

In the non-fiction section we have an interview with author Martin Millar and a review for his recent book "*The Goddess of Butterflies and Daisies*." We also interview author Fran Wilde and artist Chris Drysdale, the illustrator for this issue's cover art.

Dan Kobolt returns with another Science Center article, this time about genes.

The issue ends with a movie review by Mark Leeper: "*Time Lapse*," directed by Bradley King.

I truly hope you enjoy this issue and see you next time!

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# The Light Comes

Tony Peak

Dynaëa walked down the dormitory aisle, gray robe swishing at her bare heels. Though she'd long passed the need to go barefoot in an effort to remain awake, she still followed the custom. It didn't feel right to wear shoes around those she guarded while they slept. Dozens of still forms lay under blankets, their repose lit by moonlight through slim windows. Looking over them made her grip the Selak dagger tighter. Her watch was almost over, and she hadn't been required to slay any of the sleepers. Maybe the Slumber would pass them by this night.

Pausing at the bed of a small boy, Dynaëa placed the dagger behind her back. Thankfully she'd never disposed of a child in her eight months as a Sentinel. She recalled when she slept in the dormitories because it was too dangerous in the countryside. Too dangerous to close one's eyes and sleep. Dream.

The boy turned onto his side, clasping a stuffed ice bear. Dynaëa smiled and walked on.

Her joy faded as she fought another headache. Ever since Caltor had Branded her, she'd not required sleep. Awake night and day so she could keep watch over the people of Salfar. Her sense of taste was almost gone, too—another side effect of the wizard's Thosite sorcery.

Firming her jaw, Dynaëa neared the end of the aisle. Her sacrifices were worth it. Many had been spared from the Slumber due to her vigilance.

Something purple glittered from the corner of her eye.

Taking a deep breath, Dynaëa turned. An old woman lay on her back, so quiet and peaceful. Her gray locks were tied in the traditional Salfaran braids, just like Dynaëa's. Wrinkles and laugh lines testified to a long, happy life.

Violet frost crystals on the woman's lips and eyelashes testified to the curse of the Slumber.

Dynaëa glanced around. Good, no one stirred. She edged closer to the woman's bed, Selak dagger held out before her. Its straight, fluted blade caught the moonlight for a moment, like a killer star.

Forcing her hands not to tremble, Dynaëa observed the first Sentinel rule: try to wake the victim. She laid a hand on the woman's shoulder and shook. Though her chest still rose in

regular breaths, the woman's body was cold to the touch. Frost crystals slid off her clothing and littered the sheets. Dynaea drew her hand back.

The second rule was to open an eyelid. If a normal, dilated eye stared back at her, then the woman might still be saved, with the aid of a small incantation.

Dynaea opened the old woman's right eye. The frost crystals crunched as she separated eyelid from skin. Underneath, a solid black eyeball gazed into nothingness.

By the Myths this woman hadn't fully frozen yet. With another's help, she might be able to dispel the curse. Dynaea stared at the exit door.

"I need help in here!" she called, knowing the next Sentinel would be waiting to take the next shift.

No one answered. Dynaea straightened and took a step towards the door.

Wait. She had done this many times already. The third Sentinel rule was firm and simple:

Never hesitate.

After lowering the blade over the woman's neck, Dynaea closed her eyes.

"Bestir, for the light comes," she whispered, inflecting the syllables with Thosite magic. A chill spread from her chest and coursed through her limbs, tingling her flesh.

She slit the old woman's throat.

Dark hotness sprayed Dynaea's face and robe. In an instant the purple frost melted from the woman's face. Within seconds the pillow and sheets glistened with blood.

A door opened at the other end of the room, and the next watch's Sentinel came in. Lips tight, she showed him her dripping dagger, and gestured at the woman's corpse.

"The curse had barely taken hold of her. She could have been saved. Didn't you hear me?"

He ignored Dynaea, studying the sleeping people, dagger clasped in a steady hand.

Dynaea stormed out the opposite door, not bothering to clean her face with one of the anointed towels offered by the guard outside.



Inside the Sentinel Rotunda, Dynaea removed her gray robe and laid the Selak dagger on the altar. Other Sentinels came and went, putting on similar garments or disrobing. Long inured to embarrassment over her slight, pallid body, she washed off the old woman's blood in the



communal trough. At least none paid heed to the scar above her left breast. Beside her, other Sentinels cleansed themselves. No one looked at each other. None spoke. The cold, crimson-stained trough water sloshed onto her feet.

After toweling off, Dynaea donned her plain gray dress and blouse, then slipped on a heavy gray wool coat. As a Sentinel, she wasn't allowed to wear other colors, even while off-duty. As an unwed Salfaran woman, she wasn't allowed to wear darker colors anyway. She looped her black plaited hair around each arm. Last year, before becoming a Sentinel, the plaits had reached her ankles. Men would pay her no mind now, though.

Dynaea exited the Rotunda and entered the streets of Altakraesis, capital of Salfar. Snow was still falling, and street sweepers struggled to keep the paths clear for horses and noblemen. Ladies attired in elegant black dresses, covered in Thosite designs, passed Dynaea without a glance. Soldiers in hulking black plate mail marched down the street, off to another campaign against the Dryxans or Seradomians. Peasants glanced at her, whispered to each other, then hurried along.

No matter. The only person she wished a conversation with never walked these streets.

Keeping her chin up, Dynaea strolled down thoroughfares ringed by buildings so tall their tops faded into the wintry pall above. People rushed about their business, dark circles under their eyes from lack of sleep. Raised voices, galloping horses, and creaking wagons hammered in her ears. In the alleys, city guards cleared out the night's dead—either frozen by cold, or fallen into Slumber. Each year, fewer could afford the Sleep Tax, which allowed them to rest in a dormitory at night. But not these impoverished victims. The purple-crustured corpses looked more alive than those dying naturally.

Memories of Dynaea's home town, its people frozen solid in purple ice, came to mind. The wicked cold. Those horrified faces.

She quickened her pace.

As Caltor's tower came into view around the next block, Dynaea walked even faster. After pushing through the crowds nearer the city's hub, she entered through the tower's thick, engraved doors. Only those allowed entrance by the wizard could go in. Caltor never denied her.

Whereas the noise outside had filled her ears, silence reigned inside. A few braziers burned, lighting a long chamber filled with ancient statues of Thosite dragons, old imperial maps, and bookshelves. Scents of soot and dusk spice stung her nose. Dynaea paused and enjoyed the tower's warmth, its spacious solitude. It remained unchanged since her childhood, when she'd first met Caltor.

"You took your time." His strong, thick voice filled the room.

Dynaëa started to bow, but a gentle hand brushed her cheek. She blinked and gazed up into the golden, reptilian eyes of Caltor—the wizard who'd rescued her years ago. The same one who'd Branded her as a Sentinel.

"You have plenty of it," she replied, smiling. It almost hurt her face to do so.

Caltor stood a head taller than she, with broad shoulders covered by thick black robes decorated with Thosite runes. Short black plaits hung from his head, fitted with onyx clasps. He smiled back. A handsome man... who never aged.

"There is sadness in your voice. You had to perform your duty last watch." Caltor stepped back and examined her. "I still smell her blood in your hair."

As a master Thosite wizard and an advisor to the Emperor himself, Caltor seemed to know everything. Which was why she'd come here.

Dynaëa's blouse collar made her throat itch. "I want to know if the Emperor's counselors have come to a decision regarding two Sentinels per shift."

His smile disappeared. "You ask me this too often."

"That is not an answer." She tried to keep her voice humble, but his frown deepened.

"You are unhappy. It is always harder for young Sentinels." Caltor walked to a wall map of Rathos. On it, Salfar controlled the northern part of the continent. The southern lands—Dryxas, Seradom, Nemason—were just names she'd read on the casualty lists after each campaign. Battles to secure food and goods for an empire stricken with Slumber. Her brother had never returned from Seradom. Both her uncles had been slain in Dryxas. Her people were no better off despite such costs.

"I cannot taste food and drink anymore," she whispered. "My monthly cycles...they have ended. And now I—"

"Have headaches," Caltor said. "I know. So do I. That is the price paid by all who practice Thosite magic. Be thankful you are not I. My eyes were once bluer than yours, and my tongue, unclipped. But to speak the dragon magic requires... eschewal of the person we once were."

"But the dragons cursed us with the Slumber!"

"You came here for that argument again?" He turned away and touched the map.

"We are poisoning ourselves with their magic just to survive a little longer," she said.

Caltor faced her. "What would you have us do? Take drugs to remain awake, like the southerners? Pray to the ancient gods like uneducated fools? Allow our children to sleep in

unguarded, unwarded buildings, only to find them frozen come morning? You know the consequences of that."

Scowling, Dynaea clutched at the scar above her breast. "You dare mention that to me?"

"You need reminding." Caltor spoke a guttural, heavy word and became shorter, thinner. His black hair turned brown, and the robes became an embroidered tunic and pants. Blue eyes replaced the reptilian ones, and his face...

"Father," Dynaea whispered.

"You willingly let me Brand you. Willingly took the Sentinel oaths, so that the memory of the man I imitate would be honored." Caltor neared her, and Dynaea tried to breathe.

His voice, his husky scent... that dimpled chin... Caltor's magic copied her father in every precious detail. She reached out to him.

In an instant her father's countenance weathered into a cruel, gray-skinned visage of hate. Solid black eyes glowered at her, and thick black claws now hung from each hand.

Crying out, Dynaea recoiled. The scar itched and became warm.

"Do you remember?" The figure before her asked, then swiped at her with its claws.

Dynaea tumbled to the floor. Her plaited locks came free and draped her shaking face. The scar burned now, just like the day her father, transformed by the Slumber into a Grul, had tried to kill her. She'd never forget the Grul poison running through her body, spreading from the wound... incinerating her heart.

"Stop it! Father, stop..."

The next moment, Caltor's soft, large hands cradled her head to his shoulder. She didn't weep. Not even sob. All she could do was gasp, or try to rub the scalding fire from the scar.

"When I passed through your frozen town that day and saved you, all your people had wakened from the ice," Caltor said. "Cursed by the Slumber, their dreams stolen by the dragons of Thosos, and twisted into Grul. Alive, but mindless and filled with an ancient draconic spite."

Dynaea recalled how she'd refused to leave, hoping her family would rise from the ice. Hoping one of her uncles would return in his engraved plate mail, fresh from a victory in Dryxas. Not until afterward would she know why her family had become monsters, or her uncle's fate. Kinless and not wanting others to face the Slumber unguarded, she'd accepted Caltor's instruction to become what she was now.

"And what am I? I am more dead than alive," she mumbled.

"You do what needs to be done," Caltor said. "Without the Sentinels, we would have no warning. Our people would have even less sleep than they do now. Your magic ensures that their bodies do not rise again."

"We need two per shift," she said. "There are so many in the dormitories now."

"We haven't the Sentinels to spare." Caltor frowned. "You know that would not change anything, even if the counsellors allowed it."

"What of the southernns? Surely they do not cart out wagonloads of dead every morning."

Caltor rose and straightened his robes. "Soon they will. The Slumber is spreading. With each passing year it grows in potency. The reach of the dragons is great."

"Why not send someone down there? We could share with each other what we have learned, and work together on a solution. I could make the journey. The southernns might—"

"Youth blinds you. Many others have studied these things, and know how to handle them. Your next watch will begin with nightfall."

Dynaëa stood and wrapped her plaits back around her arms. "Forgive me, Master Caltor. There is... much I have yet to learn."

His face softened, and a trace of humanity shone through his draconic eyes. "We have all lost, Dynaëa. You, your entire family. Me, two daughters to the Slumber and a wife who disowned me. If we are to save others and return pride and security to Salfar, we must never give in to childish hopes. Sleep is for those who can only dream. You and I... we act."

Meeting his eyes, she nodded. After delivering a half-curtsy proper to her social status, Dynaëa departed the tower. Outside, the snow had drifted onto the curbs, and the blinding white squall enfiladed her face with a hundred tiny cold impacts.

Any children she passed didn't play in the snow. No snowballs. No snow kings or queens, built as tall as a person, with rocks for eyes and noses.

Why should they? The last snowballs she'd thrown in her hometown had been stained purple.

Not bothering to protect her face from the blowing snow, Dynaëa strode down the street.



The rest of the day she carried out her usual routine: reciting Thosite poetry from the Remembrance Balcony to commoners in need of culture; studying the Sentinel's Tome, a collection of historical volumes maintained by her order; and attending Sepulture, the ceremony where each night's dead are interred into stone pits and burned. The quiet, somber ritual left her even emptier than she'd felt after leaving Caltor's tower.

Gazing southward, she stiffened. What if she left the city anyway? She'd be long gone before anyone found out. And when she returned with a cure from the southernns, everyone would rejoice.

A small girl stumbled into Dynaea as people left Sepulture. Dynaea sucked in the chill air. No, she had to protect them. Going south would only betray her oath and leave them unguarded, with no extra Sentinels to take her place.

As night drew close, she paced in one of the city squares, watching the young men and their consorts. Couples holding hands, or braiding their personal seal into each other's hair. Young women wearing the traditional Salfaran dress that hid the legs but revealed arms, back, and the top of the bosom. Things she could never show now, since all would see that awful scar. Blemished flesh was almost considered a disease.

One couple whispered to each other, then kissed. Dynaea ran from the square, cinching her overcoat tight against her body.

Not even the single young men there had looked at her. These ugly gray clothes, advertising what she was... she ran faster, bumping into people.

Did any of these fools realize what she did for them each night? What she had given up, so they'd be safe?

She arrived at the Rotunda early. After stripping her clothes, Dynaea just stood there. Wondering if any fellow Sentinels would look her way. Recognize that another human being was in their midst, that she had this gross scar, that she was too thin, or that her breasts were too small—

Before anyone could see the tears, she shoved on the dark-stained gray robes, yanked the Selak dagger from the altar, and entered one of the dormitories.

With the snow storm outside, no moonlight spilled through the windows this time. Dynaea marched up and down the aisle, bare feet numbing in the cold. The sleepers had received an extra blanket, but she still wore the same thin robe.

She turned the dagger over and over in her hands. Like all Selak blades, its handle was wrapped in Grul skin. The pommel was fitted with an onyx carved into the shape of a closed eyelid. When used in conjunction with a Thosite incantation, the dagger ensured anybody cut

by it would remain dead forever, their essence severed from this world. It was the only way to ensure the dragons would have no control over the corpses.

Caltor had admitted the southerners didn't have Sentinels. And they had some sort of drug to resist fatigue. There had to be another way. Slitting people's throats wasn't honoring her family's memory.

Hours drifted by like snow over a desolate street. She handled the dagger so much the metal stayed warm. She untied and retied her braids twice. How had that young woman worn hers in the square? Four times she tugged down her robe and checked the scar. Wondered if she could carve it away with the dagger, speak an invocation, and sever that memory from her mind forever. Just like she severed these people's lives.

A light bell tone sounded. Struck by the guard outside the door, it heralded the last moments of her watch.

Dynaëa studied a few sleeping forms, then stopped at the bed where the little boy with the ice bear slept. It had slipped from his grasp, and now dangled on the edge of the bed.

As she pushed it back under his arm, something cold touched her fingers.

Violet frost.

Her throat constricted. The robe made her shoulders itch. She passed the dagger from hand to hand, tried to slow down her breathing. Maybe the curse had just started, and he could still be saved. Or she could have tracked in snow from outside... but that had been hours ago.

Never hesitate.

She opened one eyelid, then the other. Twin pools of oblivion greeted her. The boy's chest rose and fell in a comfortable cadence. Sitting on the bed, Dynaëa nudged him. Poked his belly. Prodded her thumb into his back. Then prodded it again, hard.

The boy didn't stir.

By the Draconor, he'd better awaken! Dynaëa punched and elbowed him, then slapped his face. That innocent, beautiful face of youth and possibility. Everything she had lost.

An awful chill wrenched through her stomach, and she almost gagged.

Rule number three. Never hesitate.

"Bestir, for the light... the light..."

Dynaëa looked away and cut the boy's throat.

When the next Sentinel arrived, Dynaëa still trembled on the bed, staring at the blood-soaked ice bear at her feet.



Though Dynaea was allowed into Caltor's tower the next day, hours passed before he finally came down to see her. Good. Let him see she wouldn't be ignored. She would wait forever if need be. At a word from him, the brazier flames rose, and warmth spread over her body. It didn't reach her heart.

His reptilian eyes narrowed. "I know you hurt. Yet you break Sentinel protocol by coming here expecting me to reverse the Brand."

Dynaea stalked up to him. "That's not why I'm here. I remember my oaths. I know what we face."

"There is no other way. Not yet." Caltor turned toward the stairs.

"There might be." She laid a hand on his arm. Were she a commoner, she could be whipped for such an act. Even as a Sentinel, she risked three days without food. Thosite wizards commanded more respect than most noblemen.

He studied her face. How many centuries had those eyes seen? How much death?

"Grant me leave to travel south. I will learn how the southerners deal with the Slumber." The words spilled from her lips.

"The southern kingdoms? Barbarians and pirates. They can teach us nothing. Salfar has always been alone in this struggle," Caltor said.

Dynaea stared at him. "Have you tried? Have you ever left this city to find out?"

The air hummed until her eardrums throbbed. The brazier flames flickered near her face. A heaviness pressed on her chest, and she had to withdraw her hand from Caltor's robe, it felt so hot. She'd not seen him this angry in years.

"You presume to lecture me?" he asked in a low voice. "Ignorant of the world, of men? What could a girl like you learn that I have not?"

Though she flinched, Dynaea maintained her stare. "Destroying ourselves and our children will not save us."

"Neither will naiveté."

"Only the dead stop trying," Dynaea said. "We have made a tomb for us all here, when we need life!"

He sighed, and the heavy sensation left her chest. The brazier flames calmed. "Do not waste your life on a misguided dream."

Dynaëa clasped his hand. Even now, Thosite power coursed through it, making her flesh tingle. "At least let me live that dream, before the dragons steal it. Like they stole your daughters."

Caltor flung her hand aside and climbed the stairs.

After staring at the map of Rathos for a long time, she left the tower.



Dynaëa led the stolen horse to the city's southern gate. In an hour, she'd be expected in the Sentinel Rotunda. Unless she got at least two leagues from the city, her Brand would consume her with great pain. Caltor would make it worse.

She'd sworn to defend her people from the Slumber. And so she would. Her way.

As she crunched over fresh snow, the horse whinnied. Soldiers at the gate studied her. Did they suspect? Shaking, trying to breathe, Dynaëa forced herself to continue.

"Sentinel Dynaëa?" a voice called.

Lips pressed together, she turned around. Across the street waited scores of armored troops and several horse-drawn wagons.

Someone had reported her. No doubt she'd be forbidden food for a week, maybe worse. So be it. She couldn't taste anything now, anyway.

The soldiers parted ranks and Caltor's dark-robed figure appeared. Dynaëa made herself stand straight.

Peasants stopped and knelt as Caltor passed. Noblemen bowed their heads. Dynaëa gripped the horse's bridle so tight her palm burned.

"You would leave without my permission?" Caltor's neutral tone sent her heart pounding.

Swallowing, she looked down and nodded.

Caltor's voice rose. "Even if it means your death?"

She faced him. "Yes."

Snowflakes pelted her. The horse pawed, the soldiers stirred. Dynaëa didn't drop her gaze.

Caltor motioned a soldier forward, who saluted and presented her with a sealed letter. Dynaëa clutched the bridle tighter. At least he had made her punishment official. Finally



breaking her stare, she took the letter and opened it. She had to read it three times before she could breathe.

It was a diplomatic dispatch addressed to southern rulers, with her named as the emissary. These soldiers, the wagons—all assembled as her entourage. Caltor had signed the missive in intricate Thosite characters, far eclipsing normal penmanship. Rolled into the letter was a map of Rathos, with all those names she'd only heard about.

Dryxas. Seradom. The graves of her kin. The future of her people.

The bridle slipped from her grasp. She blinked away snow and gaped at Caltor.

"Bring us back light," he whispered. Before she could answer, he gave her a fond look and left.

"Sentinel Dynaea? Are you ready to travel?" the soldier asked.

Something cold and hard slammed into her back. She whirled around.

Two little boys laughed and ran away, claspings snowballs.

She smiled as snow collected on her shoulders, in her plaits. None of it chilled the glow within her.

"Yes," she replied.



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**Tony Peak** is a member of the Horror Writers Association, and his work has appeared in fifteen different speculative fiction publications and anthologies. He resides in rural southwest Virginia, with a wonderful view of New River. In addition to writing, Tony is an advocate for planetary exploration, a supporter of science and reason, a wine enthusiast, guitar player, and occasional hiker. He possesses a keen interest in Transhumanism, progressive thinking, environmental issues—and British comedy.

# Minor Disasters

Elise R. Hopkins

The news wasn't even news anymore—that was the problem. It was full of shoe styles and celebrities and five year olds who could play Mozart. Yeah, there was the occasional tear jerker about a local house fire and some sensationalist crap, like that story about a thousand dead birds falling out of the sky that was playing now. But if you wanted some cold, hard facts about Iraq or the economy, you could forget it. Robin flipped off the TV in the middle of a video showing featherless, lifeless birds peppering some hick's lawn. She leaned against her husband.

"Want me to start dinner?" she asked.

"I was watching that," Samuel said.

Robin sighed and handed him the remote, then went to the kitchen and started seasoning pork chops. Maybe if she decided to step out of the realm of domesticity and put her journalism major to use, she could be that one reporter who made a difference. She snorted at the ridiculousness of it. The days of Watergate were over. She felt like she was contributing more to American society by driving her kid to soccer practice than by playing up minor disasters so they could compete with reality TV.

She tossed salt at the meat with more force than necessary and set the pork chops in a pan. Half an hour later, she called the family to dinner. Samuel moseyed in from the living room and their six year old daughter, Tiffany, came skipping down from upstairs, her blond curls bouncing around her shoulders. The family mutt, Socks, trotted right behind her. Robin had been trying to teach Socks not to beg during dinner for years, but it didn't help that Samuel and Tiffany constantly snuck him bits of meat from their plates. Robin had given up on having a well-behaved dog just like she'd given up on the news telling her anything worth knowing. She sighed and passed the plates around while Socks circled her chair and whimpered.

"So that whole bird thing is kind of creepy," said Samuel.

Robin shrugged. "They probably just got blown down by a storm or something."

"What birds?" said Tiffany.

"Never mind. Eat your broccoli, honey," said Robin.

"There were a bunch of birds that fell out of the sky over Detroit this morning," said Samuel. "No one knows why. The scientists are assuming that it's some disease or something, but they can't find any trace of it in the birds' systems."

"Well, yeah," said Robin. "I bet that makes for great ratings."

"Why are the birds sick?" said Tiffany.

"Because they didn't eat their broccoli," said Robin. "So, Samuel, how was work?"

Samuel shrugged and held a rind of fat out to Socks, who took it and ran out through the doggie door.

That night after Tiffany's bath, Robin brushed her daughter's hair, read her a story, and tucked her in like she did every night. By the time she got back to the master bedroom, Samuel was already engrossed in some sci-fi paper back. Robin tried to start up a conversation with him a few times, then turned off the lamp on her side of the bed and went to sleep.

Robin woke the next morning to Tiffany's screams.

"Samuel?" she reached back and slapped her hand against his chest to wake him, then bolted for Tiffany's room. Tiffany was sitting up in bed, squealing and looking at a fleshy lump on the blankets covering her lap. Socks sat beside the bed, panting and wagging his tail.

"It's okay, honey," said Robin. At least it wasn't burglars or rapists. "Socks was just trying to give you a present. He doesn't understand people presents very well."

She grabbed the blankets by the corners and carefully lifted them off her daughter. Tiffany leapt off the bed and hid behind her Barbie dollhouse, peering at the wad of blankets through the little pink windows. Samuel appeared in the doorway.

"What's wrong?"

"Socks just dragged something in from the yard." Robin set the blanket down on the floor.

"What is that?" said Samuel.

Robin cocked her head to the side. It had definitely once been a small creature. It was about the size of Robin's fist, bald, and the places where Socks's teeth had punctured the skin showed red. "It sort of looks like..."

Samuel glanced out the window, then froze. "Um, sweetie, I think you need to see this."

Robin joined him at the window. Their lawn was covered in what must have been a hundred birds, all featherless and dead like the one on her daughter's blankets.

"What'd I tell you?" said Samuel.

Robin shrugged. "We'll call animal control. They're just birds."

"Can I go outside?" said Tiffany.

"Let's play dolls instead," said Robin. She picked up a Stacey doll and walked it over to Tiffany's hide out, trying not to glance back toward the window. "Get that out of here, will you, Sam?"

Samuel folded the blankets over the bird and carried it out of the room. A trailing bit of sheet brushed Robin's shoulder as he walked past. Socks trotted after him, his tail still wagging.



That night, long after the authorities had come to clean off their lawn, Robin refused to watch TV.

"I don't want to see how badly the local media has blown this out of proportion," she said.

"You just don't want to admit it's real."

"Of course it's real. I saw what you saw this morning. It just isn't much different from the latest shoe styles, in that I don't need to waste my time hearing about it."

"It's our town this time. How can you not care?"

Robin sighed. "It isn't that I don't care. I'm sure if this keeps happening to the birds, there's going to be some effect on the insect population and then it'll have some effect on agriculture, et cetera, et cetera, but that's not what Fox News is going to talk about. They're just going to try to scare some old people, and then blame it on the Democrats."

Samuel sighed heavily and flipped open a book on the coffee table. As soon as Robin left for the kitchen, she heard the TV click on.

"Further testing on the carcasses has yielded inconclusive results. However, whatever this condition is, it's spreading quickly through the nation. Fallen birds have been sighted in cities from Washington D.C. to San Francisco. There have been no reports on international occurrences as of yet, but we have Ritchie in the field with live footage of a local neighborhood. Ritchie?"

Robin tried to tune it out. Once the anchor switched over to a story about some celebrity's wedding it became a lot easier. In her younger days, she might have grabbed a

notepad and a camera and attempted to get to the bottom of this whole bird thing, but for now, she would have to be content with making meatloaf.

It was a pleasant dinner, quieter than most, calmer somehow. It wasn't until she was clearing the table that Robin realized why.

"Where's Socks?" she said.

"Upstairs," said Tiffany. "He was sleeping when I left."

Robin nodded, something close to panic settling just beneath her throat. She set the dishes in the sink and walked briskly upstairs. She didn't know what she expected, but that feeling that something was wrong didn't dissipate until she found Socks in the corner of the hall breathing peacefully. When her footsteps got close to its head, the dog woke up and wagged its tail, eyes bright, and nose as wet as ever.

"Dinner time, boy," Robin said. Socks followed her downstairs to the back porch where his food bowl sat and he gobbled up his dinner as greedily as ever. Robin watched him for a minute, then went inside and finished the dishes.



At church on Sunday, there was a lot of whispering about locusts and frogs, but at least the preacher had the decency to do a nice little sermon about First Corinthians instead of Exodus. Best not to cause a panic. Best to have people going on with their lives. But Tiffany must have been listening to the old biddies, too.

"Did God kill all the birdies?" she asked from the back seat on the way home.

"No," said Robin, quickly. "There's some perfectly reasonable explanation for it, and as soon as the scientists figure out what it is, they can fix it."

"You don't know that," said Samuel.

"What? Are you trying to scare her?" Robin sped around a curve.

"I'm trying to protect my family," said Samuel. "Maybe we should be a *little* scared."

"What, do you want to move to Australia or something? No dead birds there."

"No. And you don't have to make everything I say sound ridiculous. I just think we might want to consider renting a hotel a few cities over or something. I mean, we don't know what's causing this. We could be in danger too."

"Sam, I'm sure we're perfectly safe," said Robin. "Besides, you can't afford to take off work, especially if you expect to afford a hotel."

"Well, maybe we could stay with family then." Samuel trailed off and looked out the window. There were still a few bird corpses here and there that the cleanup crews missed.

"They're three states away," said Robin.

"Grandma's house smells funny," said Tiffany.

"Well, I guess that settles it," said Samuel in that way he did when he was still angry but didn't feel like fighting. Robin didn't feel like fighting either, so she let it go. They drove the rest of the way home in silence.

That afternoon while Samuel was watching football and Robin was checking her email, Tiffany walked into the living room, dusting her hands.

"Socks is shedding," she said. She brushed her hands together and a big clump of white and black fur fell to the carpet. Robin stopped typing mid sentence. She slowly put her laptop on the couch beside her.

"I better go brush him before he gets fur all over the house," she said. She picked up the dog brush, wielding it like a weapon, and whistled softly.

"Do you want me to help?" said Tiffany.

Robin shook her head. "Go play."

She found Socks in the laundry room licking his left leg. The fur looked thinner there, and his coat had lost some of its shine.

"Hey, boy," Robin whispered. She approached the dog, took a deep breath, and ran the brush down its back. Clumps of white and black fell away, exposing bare skin. Robin dropped the brush and backed out of the room, closing the door behind her. She washed her hands in the kitchen sink, breathing heavily.

"What's wrong?" Samuel walked up behind her and put his hand on her shoulder.

"Socks is sick," said Robin. "I'll take him to the vet in the morning."

"What's wrong with him?"

"His fur." Robin closed her eyes and took a deep breath.

Samuel stepped back. "That's it. We're leaving."

"It's just a coincidence," said Robin. "He's a dog, not a bird."

"Are you listening to yourself?" said Samuel. "We're leaving now."

"Look, I have him shut in the laundry room. We'll leave him there until the morning and we'll take him to the vet and everything will be fine. It's just mange."

"Is that what you really think?" said Samuel. "Because it doesn't look like you really think that."

Tiffany fled past them, her hands covering her face.

"Look what you've done," said Robin.

"I didn't do this," said Samuel. He stalked to the living room and turned on the TV. Socks scratched at the laundry room door.



That night Robin woke up suddenly. She wasn't sure why, but she felt like she'd heard a soft sound, a knock on the door, maybe, or a toilet flushing. She wandered down the hall to get a glass of water and noticed that the laundry room light was on.

"You have to eat it," she heard Tiffany say. "I know it's gross, but you have to eat it if you want to be healthy."

Robin jogged down the hall and threw open the door. Tiffany was lying prone on the floor in front of Socks, waving a raw broccoli floret in front of his face. Almost all of his fur was gone now, and he seemed uninterested in the broccoli. Instead, he nuzzled her daughter's hand, licked at her face. Robin grabbed Tiffany's wrist and yanked her to her feet.

"I told you not to come in here," she said as she slammed the door behind them.

"I wanted to help Socks," said Tiffany, looking like she was about to cry. "He has to eat broccoli. You said."

"Well, I'll put some broccoli in his food bowl," said Robin. "I'm sure he'll eat it and get better."

"You promise?" said Tiffany.

"I promise. Go wash your face."

Once Tiffany was safely upstairs, Robin buried her face in her hands and tried to hold back a bout of sobbing.

In the morning, the dog was dead.

Samuel called animal control to take care of the body, just in case. He talked to the men who came to the door while Robin tried to distract Tiffany upstairs.

"Is Socks okay?" asked Tiffany.

"Yeah, he's just going to go stay with Grandma for a little while."

"He's not okay, is he?" said Tiffany.

"No," said Robin.

"You promised," said Tiffany. She slipped off the bed and started playing listlessly with her dolls. When Robin tried to join her, she scooted away.

Later that day, she and Samuel sat next to each other on the couch. She'd acquiesced to watch the news with him.

"The authorities are urging citizens not to panic," the anchor was saying. "While some cases of a similar malady have been reported in dogs and cats that have had direct contact with the infected birds, the mammalian form of this condition seems to be communicable only via direct exchange of bodily fluids. There have been no reports of human contraction."

"Well, at least their giving us some actual facts now," Samuel said. "Maybe the worst is over."

Robin nodded, a pit of fear growing in her stomach. The anchor was too calm, the news too reassuring. If she knew anything about the modern media they should be mongering as much fear as possible right now, milking the danger for all it was worth, selling ad space to Doritos and McDonalds—unless they were scared too. Robin clutched one of the couch cushions to her chest.

"I'll miss Socks, but it was probably for the best, keeping him cooped up like that until the end. I mean, I hate to think what would have happened if you'd tried to take him to the vet and he bit you or something."

"It isn't communicable to humans, whatever it is," said Robin.

"Better safe than sorry," said Samuel.

Robin nodded once. She avoided his eyes.



Tiffany still wasn't talking to her that evening at dinner, or even during her bath. She just dragged her plastic mermaid through the water with her back turned to Robin, occasionally shooting accusing glances over her shoulder.

"Look." Robin led Tiffany back to her room and set her on the bed. Her voice was shaking. "Sometimes you try as hard as you can and things just don't work out. It's nobody's fault. It just happens."

Tiffany remained quiet. Robin stared from the brush in her hand to her daughter's golden curls. She wanted more than anything to leave the brush on the dresser, flee from the room, but she knew it wouldn't change anything. She ran the brush through Tiffany's hair, gently at first, then harder, each tangle that tugged at the brush an affirmation that the world was all right.



Maybe those news people knew something after all. Maybe she should stop panicking, even get a reporting job in gratitude. She'd copyedit about Brittany Spears if it meant she could read bedtime stories to her little girl every night for years to come.

She kissed Tiffany on the forehead before she left the room. "At least you still have us," she whispered.

"Mommy," said Tiffany, "why is your hair all funny?"

Robin made to tuck her hair behind her ear and felt something fall to her shoulder. She clutched at her head, and her fingertips brushed against her scalp.



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# White Horse

Kate O'Connor

**W**hy hadn't he asked her? Stinking, soupy mud soaked into Adam's clothes as he crawled forward through the tall, whispering grass. Gretchen would have married him if he had just asked. Probably. Maybe. The pungent smell of crushed vegetation caught in his nose, making him want to sneeze. He rubbed his face hard. The mud-scented fabric of his gloves only made the problem worse. She had said she didn't want to be a soldier's wife. He kept hoping she loved him enough that it wouldn't matter.

Adam paused to check his gun again. They had talked about marriage a few times, jokingly after a few drinks or when his mom made not-so-veiled hints about grandchildren. He'd thought about buying a ring, but it had never seemed like the right time. Now he was far away, wishing he'd had the sense to tie her down.

Somewhere behind him in the low-lying mist, his unit hunkered down, waiting for him to bring back intel on the enemy's position. The only thing he was sure of was that they weren't where they were supposed to be. The cold breeze picked up, tossing the mist into swirling ivory towers against the clear night sky.

A sharp pop sounded somewhere to his left, followed by several others. His shoulder jerked as fiery pain exploded under the joint of his body armor. He heard garbled orders being shouted through his earpiece. The mist parted briefly, swirling away to reveal several armed men ahead of him. He sighted along his rifle and fired. A man went down.

Time slowed to the weight of the trigger on his finger, the hurried rush to reload. His earpiece crackled with orders to fall back. Adam ran, ducking and weaving through the clutching grass and the smell of gunfire.

The sound of weapons firing faded until all he could hear was his own heartbeat. Adam slowed down. He was alone in the mist. His shoulder burned. He shoved his fingers under his Kevlar vest, finding the neat hole in his clothes and the flesh underneath. He pulled off one of his gloves, flipped it inside out and stuffed it between the shoulder strap and the wound, hoping to slow the bleeding. His fingers came away dark and wet in the moonlight. He worked to calm his breathing, scanning the terrain for any sign of the rest of his unit. There was nothing but the drifting mist. He moved forward.

Adam stumbled at the foot of a small rise. Up on the ridge, the mist shifted strangely. Heart in his throat, he dropped into a crouch, raising his gun. A pale horse, glowing alabaster in the moonlight stepped out of the darkness.

The ornate black coach harnessed to it should have come from a movie set. One by one, a long line of people climbed through the dark doorway. He didn't understand how he could have missed seeing them. They wore uniforms, but he couldn't tell which ones. He crept closer.

Adam recognized Sergeant Reed as the man hauled himself up the small stairs into the darkness beyond the door. Wilson was next. They had shared a tent during this mission. The man was terrible about cleaning his boots. Other familiar faces lined up behind them. Stunned, Adam stood up and ran towards them.

"Wilson, Reed! What's happening? What's going on here?" They ignored him. Adam slipped in the damp grass, catching his chin on a rock. He tasted blood as he scrambled back to his feet. The door of the coach was closing. There was no driver. Adam ran for the horse.

He reached for the animal, noticing as he did so that there was no bridle either. His fingers brushed its mane and it sprang away, dumping him backwards into the mud.

Adam got up. The need for silence long since forgotten, he charged after the rapidly moving coach. The mist closed in behind it, forcing him to follow by sound alone. He struggled through tall grass and mud that didn't seem to slow the coach or the horse drawing it. The mist swirled overhead, cutting out the stars.

He pushed forward, fighting towards every glimpse of a white flank or sound of a bell-like whinny. His muscles ached and his shoulder had gone numb. His pack was no longer on his back. The rifle clutched in his cold hands was clotted with mud. Blood ran down from his wound. His feet slowed of their own accord. In the dark, someone called his name. He struggled forward again. It sounded like Gretchen.

Ahead of him, the mist began to thin. He checked the ground for hoof prints. It was bare of any sign of the coach's passing. Adam stumbled to a stop, dizzy and exhausted. A soft whinny startled him. The white horse stood a few yards in front of him. The coach was nowhere in sight. He took a step towards the animal.

Light from the rising sun caught the mist, turning it golden and too bright. Adam put up a hand to shield his eyes. By the time his vision cleared, the horse was gone. The chain-link and razor wire fence surrounding the military base his unit had deployed from rose up in front of him. A strident voice demanded he put down his weapon and identify himself.

Dazed, Adam dropped the gun. They brought him inside and, when his identity had been verified, sent him straight to the medics. They waited until he was clean and bandaged to tell him the news. Two others from his unit had been recovered alive. The rest, including Reed and Wilson, were dead or missing. The bodies had been found three days ago.



In his dreams, he chased the silvery flick of a long tail through a tangled wood. He reached out to grab hold, but the coarse strands slipped through his fingers. He tried again and again.

Adam woke in a cold sweat. He hadn't dreamed of the white horse in years. In the military hospital over a decade ago, the story he told had been chalked up to his injury and trauma. He had been happy to believe them. The only part he couldn't make sense of was where those three extra days had gone. Try as he might, he only remembered chasing the horse for one night.

He got out of bed quietly. Gretchen hadn't been feeling well for over a week now. The doctor was still looking for a cause. His wife sighed softly in her sleep and he froze, half out of bed. He waited until her breathing steadied before moving again. She needed her rest.



The word "cancer" ate a hole in his gut. It didn't matter how often they said it was probably treatable. All he could see were the hollows under Gretchen's eyes and the tight lines around her usually smiling mouth. He promised them both that they would get through this together. It was just a bump in the road. In the back of his mind, a deep, unbearable darkness loomed.

He put Gretchen to bed and sat their boys down for a talk. They were young, but they were smart kids. Adam could see that they didn't believe him any more than he believed himself when he told them Mom would be okay.

The white horse came back when he slept—tall, imposing, and terrifying. He grabbed handfuls of stones and flung them at it as hard as he could. The horse looked at him accusingly, pawing the ground with its great hooves. It was gone when he woke, but every time he closed his eyes, it returned.



The vinyl chair next to the hospital bed squeaked whenever he moved. The lights were never off all the way. The nurses came and went at all hours, waking Gretchen in the middle of the night to check her blood pressure and give her a pill to put her back to sleep.

Even Adam knew they were coming to the end of their battle. She was a shadow of herself, in spite of everything the doctors had tried, in spite of all of her strength of will. Talk of recovery had stopped months ago.

Adam sat in the half-dark and listened to Gretchen's labored breathing. He tried to breathe with her, only drawing air in when her chest rose and letting it out when the mask over her face fogged. In. Out. In, out. His head spun and he sucked in air out of rhythm.

Unshed tears stung the corners of his eyes. He was so tired. He had lost track of how many nights he had spent dozing in the chair, listening to the beep and whirl of machinery. She was too young for this, but that didn't seem to matter. Adam closed his eyes, wrapping both of his hands around one of Gretchen's.

The white horse stood in the shabby hospital room with them, glowing silver in the darkness. There was an empty saddle on its broad back. It looked at Adam with deep, knowing eyes. He shot to his feet, throwing himself between the animal and his wife. "No! You can't have her."

The horse tossed its head, moving around him to nuzzle one of Gretchen's tiny, wasted hands. To Adam's shock, her gray eyes opened and she smiled. She put both arms around the horse's neck and it lifted her out of the hospital bed. The equipment keeping her alive fell away and she stood on her own.

Their eyes locked. Her smile grew sad. She nodded to him, stroking the horse's ivory nose. His anger fled, leaving him hollow. He couldn't ask her to stay and suffer more. "Where are you taking her?"

Neither of them answered. The white horse bowed low, going down on one powerful knee. Adam put his hands around Gretchen's delicate waist and lifted her up to the saddle. She felt like sunlight under his fingers. Her translucent hand ruffled his hair and she smiled down at him. All traces of her long illness were gone from her face. She looked as radiant as she had the day they had gotten married. He hated that he had forgotten just how beautiful she could be.

"Go gently, will you?" Adam put his hand on the horse's muscled flank. Its living heat surprised him. "Just go gently." His voice broke. He clutched at Gretchen's nebulous hand. "I love you."

The horse surged to its feet, forcing Adam to let go and step back. Gretchen looked like a queen on the stallion's back, already so far away. The horse whinnied softly, nudging Adam with its velvet-soft nose. His chest was too tight to let any tears through.

The horse reared, pawing the air with steel-bright hooves. The hospital window stretched and widened, the glass turning crystalline and drifting to the floor in a glittering rainbow. On the other side of the window frame, Adam saw golden mist rising. The scent of sun-warmed flowers wrapped around him for a moment before the white horse charged forward. Its hooves rang against the linoleum and it threw its pale body into the air, clearing the window frame easily. Light flared, forcing Adam's eyes closed. He heard Gretchen laugh joyously.

He opened his eyes again. He was sitting on the squeaky chair in the little room that smelled of antiseptic and death. Alarms were blaring beside his head. Gretchen's cold, still hand was clutched within both of his. Adam stared blankly as a flurry of nurses and doctors whirled around the room. He got up and stood by the window as they took her away, nodding in response to whatever they said.

His Gretchen might be in a better place, but she wasn't with him, never would be again. Nothing was going to make that stop hurting. It felt wrong that he couldn't cry.



Almost since his arrival at the nursing home, Adam had thought of the chair in the garden as his chair. He sat out there most afternoons when the weather and nurses allowed. For years, dealing with his sons and the world at large treating him as if he had grown stupid and incapable as his hairline receded and his muscles slackened had infuriated him. He had lived a good life, made the tough decisions, held himself and his family together in spite of everything.

All of that seemed to count for nothing now and he had to admit that time was catching up with him. He dreamed of the white horse all the time, but its saddle was always occupied. He wasn't surprised. People came here to die, slowly or quickly. He'd had a good

laugh at the funeral home across the street and the graveyard two blocks away. There were four churches within easy walking distance. Quite a business they were running.

He was tired of being angry with people. Being treated gently, shepherded to meals and social events, reminded of bedtime and medicines gave him more time to think about his dreams. Each time he heard the clatter of hooves or smelled the musky-sweet aroma of horse as he dozed, he wondered if this time it was coming for him. That didn't seem as frightening anymore. Gretchen was waiting and he was tired.

Adam settled into his chair, smiling as the loose arm groaned the way it always did. There were butterflies in the garden. Gretchen would have liked that. She would have hated the rest of it—she wasn't one to ever be told what to do. Adam's eyes closed as the warm sun sank into his old skin. He supposed he would miss this part when his time came.

The soft tickle of whiskers in his ear woke him. A hay-scented puff of horse breath blew in his face like a laugh. His breath caught in his throat. The pale horse looked back at him from between the daisies and the daffodils. Its saddle was empty.

"My turn, then?" He got to his feet more easily than he had done in years. The horse stepped forward, not leaving so much as a dented leaf in the garden. The butterflies swirled around its gracefully curved ears. It started to kneel.

Adam tangled a hand in the glossy mane. "I'll walk, if it's all the same. I saw how you went charging off with the others. I'd rather go under my own power."

The horse nodded its great head, straightening up to its full height. Adam's back straightened with it. "Lead on, old friend. Just take me where you took them."

The horse stepped forward gravely, though its dark eyes were dancing. Adam matched its stride, feeling the years fall away with each step. The light grew brighter around them. This time it didn't hurt his eyes.



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**Kate O'Connor** is a sometime pilot, archaeology field technician on off days, and occasional dog groomer. Her work has most recently appeared or is forthcoming in *InterGalactic Medicine Show*, *Escape Pod* and *Daily Science Fiction*. Kate was born in Virginia, but spent most of her growing-up years in Indiana. She made her way out to Arizona for college and graduated from Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University-Prescott in 2009.

These days, she's living in the New York area telling stories, digging up artifacts, and managing a kennel full of Airedales.



# ReMemories

Nancy Waldman

The nanoprocessor points lit up, flashing blue in each corner of the wall of windows in my daughter Miell's swanky apartment. A bigger than life vid appeared, the date showing on the lower right. I advanced it until I found the memory I wanted: Hayes' sixth birthday.

What was I expecting?

A joyful birthday party. Messy and loud. Cake. Balloons. This glamorous skyrise full of giddy children. My grandson Hayes excited, happy, grinning from ear-to-ear.

But a very different scene played out—all from his own eyes and ears. No internal emotions recorded, of course. No smells or tastes. Nevertheless, I was in his head, experiencing the world through him.

Hayes, like many children these days, had been implanted just after birth with a ReMemory slot behind his right ear.

*Just another example of technology that's passed me by.*

Years ago, I was a professional tech junkie, constantly at some kind of interface—anything other than the real life kind. Before my kids were born, I swore it off and moved to the country.

It felt weird—invasive—to be in his head.

He sat at their gleaming cocobolo dining table that held a mountain of professionally-wrapped presents. The room was quiet. Hayes looked down at the present he'd just unwrapped.

"Mom?" he said, his voice projecting. "Thank you. It's the game I wanted."

No reply.

He sighed and I felt my own echoing breath rise up and fall. The sensation was similar to inhabiting an avatar on an MMORPG, but more intense.

He got down and walked toward the living room.

I heard an animal sound. But there were no pets here.

"Mom?" Hayes came around the corner. My tall, lean Miell knelt on the floor, forehead to the ground, her hands in loose fists clawing at her temples. The high-pitched moans came from her.

My heart sped up.

"Hold on... Hayes," she said, her voice muffled. "Gimme a sec."

He just watched her. She seemed to be in pain, but he didn't run over to help or ask her what was wrong.

*As if he's used to this kind of scene.*

After a while he said, "What about v-linking the other kids in for the party? Weren't we going to do that?"

She didn't respond.

Hayes looked back at the presents on the table. Then he walked past them into the kitchen and opened the fridge. A cake sat on a lower shelf, beautifully decorated with IncrediBlaster—a heroic game character he loved and often pretended to be. He leaned in, scooped a finger full of icing off the back corner, and put his finger in his mouth.

Some link in my brain caused my salivary glands to respond.

Hayes returned to the dining room and opened another gift, this one a bright red and yellow IncrediBlaster costume. In the background I now heard Miell talking to someone in a desperate voice, but it was too far away to understand the words. Or maybe Hayes didn't want to hear.

*What a lousy party. What a lousy memory.*



Miell and I fought when she was a teenager and young adult. She stopped routine contact, which meant that I'd seen Hayes exactly twice before this visit. When she called me three weeks ago, saying that she had to go on an extended business trip and wondered if I might like to stay with my grandson, I jumped at the chance and asked few questions.

Over the weeks though, I'd grown suspicious. Miell v-linked in everyday to check up on us, but she wouldn't tell me where she was or when she'd be back. Plus, she looked bad. Overly thin, with deep circles under her eyes.

She was mostly full of instructions.

"Make sure he gets exercise." This meant exercise videos—cartoon characters running him through a little cardio. If it was so important, why wasn't he allowed to walk on the city streets with me?

"Are you putting on his finger clip every night?" The clip monitored his vital signs even though she said he had no history of illness.

*Techno-chicanery promising to keep children safe from harm. As if...*

Earlier today, she said, "Don't forget to change his memory chip. It fills up every three to four weeks depending on how much he sleeps. Put the full one in sequence in the chip reader in his bedside drawer. It makes a back-up."

This was the first time I'd heard about this.

*Maybe because she didn't expect to be gone so long?*

"When are you coming back? Hayes misses you."

"He obviously loves having you there. I saw that his reading's improved. That's your doing. Thanks."

*Avoidance.*

"Talk to me. I don't even know where you are. Yes, I was thrilled to be let into your lives. I would've done anything you asked—and I have. But..."

She glanced over her shoulder, then turned to face me again. "I'm right here. You can always get in touch. I'm working. You've nagged me forever to get to know Hayes. Enjoy it. Don't forget, regular school will be out soon. The info on the summer school is on your compad. Gotta go."

Since Miell wouldn't tell me anything, I decided to look at Hayes' recorded memories. I never expected to see her writhing on the floor in agony.

I fell asleep worrying about Miell, but woke up with the idea of throwing a replacement party to make a happy memory for Hayes.

But how? I'd never been to his school, didn't know the parents or the other kids. None had been to the apartment since I'd been here. They v-linked in for play dates.

"Want to walk with me on the way to the station this morning?" I suggested as he pulled on his sneakers. His big brown eyes stayed neutral, but I had the feeling he liked this idea. "I want to have a conversation which is hard when you're in front of me in the wheelie. Plus, it's more grown-up, don't you think?"

"I'm six."

"I know. Six-year-olds can walk, right?"

"Right."

I'd forgotten that a crowded, noisy city street isn't the best place for a conversation. Even walking side-by-side we had to shout. "Is your mom sick?"

"What do you mean?"

"Are there times when she can't work? Stays in bed?"

"Oh. Yes. Well, she does work—" He looked up at me and said proudly, "in the movies! But sometimes she seems kind of, like, sick."

"She hasn't told you what's wrong?"

He didn't answer. I looked down and he just shook his head.

It hit me. Hayes was so careful with words, with his reactions to things because of ReMemory. His mother could, would, see whatever he did or said. The only private thing he had were his thoughts.

We walked in silence.

When we got to the station, I strapped him in the wheelie.

"Can I walk home this afternoon?" he asked.

"You bet."

Negotiating knots of heedless teenagers and self-absorbed business types, I wheeled him through the throng until we arrived at his private berth on the Peditrain.

I pushed him up the shallow ramp, smiling at the functionary who wore puke green and acted as if she'd never seen us before. She held the scanner in front of Hayes' eye. It beeped cheerily, one of hundreds of others going off in the terminal. She nodded and we boarded the train.

Hefty metal hooks locked the wheelie into place. I had twenty seconds to kiss Hayes good-bye for the day before a belt with eight inches of bright blue and orange padding lowered around him and the whole wheelie. I gave him a quick hug and we touched noses. I exited and the door closed behind me. The windows were one-way. I could no longer see my boy, but I always waved at him anyway.



"I can't stay indefinitely," I said to Miell when she showed up on the vid later that day.

"You wanted to get to know your grandson."

"True, but I know something's seriously wrong. I watched Hayes' memory of his last birthday."

She drew back in a long slow motion that reminded me of a snake considering whether or not to strike. Her shaky hand floated up and grabbed onto the back of her skull, her fingertips digging in.

"You're sick, or addicted, or both."

"I'm working."

"I've seen you on the floor. Moaning. What's the drug?"

"I'll hire a nanny so you can go home. Don't know why I let you into my life again. Big mistake."

"Let me help."

Her hand now lay on the desk in a tight fist. She wore heavy make-up, but it didn't cover up anything.

"I... I am not addicted to any drug. I just can't come home right now. We're... trying to cobble a complicated, time-sensitive deal on a film. Sorry this didn't work out. I'll find a nanny for Hayes."

"No!"

She disconnected.



I fussed with Hayes' bed covers as he snuggled on one side, settling in for the night. As soon as I'd tucked in his arm, it wiggled out again. He turned his head to look at me, splayed his fingers and said, "Gama, you forgot the monitor."

I sighed. "So I did." I fished the bright red finger clip out of a dish on his bedside table and sat down on the bed. Pinching the plastic device to open its tiny padded jaws, I slipped it over his middle finger and let go. He had reassured me that he didn't even feel it.

"Nice that it's red," I said.

"Red's my favorite color."

"It *is*?" I feigned shock and surprise.

He grinned, only then remembering that he'd told me this dozens of times. "Yeah, like IncrediBlaster's cape. Don't forget to turn the monitor on." He rolled over again, pulling both hands together and under his head in the classic child-sleeping pose. I tucked thick strands of light brown hair behind his ear.

"Tell me again why you need monitoring."

"I dunno," he said, his voice muffled. Then, remembering that it was his duty to educate his clueless grandmother, he added, "So you'll get an alert if something happens to me in the middle of the night."

*Parroted words. What if it isn't about Hayes, but Miell?*

What if he had to wear a monitor because she was often so indisposed that she wouldn't hear a normal kid's cry in the night?



While Hayes was at school, I zipped through hundreds of his memories. Most of the chip held ordinary, mundane scenes.

A series of women looked after Hayes. I took Miell's threat to replace me with a nanny even more seriously after seeing them all. But I also took heart that she had called me this time. First time in six years. There had to be a reason.

The vids showed that Hayes had friends at school. He was a bit of a hanger-on, never the center of attention, but I saw no evidence of bullying or being actively disliked.

At home, he often went into his mother's empty room, lay on her bed and put on her head phones. Then, the vid would pause, indicating that he'd gone to sleep.

I also witnessed him and his mother together in the bed. Once they watched a funny movie while eating popcorn. I giggled out loud at a wrestling/tickle fight they had another night. It wasn't all bad.

But for weeks at a time Hayes saw Miell only on the vid or in person briefly at night after he was asleep. His eyes would open a slit and she'd appear blurry, a wreck. And worse, there were dozens of memories Hayes had of his mother seemingly passed out, or rolling on the floor clawing at her scalp, or pleading with someone to get her a fix.

*I am not addicted to any drug*, she'd said, like a politician denying a specific thing truthfully while lying by omitting the larger truth. *So, if not a drug... what?*

I ran the vid back to one of those pleading scenes. Hayes sat on the couch playing a game. Miell told him to mute it while she argued with some man. I backed it up a little more.

*Maybe I could...*

I minimized the vid controls on the comppad and searched the menu for editing software. This was one of my obsessions back in the day. The one I found had way more bells and whistles on it than I ever had, but I knew enough to know what to ignore.

I soon had the scene downloaded to the pad. I copied the section I wanted to work with and brought up the snippet in the editing software. Isolating the audio, I ran it back several times.

"D... dal... Bi... I be... s[unintelligible]... You got... [unintelligible]... can't ren... [unintelligible]... No... -ts!"

This section finished with a barrage of enraged words from Miell that were also unintelligible, but the meaning was clear.

It wasn't much to go on.

I worked with it: dulling the ambient noise, pulling up the dominant frequency of Miell's voice, tweaking the bass and treble so the vowels would come in more clearly, running it over and over. Sometimes the results were worse. Finally some of the words came in more clearly.

"...deal's a deal. Bi-n[-*something*]-l beats. You got me hooked... [unintelligible]can't renege. Didn't know... [unintelligible]... No... [unintelligible]... fucking implants!" And then the cursing.

*Bi-n[*something*]-l... beats.* It tugged at my memory.

*What else could she be addicted to if not a drug?*

I used to be addicted to digital technology; that's why I was so wary of it to this day.

*Bin----l beats.*

*Binaural beats. Of course.*

Audio recordings geared specifically for human ears, the human brain. One sound thread for each ear, running into and mixing in the brain. They'd been around forever and—like snake oil—people would periodically claim that they were digital drugs, safe for relaxation, stimulation and highs. Just like pharmaceuticals without criminality or side effects. I never knew them to gain any credibility and I hadn't heard or thought of them in years.

I did an Internet search and was, once again, blown away by what I had missed. Binaurals were big business. Huge.

I walked into Miell's bedroom. There in the bedside table were the headphones I'd seen Hayes listening to when she wasn't at home. They were hardwired into a dedicated audio device. *Odd, I thought, I never saw her wearing them in any of Hayes' memories.* But then, I couldn't watch every minute of his life.

I put them on and turned up the volume.



"Hayes, are you asleep?"

"No."

"Mom told me to check your chip yesterday. I almost forgot again."

He rolled over and looked at me sleepily.

Sure enough, it blinked red. I popped the chip out, put it on the table and turned back to him. I stroked his soft cheek, passively bemoaning the day in the future when coarse whiskers would sprout from them.

"I want you to come to my house for a visit."

"Your house?"

"Uh-huh. We'll wait till school's out and go then."

"Does Mom know?"

"Um, no. I just thought of it. Don't mention it yet. Let me work out the details first, okay?"

"Sure. How will we get there? How far is it?"

"Let's talk tomorrow. Another week of school?"

He nodded.

"Okay, I'll need to tell the school camp that you won't be there at first. Do you mind missing it?"

He shrugged and shook his head.

"We'll have an adventure."

He didn't react much. This was a boy who waited to see. "You have cousins."

"I do?"

I nodded. "Some older, some younger."

"I'll meet them?"

I nodded again thinking of the birthday party I was going to give him. "Remember I told you about my animals."

"Oh yeah." He thought for a minute. "A dog?"

"Yep. A big, old, stinky golden retriever. And cats. And ducks."

"I can see them all?"

"Of course. Guess what my dog's name is."

"I don't know."

"Red."

He gasped. "Red's my fav—"

We broke into a fit of giggles. When it faded, he said, "Mom will think this is okay?"

"I'm hoping she'll come too."



This was obviously too far-fetched for him to believe, but he grinned when he said, "Not really."

"Maybe not. But I'll try to convince her."

I patted him again and got up to leave.

"Gama, you forgot to put in the new chip."



The next day, I set to work researching the coding behind ReMemory. Once a techie, always a techie. I went searching for forums I hadn't been near in years. There they were with the same clunky, old-fashioned formats and an astounding number of the same names; old Internet friends who were more than happy to help me hack into the program.

I ran a bunch of old memory chips through the vid, copying and pasting clips onto the comppad, constructing the most boring, generic memories I could find from Hayes' life until I had almost enough for a full chip. I slipped an empty chip into the vid, dated it next in sequence before the one Hayes was currently wearing and filled it with the fabricated comppad memories.

By the time his school was out for a few weeks of summer, we were packed and ready to go. Hayes had asked no more questions about how much his mother knew or whether she was coming, but I owed him the truth.

"I haven't told your mom that we're going, Hayes," I said that morning.

"You said you would."

"I know, but that could backfire."

"What do you mean?"

"She might fly home, hire another nanny, make me leave without you and life would go on as it was before I got here. I don't want to take that risk. I hope you don't either."

He sat at the kitchen bar eating his cereal. He took several more bites before answering. I sweated out the long pause. "I want to go with you. But, are you kidnapping me?"

"Good question. Kind of. I guess. But your mom cares about both of us. I believe she finally let me into your lives because she knows she needs help and didn't know how to get it any other way. I hope she'll join us there, but she might just come and bring you right back here. I can't stop her if that's what she wants."

He nodded, still chewing. "Okay. I want her to be like she was before she got the mic-implants."

I stopped cleaning up the counter and turned to him. "The what?"

He looked guilty.

I walked over to him, pressed on his implant and took out his memory chip, putting it down on the counter. "It's okay. I need to know."

"She got implants. They're like microphones in your ears so you don't have to wear headphones."

I breathed. "And since she got them...?"

He shrugged. "She's been really weird."

It took me a while, but I finally said, "I want her to be like she used to be too, buddy. So, we have to do one more thing to make this work. We're going to record a fake memory on one of your chips. It's called 'acting.'"

He grinned.



We caught a shuttle flight, a high-speed train, and were met in the nearest little town, Macklins Corner, by my son—Miell's older brother—the one who'd been taking care of my life here. He drove us to the house. Hayes, always quiet, withdrew even more the farther we got from the city.

I kept talking to him. "We're going to see Red soon." "Tomorrow you'll meet your aunt and some of your cousins." "Are you homesick?" But it wasn't until I said, "We aren't really farther from your mother here than we were at home, Hayes."

He looked at me. "Do you have a vid?"

"No. Not like yours. But we have a computer and Internet. You'll be able to see and talk to her, she'll just be smaller. But remember when I said we needed a little time first?"

He nodded, but he looked scared.

I patted his leg. "When Mom can't v-link to us, she'll be worried, but eventually, she'll think to look at the back-up of the last chip in your series and see the scene we acted out, right?"

"Yeah. Then she'll think that we've gone to the national park for a camping trip and that's why she can't v-link with me for a while."

"Right. She'll be mad, but with me, not you."

"That's okay."

I smiled at him. "She'll try to contact me here, or if not, I'll call her. Look!" I pointed out the front window.

Down the gravel drive, Red, his wavy, amber coat looking unnaturally clean and well-groomed, came running up to meet us.



It took longer than I expected for Miell to figure out what I'd done. I made myself unavailable online most of the time, but I had my call-in software set to record missed calls. We'd been there almost two weeks before she made her first attempt.

By that time, Hayes had met all of his extended family, knew how to take care of the chickens and ducks, had recovered from his first ever case of poison ivy and was beginning to tan.

I was ready. I set my status to "available" one morning and waited for the alert. When it came, Hayes was out swimming with his cousins.

"Mother."

"Hi, Miell. As you see, I took matters into my own hands. I think that's what you wanted... even if you'll deny it."

"You are at home? He's with you?"

"Yes. He's well."

"Mother... Jesus, you faked the memory chip! Why? Why'd you go to so... to such lengths?"

Today she wasn't wearing any make-up. I could more easily see the girl I raised even through her dulled eyes. My heart went out to her.

"His life was lousy."

She winced.

"He's in need of... many things. But, we can agree that the most important thing he needs is his mother."

She looked over her shoulder. "You don't understand."

"I do. I know about the binaural beats and the implants."

She teared up. "You don't know that I'm... trapped. I'm literally trapped."

"By?"

"My brain." She spat the words in a harsh whisper.

"Tell me."

"I got the implants removed. That's why I went away. My plan was to get them removed, come home, thank you, and have my life back. You wouldn't have to be confronted with what a fuck-up I am."

"So you got hooked on this stuff before the implants?"

"Oh god, yeah. For years. It changes your brain. I couldn't sleep without The Beats. Then I couldn't wake up without it. And the company knows exactly what they're doing! They know. They hook you till you need more and then sell and insert the implants and, under the influence of it all, it seems like a good thing. You program it to put you to sleep or give you a high or stimulate you and no one's the wiser because it doesn't show. It's piped into your brain 24/7!"

"Jesus, Miell."

"I knew right away the implants were a mistake. I wanted the company to take them out, but they had me where they wanted me. They refused to download The Beats when I said I wanted the implants removed."

"So how'd you... What did you do?"

"I had to go to a private doctor. They're out now. But my brain is ruined."

"No, no baby. It'll get better."

"I'm glad you took Hayes."

I gulped hard. "Come here."

She shook her head.

"You are one of the strongest people I have ever known. We'll help you."

"But... I'm no good to him. Kinda, you know, crazy right now." She paused for a long time and then jumped at some noise. "Thanks, Mom. I'll be in touch."



Strains of an off-key "Happy Birthday" had just finished. Hayes, standing by the dining room table surrounded by seven cousins, two new friends, and even more adults, was about to blow out his candles.

Twisted crêpe paper in multiple colors hung crisscrossed over the ceiling and windows. Paper streamers curled from the light fixture along with dozens of balloons. A

piñata awaited us outside on the maple tree. Everyone had gone all out to throw this sweet, sad boy, the best party ever.

I made the cake, so it was a tottering affair, but Hayes' artistic cousin saved the day by drawing a fine facsimile of IncrediBlaster's upper body with red cape streaming over its lumpy surface.

Just before he blew out the candles, my calico cat jumped on the table and stuck a paw right into IncrediBlaster's nose. Everyone reacted: screaming, yelling, waving, shooing, shouting, laughing, and then someone noticed the cat's tail was on fire.

The flames were quickly extinguished, the cat was unharmed, and the chocolate cake was delicious.

Loud. Messy. Colorful. Giddy. Playful. Boisterous. Joyful. Unforgettable. A real birthday party.

Everyone moved outside and the kids were well into their mission to destroy the piñata when my attention was drawn by Red barking and running to the front of the house. I followed him.

A taxi sat in the drive. The back door opened and Miell stepped out into the bright sunshine. She held onto the open car door as if she might crawl back in and take off again.

"Mom," she croaked.

I rushed over, found her wallet, paid the driver, put my arm around her waist and said, "I've never been so happy to see anyone in my life." She crept along like a woman much older than me but she managed to squeeze my shoulder with her shaking hand.

"I'm taking you upstairs. We're having a party for Hayes and there are too many people here for you to face right now."

"A party? For Hayes?"

"I'll explain later. What do we have to do to help get your brain healthy again?"

"Oh god, Mom, if I knew that, I'd..." We were half-way up the stairs. She turned and looked at me, the pain in her eyes palpable. "I need to be reminded of why..."

"Why you're putting yourself through this?"

"Yeah. Like a hundred times a day. I'll forget."



I tucked both kids into bed that night.

Miell first. My son gave her a mild sedative from his medicine cabinet. She looked calm for now, lying in her old bed. "I've always been trouble."

"You're worth it."

"One doctor suggested electroshock."

"No. They still do that?"

Her shoulders rose and fell against the pillow. "Guess so. I decided coming here to the boonies might be a little more pleasant than that alternative. And being this far out in the country might serve as enough of a shock to my brain. It's worth a shot."

I smiled at her. She was broken, but not destroyed. "That part of you that's 'trouble?' It's your best part as well as your worst. Put that fierceness to work for you."

"Easy, right?" she said, gripping the bed sheets. I stroked her hands and she relaxed them, closing her eyes.

I stayed with her until she drifted off.

*Do I have the energy for this? The stamina, the reserves to deal with a six-year-old and an addicted daughter who's always been trouble?* I didn't know. The only thing I was sure of is that this was going in the right direction.

I watched her sleep for a few minutes and then went to Hayes. He was in bed wearing his IncrediBlaster costume.

"You going to sleep in that?"

He nodded, dark eyes defying me to tell him 'no.' I sat on the bed. "What'd you think of your party?"

Our boy of few words struggled to find the right ones. Finally he said, "The best." He squeezed me around the middle. "Ever."

"That's what I like to hear."

Putting him to bed reminded me of our time in the city. "I guess I should check to see if your chip's full." I sighed. As I reached behind his ear, he pulled away. "What's wrong?" I pressed on his implant, but didn't feel the pop of the chip sliding out. "Turn around." He did.

The implant was empty.

I was confused. *I left the chip out?* No. The day we left the city, I put the real one back in after we recorded the camping scene on the phony chip.

"I took it out."

"Hayes. When? Before your party?"

He nodded.

"But... I wanted to make you a happy memory and now... Why did you do that?"

He stuck his jaw out. "I knew it was going to be special. So, I wanted to keep it... private. Just for me. Is that okay?"

My breath caught in my throat. All I could do was nod.

"Don't worry, Gama, I won't ever forget it."

He lay back, snuggling under the quilt.

My body plopped down on the bed. I reached out over him, feeling soft patchwork and his warm body, my mind holding on hard to this moment.



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**Nancy Waldman** trusts words more than numbers. That's why she became a writer instead of a numerologist. She writes about people and other "p" things like perception, plasticity, power imbalances and possibilities. She used to be an RN and likes to do art and photography. She co-founded *Third Person Press*, is a member of tribe *Viable Paradise XVII*, reads submissions for *Bastion SF* magazine and is on the board of a very personal charity: EPIC. Nancy grew up in Texas, moved around a lot—including Connecticut and London, England—but finally settled on the outlying isle of Cape Breton in Canada. That's off the map as far as her mother is concerned, so she has a house in the North Carolina mountains, too.

# The Gunman on the Wall

Aleksander Volkmar

There is a question. A single question leeching on the deepest, darkest part of our minds. Tucked away, trying to hide. But it's there. We can't escape it, no matter how hard we try. Because it stares down at us every single day, every single life. Always there, looking down at us, hiding half the world from our eyes. Towering above in the sky, the stone face of the Wall glares down with cold unwavering silence. And what it hides flutters around our thoughts like moths circling a flame, staring in wonder but never able to touch it without crumbling into ash.

The Gunman makes sure of that. His work is displayed across the Wall's roots for us to see, a carpet of bones picked dry and scorched white. They are his creations. His children.

I look at them in wonder. Some look in terror. Others respect. Different, but all the same: a warning. If we approach the Wall, we will fall still in decaying sleep, joining nameless dust crumbling to ashes. The Gunman, atop his perch in the sky, holds us back, under a shadow as old as memory itself. Back from what? That is the question.

Everyone has their own answer.

Ailah sees vast forests of lush, swaying trees, leaves dancing in the soothing wind. Kinah dreams of a city vast and endless, its towering stone structures rising to meet the clouds themselves. Akel describes a glittering blue ocean, filled with great wooden ships bearing flags of every color. The priest always dismisses our follies:

"Beyond the Wall, only the ones judged worthy by the Gunman may live. Whether it is in this life or in your next, eventually all will find their way into Paradise."

I sit and listen. Any story paints a better picture than the nothingness that surrounds our side of the Wall. An endless scape of shifting, searing sand stretches out past the stumps of dried mud structures we call home, bathing in the glow of a burning sun above. To dare the rough, loose earth that is swept dancing with the wind was beyond question. Your soul, lost in the sands for the rest of time, would never cross the Wall, never be reborn for a chance to be judged worthy by the Gunman. Which is worse? For souls to wander endlessly or be snuffed out by the Gunman's rifle? The only choice we have is to survive under the Wall's shadow until called to the other side.

And survive is all we do. I keep watch of bony livestock scrounging the brittle dirt for the smallest crumb of leafy green. There's no point really. Weak little legs would perish



immediately out in the desert. And yet we stand squinting at the dust-coated animals, or digging dry earth in hopes that seeds take root to bear small, shriveled fruit and vegetables. Many nights we simply stare into the flames, watching them dance instead of us. The fire always dances. It is free from this world, able to come and go as it pleases. We are not. We are trapped here, held back from Paradise by the Wall. My life is everyone's life. We must look like scurrying little ants to the Gunman, speeding along to die over and over again until he deems us worthy to cross the Wall.

I wonder how long he's been up there.

Only once have I heard the blast of fire that erupts from the Gunman's weapon when someone is foolish enough to disobey his only rule. I was still very young when my friend Miel's father, head burning too hot under the sun, thought he might outwit the Gunman during the dark blanket of night. Maybe he saw himself as a shadow, or a small fly buzzing harmlessly around. But the Gunman knew. He always knows. Miel's father collapsed before he'd touched the Wall, bright red spilling from his stomach.

The sound the weapon had made still lingers in my mind. A mighty roar, echoing through the clouds and desert. Its power was overwhelming.

Miel remembers too. Out in the fields he holds his stare on the stone curtain spreading across the horizon, eyes fixed on the top. I see something in his eyes, a hate buried in fear of the Gunman's wrath, waiting for its moment to pounce. Hopefully it won't. For his sake.

But if I look hard, the same look is in everyone's eyes. Eyes that when young sparkled and gleaned are now eroded into dull, dry things. Though we show respect for the Gunman, give offerings of fruit and vegetables to the basket dangling from the Wall's summit, and never approach the Wall, hate is in everyone. We do well at hiding it. The Gunman may see everything we do, but even he can't see our thoughts. If he did, the visions would scream and tear, demanding to be let across the Wall. They'd shout:

"Why aren't I worthy to pass the Wall?"

"Why is the Wall here?"

"Why is Paradise cut off from us?"

"Why us?"

"Why?"

"Why?"

"What is behind the Wall?"

The single question. It has many forms. But they all drive us in a single direction.

How lucky those must be who have made it over. How perfect their lives are now. With the Gunman to their backs, free of the wastelands that surround us in a prison of emptiness. Do they still remember us? Do they remember the desert and sun? The eternal shadow of the Wall? Or the aching, crushing feeling of every day, held at bay by the sliver of hope that this life will be the one that is worthy. For them, it was. For us, only the Gunman knows.

Sitting under wrinkled dry trees, Miel and I watch the sun creep under the horizon. The smears of purple and red and orange filling the edge of the world are almost enough to forget about the Wall, even if only for a moment. Against the splendor of colors, the pale stones fade away into shadows. We see dreams in those lights. Figures free, swimming in the open sky above the deserts with graceful twists and turns. They must see everything. Our small lives amidst the sands. The Gunman on his perch. Paradise beyond the Wall.

Miel sees his father dancing in their company. A lost one reaching out for a hold on the Wall, only to be dragged down under the curtain of night. He talks to me about the Gunman. Whispers curses and threats. The ring of the Gunman's weapon is the loudest sound in his head and it spills through vengeful lips like water escaping a cracked bowl.

"I wonder," he began once, "what if the roles reversed. If *we* stood watch of the Gunman and judged him. Would he lie on his back, helpless, like us for once? Or would he beg for mercy, like a beast for its next meal?"

"The Gunman has always been the judge. It's his word or nothingness."

"But imagine if one of us were Summoned. Up there, on the Wall's peak, standing without the Gunman's weapon bearing down. Could he be defeated? Could he be cast down, so *all* of us can enter Paradise?"

I was silent.

"You know we deserve it, Ekial. How long have we been trapped under his Wall? How long have we suffered for something we don't know about? It's time to end it."

"You speak the impossible. No one can scale the Wall without his permission." I didn't need to add more.

"I know. Only the Summoned. And I say, if either of us are Summoned in this lifetime, we must bring down the Gunman. Instead of passing by, ignoring all the suffering he's caused, we let our people have what they deserve. Leave him with nothing to look over. He can rot in these sands, rot as we have, forever."

We made our pact there, as the inky night finally blotted out the sky. If we were Summoned, we would fight. Was the Gunman possible to overthrow? The answer was unknown to us, though we swore to try.

But will I? The fire that burned in Miel's eyes was inspiring, but the Wall casts its shadow of doubt over that tiny spark. It could be wiped out in a moment, a single burst raining down from the sky. And then, nothing. No more chances to be judged worthy. Not a chance for Paradise. Just endless sleep under the Wall. Sleep without dreams. I don't know what I could do against the Gunman. What I would do. He has looked down at me every day of my life, every day of my father's life, and his father before him, longer than anyone can remember. He is the judge atop the Wall. What hope would I have against him?

I've never had much hope. The priest says it is possible to see into past lives, see where you went wrong, know the sins that kept you from Paradise. I cannot. I don't know how long I've been waiting under the Wall. This may be my first life, or my hundredth. Each one fading away in the memories of the Gunman's eyes. I look up at that Wall, the emptiness it covers us with. And yet, what else is there? Nothing surrounds us like a cage; it is everywhere, with no escape. Not even death. I may be here another hundred lives, but eventually I may be worthy. Eventually I will cross the emptiness of the Wall and arrive where worthy lives descend. I've never had much hope, but that hope is the only thing out in these wastelands. The hope of being Summoned.

Such hope can endure for years, the faintest of whispers that keeps one foot moving ahead of the other no matter how tempting it may be to collapse in exhaustion and end it all. And at last there came the moment when that whisper might be fulfilled, when without warning, on a day like any other, the Sign for a Summoning was received. As always, it came within the offering basket, descending from its point of origin so terrifyingly far above. The priest retrieved the carrier and brought its contents back for all to behold: a single, gleaming bullet.

A silence heavy as death gripped the entirety of the village as the object was held high for everyone to see. The piece of metal was dull, grim, and lifeless in the fading light. Its contours and ridges held dreadful suggestions of its intended purpose, and despite everyone's curiosity, no one, including me, could look at its shape for more than a few moments before glancing away in fear. I shuddered at the thought that this thing, once in the presence of the Gunman, was now here among us.

The priest spoke, "The Summoning has again been laid upon us! The Gunman has chosen someone that is worthy in his eyes!"

Life ceased. No one moved, spoke, or breathed. As the priest retreated to his hut, the world had become so incredibly small. Everything depended on what the priest saw dancing in fire and smoke. The Gunman sent his wishes with that bullet, to be read in smoldering ashes. Only the priest could interpret, only he could see. Every eye focused on that hut, every mouth sounded out their name, every mind saw themselves scaling the face of the Wall and emerging into Paradise.

The sun had set when finally the priest appeared outside. A mass of bodies surrounded him in an instant. Miel and I glanced at each other before turning our gaze towards the priest. In his hands rested the bullet, just as lifeless and twisted as it had been during the day. The old man breathed slow, facing the ground before facing our question.

"The Sign has shown me a name. A name that has been deemed worthy of entering Paradise. Forever more will this soul be free, free to join our ancestors in the greatness beyond the Wall. Step forward and claim your entry," he pointed, "Ekial."

Nothing else existed as the priest placed the bullet in my shaking hands. Not the eyes, some glaring, some praising. Not the faces, some proud, others fallen. Not the stars above, the sand below, or even the towering Wall. Just that pointed bullet shining against my flesh.

Sleep would not come that night. Swarming in my head was the question, louder than ever before. I didn't know what was behind the Wall. I didn't know what I would find when standing above the world. From Paradise in all its glory to oceans of fire breaking the earth itself, there could be anything. All I knew was that I'd be facing it alone.

I remembered my pact with Miel. More than anything I wanted the strength to carry it out. But looking at the bullet in my hands, the thought grew madder and fainter with every passing moment. The power in this weapon frightened me. The thought of standing before what once held it was terrifying. Miel should have been the Summoned. His rage may have stood against the Gunman. Not mine.

When at last I stood facing the Wall with the sun creeping into the sky, staring up at its impossible heights with the bullet clasped in my hands, a realization came to me. I looked back at my village, all my friends, the people I had known my whole life. No matter what happened, I would never return to this place. The priest put his hand on my shoulder and urged me forward. Taking a deep breath and dropping the bullet in my pocket, I slowly approached the Wall. The closer I got, the more the carpet of bones grew beneath my feet. My heart raced furiously. The Gunman had Summoned me, so he would not fire down. But the bones crunching under my feet followed me the whole way. Never had I been this close to the Wall. I was entering his domain. His kingdom.

The Wall rose before me. The mass of dark gray stones seemed to rise up forever into the sky. Uneven and jagged, they formed a twisting staircase leading up the rocky face. Reaching out, my fingers closed around the brittle surface and, with an anxious pull, I dragged myself up. I climbed and climbed and climbed. The sun moved overhead as I ascended into unknown skies. My muscles stretched and ached, suspending me above the world below. Sometimes a small ledge jutted out of the Wall, enough to give a chance to rest as the hours dragged on. Up and up and up, farther than I would have believed possible. Looking down, the village was just a few spots on the desolate stretch of a desert that seemed to never end. I could see further than anyone else, and yet I still saw what I had seen my whole life: nothing.

The world in the sky was strange and alien. Small insects scuttled along the rough stones, disappearing into tiny holes at the sight of my approach. Icy wind crept along the Wall's surface, grabbing with long thin fingers, vainly trying to tear away the smallest grain of rock. The clouds, so small from down in the village, were huge flying monsters now, twisting into a thousand different shapes through the sky. The sun beat down on my back with furious intensity, as if it knew that I shouldn't be here. Cold, thin air surrounded me like a prison, and my breathing grew short and sporadic. I had to make it to the top. The Gunman was waiting for me there.

I did not know how far I had climbed when a ledge mercifully appeared above, this one forming a small cave within the stones of the Wall. Arms and legs crying for rest, I pulled myself in and curled up, weak and tired. My strength gone, my breath short, I lay exhausted in the shelter, letting the wind whip at my hair and clothes. How far was there left to go? It could be a few feet more, or another day's worth of climbing.

I thought about everyone back in the village. They would be looking up at the Wall day and night, no one able to sleep, eat, or work. The fire would dance unwatched tonight, alone in its existence. Just like me up on the Wall. But here was different. In the village, the night was quiet, peaceful, broken only by the rustle of dried leaves or the patter of footsteps. Here, the only sound was the moaning wind as it swept along the endless surface of the Wall. It never stopped, never slowed, never gave up. The drone lulled my aching body into sleep, even as the hard, brittle stone dug into my skin.



Daylight greeted me when I awoke. Had a day passed? Just a few minutes? I lay looking at the clear blue sky, numbness consuming my body. It seemed a lifetime to crawl back out onto the Wall's face, to grab hold of the snaking staircase. Inch by inch, minute by minute, the stone surface ever around me. I dared not look down. Hugging the rock, I stopped. A wave of weakness rolled over my body, as if all my strength had tumbled down the Wall to its death. Numbing pain surged in my head.

I was alone. Alone, weak, pathetic, fragile. About to stand against the Gunman. Impossible. No one could. How had I ever thought I could? My promise to Miel shattered, raining broken words down through the clouds. Like those before me, I would crawl meekly past the Gunman for whatever fate awaited me beyond, bowing my head like a scolded beast. But there was no strength left in me. No strength to continue.

Leaning back against the nothingness behind me, I looked up towards the sky, ready to embrace it like a long lost friend. I almost surrendered completely, about to fly, when I saw it. Above me, in clear sight, was the summit of the Wall. It had stopped. Within my reach. And there the Gunman sat, waiting for me to emerge broken and empty in his presence. But something changed then. Something ignited in my veins. Miel's words came rushing back:

*"Instead of passing by, ignoring all the suffering he's caused, we let our people have what they deserve. Leave him with nothing to look over. He can rot in these sands, rot as we have, forever."*

I knew what I had to do. He wouldn't have the satisfaction of seeing me beaten. I would make it. Grasping the rock with new-found strength, I clenched my teeth and heaved myself upwards. Faster than I thought possible, the gap between me and the top of the Wall began to shrink. Almost there. So close. So close. Fire burned in my eyes. Fire that would consume the Gunman. Images of every face in the village rushed through my head, urging me on, shouting, hands outstretched to tear the Gunman down from his throne, letting him fall and be consumed below in the garden of bones he had grown for so long.

Wrapping my fingers around the lip of the last ledge, a deep breath filled my lungs. Here I was, at the top of the world, the Wall plummeting down below until it met the tiny dots of the village.

This was for them. For every soul that's been waiting for years beyond number to cross over the Wall. For every soul broken below and every soul forever lost in the desert. I would not fail. I could not. I pulled myself over the ledge and stood atop the Wall, ready to face the Gunman for the first time.

Ready, until I saw what was there.

No terrible, vast, supreme entity came down with fury upon me. No booming roar of a voice that would break the sky itself. Nothing but a man who sat dead still on the top of the world. An old man, older than ancient, his skin worn down like rough leather, the last remaining strands of wispy hair fluttering in the wind. Dull, dark eyes barely saw me, barely moved as I stood before him. Hunched over as if an immense weight was crushing him, his gaunt body made not a single movement. Neither did mine. Who was this man? He couldn't be the Gunman... could he?

The moment dragged by, broken only by the rushing of eternal wind. His eyes met mine, filled with an incredible sadness and loneliness so powerful I nearly collapsed. My throat was dry, my eyes watery. This wasn't how it was supposed to be. This wasn't what was supposed to happen. The man's arm lifted, slowly and shaking, until he pointed behind him, off into the distance beyond. I realized I could see what lay beyond the Wall.

The question would be answered.

Hope filled my heart, more hope than I'd ever known. Stumbling forward, my breath caught in my throat, I gazed out to what wonders would fill my sight, what dreams would become realities.

And there was nothing.

I did collapse this time, falling to my knees, every ounce of strength and hope utterly vanishing. Below me, on the far side of the Wall, stretched an endless wasteland, from horizon to horizon. No wondrous city, no rolling green fields. Just another world made of sand. The tears flowed freely down my face now. I couldn't breathe. Couldn't move. I don't know how long my frozen body sat there, completely destroyed and broken. It was over. Everything was over. Everything I had ever thought, believed, and dreamed, over.

A gnarled, skeletal hand rested itself on my shoulder. Looking up, I saw in the man's eyes an understanding and sorrow that had no need for words. It was all there in his ancient, sad eyes. And then I knew. Knew what he was. He had been just like me, a Summoned. Scaling the Wall, believing something glorious to be waiting on the other side, only to have that comfort ripped away from him atop the world. My story was his, and his story was the ones before him. Hope had led us here, had driven us, had forced us to keep going on so that one day we may stand here and look out to what was promised since before time can remember.

But now, standing on the Wall, I saw it was hopeless. There would never be a day to enter the Paradise beyond. It wasn't there. Nothing was there. The only things left in this world were the village and the Wall.

The man turned me around and pointed again, towards the side of the Wall I had come from. There it was, resting like a predator waiting to strike its prey. The gun. Long and deadly, it sparkled black in the bright sunlight, like it was a blot of space the sky had forgotten to color. I slowly approached and lifted its weight, my hands trembling. The touch was cold and hard, just like the bullet I had received. Reaching in my pocket, I pulled the piece of metal out and held it in my hands. Both objects seemed to attract each other, to want to be together, two parts of a single dreadful force. Without thinking, I loaded the bullet into the gun. It seemed like the right thing to do, the only thing that made sense anymore.

An eyepiece was attached to the gun's barrel, and pressing my eye against it, my village appeared in swelling clarity. Life continued as normal down below. Never again would they see me, say my name, remember my face. In their world, I had passed into Paradise, leaving them behind for something better beyond, something that soon they will join as well. My face glistened with tears, but I was glad for them, glad they still had their dreams, their hope, their Paradise. They were better off than me. I had nothing left, no dreams, no hope, just an empty world that stretched endlessly in all directions.

And then I saw him. Running over sand and bones, eyes set to climb the Wall. Miel. I wanted to shout, scream at the top of my lungs for him to stop, but he wouldn't hear me. He reached the Wall, grabbing hold of its rocky surface in an attempt to begin his own climb. Then I realized: Miel cannot see what I've seen. No one else can. They need to survive, if for no other reason than just to live, to defy the hopelessness of the world. If they knew the truth, they would lose their hope, and crawl into the shadows around them and simply cease to be. They would die. And then, there truly would be nothing left. The world would be empty. Lifeless. There was only one thing to do. My last trace of hope disappearing, I pulled the trigger.

A fiery crack shattered through the air. It echoed from far down in the village, all the way up to the highest cloud in the sky. Shaking the world itself. The ringing in my ears gave way to silence. A terrible, absolute silence. My friend, Miel, lay dead among the bones, ready to join their ranks as one of the nameless sleepers under the shadow of the Wall. A child of the Gunman. A child of mine. I turned back to the man. Only a brief nod escaped his stillness before he laid a tired head on the cold stones and fell into peaceful, unending sleep.

I stood alone in the empty sky, with nothing but the Wall and gun as companions. To those below, I had entered Paradise, my soul finding peace in the lands beyond. Yet here I would remain, perched like a vulture in the sky watching with keen eyes those who still believed, who needed to keep believing. No one else would learn the answer, the answer to



the question that would doom them all to nothingness. Until my time came to an end, no one else would climb to this lonely peak where the truth was spread out on all sides. No one else needed to know. There only needed to be one Gunman on the Wall.



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**Aleksander Volkmar** works with a pen in one hand and glass of bourbon in the other to write stories of dark speculative fiction, horror, and anything else that lies between. His work can be found at *The Literary Hatchet Magazine*, or at [aleksandervolkmar.blogspot.com](http://aleksandervolkmar.blogspot.com). Living in North Carolina, he earned his B.A. in English Literature and imagines a future where he has read every book in his ever-growing bookshelves. Besides writing, he also tries his hand at illustrating, spends far too much time playing video games, and sometimes goes to meetings of the Esoteric Order of Dagon (though he mainly attends for the free food).

# The Magister's Clock

Simon Kewin

A door hinged open in the golden face of the clock. Saffiah stood in front of it, not breathing, waiting for an answer. The flame of her torch sputtered in the cold air.

The miraculous timepiece whirred and ticked and whirred again. She shouldn't have asked her question, but the temptation had been just too great. This device alone would know. Other clocks knew only *now*. This knew the time of all events. The birth of heroes. The death of queens. She'd been told all the tales about it as a girl, of course: her father's face lit by the flickering glow of the fire on winter nights as he described the wars fought over The Magister's Clock. The lies, the betrayals, the deaths.

And here it was, ticking patiently away before her. She had found it. So many had tried and failed. She herself had nearly been killed more times than she cared to remember on her quest. Comrades and enemies *had* died. She'd lost count of how many had come seeking the clock, never to be seen again. On this day alone she had battled through ranks of sword-wielding horrors, leapt for her life again and again as traps triggered and spikes flew at her head.

Now, finally, the clock was hers. She could enfold it in the cloth-of-night she carried with her, take it home, and sell it to the highest bidder for enough money to buy whole kingdoms.

But then she asked her question.

She could have asked it *anything*. She could have asked it nothing. Instead, exulting in her triumph, she called out to it in a clear voice:

"So, tell me the time of my own death, clock."

Something flashed inside the workings. No clockwork cuckoo here. A waxwork face wound forward, the countenance of the Magister himself. The sorcerer who had built the clock and, it was said, imbued it with his own spirit. The sneering face was painted in hard, black lines. Somehow the lines moved, scowling a cruel scowl. Saffiah backed away a step despite herself.

The face spoke. "Nearly an hour ago now, Human."

Saffiah didn't move. She shook her head, disbelieving. After everything, despite all the tales, despite all the sacrifices, the machine was useless. Broken. She wouldn't be able to name her price for a clock that just told the wrong time.

She was about to scream in rage when movement in the air around her caught her attention. A breath of cold air chilled the back of her neck. She soon saw where it was coming from. The chamber behind her was *thronged* with ghosts. She'd thought she was alone but there were thousands of them. How come she hadn't seen them before? Among them were some she recognized. Comrades and enemies both.

She could feel the cloud of regret and anger coming from them. An icy chill of understanding trickled through her. They were all caught here, trapped until the day someone took the clock and defeated the Magister.

And they'd hoped she was the one. And now...

Saffiah turned back to the clock. She swung her fist to strike the sneering face of the Magister. Her hand passed right through. Her ghostly, translucent hand. She studied her palm: fascinated, appalled. The lines of the clock were clearly visible through her. Her flesh faded as she watched: into gossamer lines, into mist, into nothing at all.

She let out a howl of rage but it became only a low moan.

"Told you," said the clock. The face grinned evilly as it wound back inside and the little door snapped shut.



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**Simon Kewin** is a UK fantasy/SciFi writer, author of over 100 published short stories, as well as the novels *Hedge Witch*, *Engn* and *The Genehunter*. He can be summoned from the aether at [simonkewin.co.uk](http://simonkewin.co.uk).

# From Mutsumi

KJ Kabza

**W**hen she saw him on the stone bridge, sakura raining down upon his oblivious shoulders, she nearly stopped breathing.

He was slim, young-looking, serious, and absorbed in the cracked leather book in his hands. Smart but adorably shy—who but a soft-spoken academic would come to a bridge in the height of sakura season, not to marvel at the trees, but to read?

The closer she came to him, the harder her heart beat. He was so perfect. She wanted to tease the book away from him, have him look up, and fall immediately into her eyes. But things would never unfold so simply. Instead, she screwed up her courage and asked, "What are you reading?"

He started. "Sorry?"

She leaned next to him on the low wall of the stone bridge, too nervous to get any closer. She willed herself to speak casually. "You're reading on a day like today."

"Yes." He swallowed. "I am."

"And you don't care about the sakura."

"No. Well, yes, but I've seen them before." He glanced down at the worn stones of the bridge, half-melted into each other with incalculable age. "I just like to read here."

"A bridge is an odd place for that, don't you think?"

"I suppose. But ever since I found it 50 years ago, I've been drawn to it. It feels like a good place; I can't explain it."

She nodded. "What are you reading? It's got to be good."

"Well—"

She leaned over, trying to see the cover, hoping she looked graceful. The leather-bound volume bore no title, but she did see the hash marks tattooed on the back of his left hand. She straightened and tapped her own knuckles. "I saw your hashes. I'm 8,000 too."

As soon as she said it, she winced. The line was so amateurish and awkward, but he seemed not to have heard her.

He flipped back to the title page. He paused before speaking, as if embarrassed of his tastes. "It's a collection of papers about the behavior of memory in a mortal being."

"You mean, the behavior of memory in an animal?"

He stared at her, clearly surprised at her interest. "No. In a human."

"When humans were mortal?" She laughed. "I thought you were a scientist. I guess you're a historian."

He hastily looked away. "I've been both."

She nodded. Her heart kept pounding. Had he thought she was laughing at him? "I think I was a history teacher, once."

"In Seattle?"

"I don't know. Why do you say Seattle?"

He looked at her quickly, and then away. "I can picture you in Seattle, for some reason. I don't know why."

She nodded again. A breeze shook the branches, and another lazy snowfall of sakura fluttered down. Around them on the bridge, couples and groups marveled, snapping pictures of the flowering boughs. She tried to think of something further to say. "Death interests you?"

He turned his book over in his hands. It was extremely old; the leather spine was cracked, and the page edges were crumbling. On the inside of the cover, written in faded ink, it said, 'from Mutsumi'. She wondered who that was.

"Not death, exactly," he said. "Memory. The fact that we could remember our entire lives, once."

"When we were only 400 or 500?"

"No, when humans as a race were mortal, before we beat aging. Millennia ago, human beings could remember their full lives up until the moment they died."

Yes—keep talking, she prayed. He seemed to be opening. She could picture him opening the same way, at a lectern in a room in Tokyo University, presenting findings about Europa's ecosystem. She did not know why she pictured this.

"I don't know," she said. "I think it's tragic—all those people before us, only living for a century, and then an eternity of nothing."

"Well. If you can ignore the dying part, it becomes quite fascinating."

She smiled. He glanced at her, and his dark eyes were so intense that she had to self-consciously look away, into the river. "Perhaps."

"You don't think it's amazing that people could once account for every year of their lives?" he asked. "Or that they could remember all the people who ever mattered to them? Or that they kept the same name, never outgrowing it? Even when they kept personal journals, it was to remind themselves of their pasts, not to re-learn it. Now, with our extremely long lives, humans have vulnerable spots in their memories. You said you were 8,000, yes? If you

haven't kept a diary, you'll never know for sure what happened to you between 600 and 3,500 years ago."

She smiled again. He was getting carried away already, propelled into some exhilarating and abstract place. He looked so alive. "Go on."

"The ability to remember your whole life changes everything. It changes who you are. You can remember all the major experiences that have shaped you. But for us, even the lessons we learn in the first 200 or 300 years, the strongest ones, can be changed. I think I was an eco-terrorist once, because I've seen pictures of myself with a name I don't recognize in history books about environmental activist groups. But now I'm a pacifist. You see?"

His eyes shone. He straightened and turned to her, and the full force of his eagerness nearly knocked her breath away. She blushed, furiously, and once more glanced over the water.

She could feel his eyes on her. "It changes romantic relationships, too," he said. "Remembering everything."

She snuck him a glance. When their eyes met, it jolted her down to her toes. "... Oh?"

"Oh yes. They used to marry, you know. That is, they used to pick one person to love for their whole lives, because they both stayed fundamentally the same, and if they started out compatible, then they'd likely end up that way. But because of our immortality, we can't possibly stay with one person forever. We change too much. We forget too much. So of course every relationship disintegrates. And—"

She blurted it out before she could stop herself. "You don't believe that true love still exists?"

He caught his breath. His demeanor changed somehow, as if she had just spoken a secret password.

Strangely, she could picture him staring at her this way in a dark room in Beijing, in a café twenty miles south of Paris, and somewhere on the Russian steppes as they marveled together at the clarity of the stars. She could even picture him doing it on this very stone bridge, as they leaned against the other wall, on a wet day in early autumn.

A new light shone in his eyes. "Are you asking me if two people can still be destined for each other?"

Unable to reply, she nodded.

"Perhaps they can be—but because we change so much, they'd have to keep meeting and separating, over and over, letting it end when one of them changes too radically. Perhaps

they'd even forget all about each other in the interim, so if they met again, it would be as if it were for the first time."

She swallowed. "You think so?"

He said, "I think... "

She leaned in closer.

"I think... actually... it's a little warm out here. I think I'm going to go get some ice cream. Would you like to join me?"

Her heart leapt. She still said nothing, but she grinned and gestured for him to lead the way.

Together, they walked off the stone bridge. The breeze picked up again, and the fallen sakura chased after their footsteps.



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**KJ Kabza** has sold over 50 stories to venues such as *F&SF*, *Nature*, *Daily Science Fiction*, *Beneath Ceaseless Skies*, *Buzzy Mag*, and many more. He's been anthologized in *The Year's Best Dark Fantasy and Horror: 2014* (Prime Books), *The Best Horror of the Year, Volume Six* (Night Shade Books), and others, and he has made both the 2013 *Locus* and *Tangent* Recommended Reading Lists. His senior project for his B.A. in Creative Writing was a werewolf novel, and his life and career have unfolded predictably ever since.

# Making Ends Meet

Jarod K. Anderson

The online ad hovered somewhere just between "free babysitting" and "get rich working from home" on the sketchy-meter, but I was sneaking up on my fourteenth month of unemployment. So, recalling the lessons of my short stint in law school, I pondered the landmark case of Beggar v. Chooser and scribbled down the address on a Post-it. Surprisingly, the job market for an almost-lawyer with a BA in philosophy wasn't thriving, so I was planning my interview outfit before my pen had stopped moving. The ad was vague and read like a flyer for the Boy Scouts. Applicants should be "dependable, organized, conscientious and punctual." The sketchy factor came from the ad's insistence on confidentiality and the fact that applicants must "apply in person and be willing to start immediately." Considering myself to be a fairly boy-scoutish sort, and certainly available to start right away, I grabbed my coat and headed out.

It wasn't far, less than four blocks from my door in fact. The place was located in a small office complex tucked between a Wal-Mart and a self-storage facility. It seemed that the developer who built the offices had kept costs down by hiring a colorblind architect who could draw nothing but uniform cubes. On the bright side, it was a tidy, efficient-looking place that did something to lessen my fear that I was headed off to have my organs harvested.

Before heading in, I checked my hair in the window of the adjacent unit, made sure everything that should be was buttoned and zipped. A pleasant little tone sounded when the door opened and I found myself in a tiny beige room dominated by a big glass security window. Behind the window sat a business-like young woman who quickly swiveled away from her keyboard to scrutinize me.

She pressed a button on the desk and the intercom next to the window crackled to life. "May I help you?" she asked.

"Yes, I saw your online ad. I'm here to apply for your 'clerk' position."

She gave me a shallow nod of acknowledgement and swiveled back to her desk to rummage in a drawer. She produced a clipboard and, turning back toward the window, passed the paperwork to me through a mechanical metal drawer that protruded through the wall.

There was no place to sit down, so I hovered in front of the window trying to balance the clipboard on the little lip of a counter. The questions ranged from your standard, "Have you ever been convicted of a felony?" to your considerably less standard, "Explain your view on higher powers and providence in general."



I hesitated, checked with my ragtag band of scruples, and quickly decided that I didn't mind working for a passably benign cult if it meant that I could stop eating ramen for every meal and making coffee filters from old paper towels. I shrugged and answered somewhere on the spectrum between nonjudgmental atheist and skeptical agnostic. I passed the clipboard back to the young woman and continued standing awkwardly in the tiny beige room.

"Just a moment," she said through the intercom then rose and carried the clipboard off to the right of the window and out of my field of view.

She returned after a few minutes, sans clipboard, and spoke into the intercom:

"I assume you can start today?"

I nodded, biting back on a hundred questions, each of which seemed both perfectly reasonable and quite capable of blowing the only real job prospect I'd had in months.

"You'll be working as an independent contractor," she said. "You'll be paid by check at the end of each shift. Shifts may last up to, but not exceed, eight hours a day. There are no scheduled breaks. You may come and go as you please, but productivity is a factor in your continued employment agreement. I'll have a 1040 W-9 for you to fill out when you leave today. Do you agree to these terms?"

"Yes," I said. I felt ridiculous, but I was just too excited about the prospect of actually being employed to say much else.

The metal drawer opened with a clank. Inside was one silver key.

"The key opens both the outer door and the door to the production room. You'll find your 1040 W-9 in the drawer with your first check when you leave."

"Do I need to clock in or out?" I asked.

"No," she replied, and turned her attention back to her work.

I picked up the key and thanked the young woman, but I had the impression that the intercom was no longer on. I eyed the key then pivoted to look for the production room door. I would have sworn that the front entrance had been the only way in or out of the room, but there it was, an unremarkable beige door with a silver handle and silver deadbolt.

Finding the door locked, I fitted the key, turned it, and walked into the production room.

My "cult" guess was still in the lead, but "about to have my organs harvested," was really starting to close the gap again. The room was black, all of it, save for a pale strip of illuminated tiles set into the ceiling. The dim lighting ran parallel to some sort of conveyor belt that spanned the length of the room. It didn't look like any machinery I had ever seen

before. The belt was segmented, made from square sections of some kind of weathered-looking wood, held into place by a jointed framework of dark wrought iron.

In front of the belt was a grey metal stool and a low table with a bucket on it. I was just trading my "I wonder what's in the bucket?" question for the more reasonable "What am I still doing here?" question when an intercom I hadn't noticed next to the door buzzed to life. I jumped and, yes, maybe peed a little, but I didn't shriek or fall down and I counted that as a win.

"Please have a seat," said a deep voice that, by the sound of it, probably measured distances mostly in Marlboro miles.

To my surprise, I actually found myself doing as he asked. In for a penny, in for a pound, I guess. I spared a brave look into the bucket as I lowered myself onto the stool. It held the sheen of some dark liquid but I couldn't tell what it was. My five-year plan hadn't really involved any jobs requiring buckets of unidentifiable dark liquids, so I wasn't really prepared to make any guesses.

"There's an electronic pedal just in front of your right foot," said the voice. "Press it slowly to move the belt. When you see a box in front of you, stop the belt and I'll give you further instructions."

"Sounds good," I said, doing my best to at least play the part of "normal first day at a normal job." Hearing my own cheerful voice actually did make me feel a bit better about the situation. Something about filling up that creepy room with my words gave me a sense of power, ownership.

I pressed the pedal and the belt clacked and creaked into motion. As it did a continuous line of small identical boxes emerged from a hole in the wall to my left. In front of each small black box was a square of sable cloth and a coil of copper wire.

I stopped the belt when the first box was in front of me and waited for more instructions from my phlegmy employer.

"Remove the contents of the box and place it in the center of the cloth," he said.

I did so. There was a single shriveled strawberry and a few old bottle caps.

"You will be gathering the cloth around the items and holding it fast with the wire, but before you do that you need to add something of your own," said the voice.

*Here we go , I thought. Here comes the organ harvesting.*

"You must whisper a secret you've never told another living soul into the cloth before you seal it."

At that, I actually looked over my shoulder at the intercom. I bit back a, "You're kidding, right?" and settled for a snort. There was a pause and then the voice added in a low rumble, "Do this in earnest, boy. I'll know the difference."

The room felt a few degrees colder. I shuddered. "I will," I said weakly. I felt an odd, external sort of pressure coaxing the words from me. I tried to shake it off, and turned my attention back to the little cloth in my hands. It was actually sorta hard to think of some hidden thing I had never told another person, but I managed it.

"I stole \$10 from my mother's purse after she wouldn't let me go to Tyler Triplett's birthday party," I whispered. Then, I gathered the cloth into a small pouch and wound the wire into a closure.

"Good," said the voice. "Now, dip the cloth into the bucket and place it back in the box. Continue in this fashion until you end your shift. Lock the doors behind you as you leave."

I dipped the cloth in the bucket. I still couldn't tell what was in there. Tea maybe or just dirty water. It was too thin to be any of the grosser options I could come up with. I returned the dripping little bag back into the box and pressed the pedal just enough to bring the next section of wood in front of me.

This time, there was a half-smashed pocket watch and a couple of those goldfish crackers. I gathered them into the cloth, whispered, "I used to masturbate to JC Penney catalogs," into the bundle, then sealed, dipped, and returned it before moving on to the next one.

I was surprised how quickly I could come up with unique secrets. I never would have guessed I had so many secrets, but they flowed out of me faster and faster even as my speed increased with the repetitive little gestures of the work. It was actually kind of fun. Cathartic.

When I came to a box containing a little finger, my mood changed. It was a pale, bloodless little thing that weighed nothing at all. It looked like it might have belonged to a child. With it, was a scrap of denim and three perfect little tiny teeth.

My stomach twisted a bit and I swallowed back hard on my impulse to wretch. I looked at the little bits of another human being laid out on the tiny black cloth in front of me and felt my initial shock and surprise galvanize into something cold and numb. If possible, the emptiness was even worse than the horror that was trying to gain some sort of footing in my disparate thoughts.

I stood up, turned from the belt and walked to the door. Some part of my brain warned me about angering whoever was behind this place, but my body was on autopilot. It

registered that the situation had become unacceptable and was, consequently, removing me from it. Just as simple as that.

I walked back into the miniature lobby, which seemed absurdly bright after the production room, and turned to walk out the front door. But, something stopped me. A shape in my peripheral vision. I turned toward it. There, in the metal drawer that jutted from the wall beneath the security window, was the little rectangle of a check.

I picked it up. It had my name on it. And, next to my name, a number: \$1,000. The memo line read: Two Hours.

I blinked at the little slip of paper for a moment and felt something strange. A smile was stretching my face. I looked from the check back to the door of the production room. I thought of the little finger. The teeth. *Lots of industries use cadavers*, I thought to myself. Are medical students evil? Are dentists dangerous? I had jumped to an unfair conclusion. Whatever this business is, I reasoned that it must be regulated by somebody.

I folded the check and placed it in my wallet. Then, I retrieved the 1040 W-9 from the drawer and filled in my information. I sent the drawer back through the wall with a clank and turned and locked the production room door with my little silver key.

I had to unlock the front door to exit. I did so and began to step out onto the sidewalk when I felt eyes on my back. I turned to see the young woman standing on the other side of the window. She stood perfectly motionless, watching me with wide eyes. Directly behind her was a man. He was head and shoulders taller than she, but rail-thin. He looked to be wearing an ill-fitted suit of some odd, ropey material that streamed down from his skeletal frame. His face was a featureless gray mask.

Probably one of those sterile suits for working with sensitive equipment, I figured. I waved at them both and mouthed, "See you tomorrow." The man and woman waved in eerily perfect unison. I nodded cheerfully, shut and locked the front entrance, and headed off to pay my rent and buy a steak.



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Formerly, **Jarod Anderson** taught college English. Currently, he works at a foundation that raises money for a wide range of college scholarships. He writes about education by day and ghosts, monsters, and madmen by

night. It's a good arrangement. Jarod's work has appeared in *Daily Science Fiction*, *Escape Pod*, *The Colored Lens*, and elsewhere. Jarod is a fan of comic books, John Milton, tattoos, pulp detective novels, herpetology, folklore, video games, and all things sci-fi, fantasy, and horror. Growing up, he wanted to be either a ninja or a maple tree. These aspirations led him to teach college English. Teaching college English led him to change careers. He lives in Central Ohio and in the laughter of children.

# Haze

KS Dearsley

Spring was always the hardest time: the air was laden with guilt. Arno breathed it in with the smell of sap rising. Spring was reddening the tips of the dogwood and swelling the ends of twigs with its promise. Arno felt its pull, sweet and sad, a time of things passing. He glanced towards the house. Its veranda remained empty. He had bought the place where the mountains met the desert because he had thought it would remind Melian of Lyria. The thought of the lavender planet made him glance at the sky in the direction where he believed the planet ought to be. He went indoors.

The sound of the news holo drew Arno to the lounge. Melian was standing in the middle of holo images of Elector Gogard pushing his way into counsel chambers through rival bands of protesters. Those draped in varying shades of lavender and violet were as muscular and vocal as the grey-clad followers of the Sanctified Path. Melian's eyes glittered and his-her cheeks were flushed as if she-he was feeling spring after all. Then Arno noticed that the hermaphrodite's elegant fingers were crushed into fists.

"We have to go to the capital." Melian's contralto could make 'hello' sound like opera. Now it raised goose-pimples on Arno's forearms. She-he swept a gesture through the holo image of Intercessor Chell of the Sanctified Path. Arno had often felt like doing the same to the real man. His lip automatically twisted, but Melian shook his-her head.

"In this, he and I agree."

As Arno concentrated on the news interview, for a moment the holo of the intercessor was overlaid on Melian's features. The sensation was disturbing. Chell smiled at the interviewer. He could have been a bank manager turning down a loan application.

"See what contact with the decadent society of Lyria has already done?" The holo followed his gaze to the lavender-clad protesters. Arno snorted.

"Wait," Melian said.

"If Government agrees to Elector Gogard's demands for free trade with the planet, Earth would become ever more tainted..."

Arno exploded. "Free trade! Are they mad?"

Melian rolled his-her eyes, silencing him.

The interviewer put another question. "And what of Lyrian claims that we're endangering their planet's ecosystem?"

"Irrelevant."

Arno wanted to take a wet dishcloth to the intercessor's smile. Chell followed the elector into the counsel chamber and Arno cut the transmission.

"You see?" Melian said.

"I see the same bigoted greedy fools we've had to deal with ever since we came back." Arno sighed. "Okay. We'll go to the talks."

"Thank you." Melian put his-her hand on Arno's arm and Arno covered it with his own.

"I could go on my own," Arno said and immediately had a flashback of Lyria; the naked androgynous bodies of people swaying in the quickening breeze. He had thought it some kind of ritual greeting of his ship, not realizing that the lavender aura that swirled in the air, forming patterns he had been able to see even in orbit, was not clinging to their exposed bodies but emanating from them. How could he leave Melian with spring waking?

"The closed minds of the sanctified ones do not hurt me," Melian said. "I came here to learn and teach."

"I'd hoped you'd come to share life with me as well." Arno felt guilty even as he said it. "You gave up everything. Why can't these 'sanctified' ones see that? Everything."

"I might never have borne fruit if I'd stayed on Lyria either. Not all of us do." She-he put his-her arm around Arno's shoulders. It was not depriving the Lyrian of offspring that caused his guilt but the fact that he was glad of it.



There was plenty of time for reflection during their journey to the capital despite frequent recognition by their fellow passers on the super-track. Arno had suggested hiring a personal flier but Melian had rejected the idea.

"How are we to tell what the people think if we do not go among them?"

Arno had acquiesced. If Melian was prepared to put up with the irritation of Earth's dirt-laden air, he could tolerate people staring at the 'hero of the Lyrian mission.' Lyria had been a hazy arc wrapped in gauze through the window of the ship as he had begun his descent. Only the merest tremble in his breath as he had reported on his ship's status had revealed his excitement. For the full length of the landing procedures, Arno had thought of himself as the hero of the Lyria mission, then he had stepped onto the planet. Pre-mature Lyrians had

approached. He had turned to follow what he thought was their awe-struck gaze and saw it, the great rent his ship had torn in the violet swirls. Hero? Mass murderer, and yet they had treated him with courtesy and compassion. Maybe it was this that caused such disbelief. If a Lyrian had committed such an atrocity on Earth, there would have been calls to wipe out all of their kind. How could Arno have been forgiven if the violet dust was indeed the catalyst for Lyrian reproduction?

As if catching his thoughts, Melian said: "We will make them understand."

Arno shook his head. "It's not in their interest to."

Melian smiled at something beyond his shoulder and Arno sighed: another one! A saucer-eyed boy sidled up to his seat and held out a marker pad.

"Can I have your print please?" He spoke to Arno, but his stare was for Melian.

Arno handed the pad back to him.

The boy hesitated. "Are you male or female?" He finally blurted at Melian.

"Don't you use the ed-interface?" Arno said.

The boy nodded. "But the news holos say Lyrians tell us their planet's covered in baby dust to keep us out."

Melian tried to hide a grin. "Well, now you have seen me. What do you think?"

"I think you're beautiful." The words tumbled out and the boy made a dash back to his seat.

"Baby dust!" Arno shook his head, but the boy was right about one thing: Melian was beautiful. His-her wheat-colored hair had a sheen and his-her long limbs had recovered their fluid grace. The Lyrian had been growing sere little by little. Arno had not realized it until now. He gulped down panic and tried to concentrate on their destination.



They almost made it up the steps to the counsel chamber unnoticed. Melian's height and gliding grace should have caught people's gaze anywhere, particularly here, where so many had gathered with opinions on his-her kind, but they arrived as Intercessor Chell emerged, and the violet-clad protesters were too busy chanting against him and his followers to see anything else. A shriek warned Arno and Melian that they had been spotted. There was an immediate cloud of lavender-hued chiffon as the 'haze' users began waving their arms in an imitation of the quickening.



"There we see the cause of this orgiastic filth that's degrading Earth society!"

Intercessor Chell's voice was muffled by the cloth he bundled in front of his mouth and nose.

The tilt of Melian's head and his-her half smile warned Arno. He grabbed the Lyrian's arm before she-he could turn back to speak to the Intercessor.

"Not now. Let's see how the land lies first."

Inside, they found the discussions were in recess. Groups of delegates stood in knots or mingled, flowing between one and another, forming and reforming alliances and obligations like grains of sand swirled in a pail of water. Melian and Arno drifted among them. Whenever the Lyrian appeared in public, people assumed that Arno would be at his-her side, and did not look for him elsewhere. It made it easy for him to wander away and eavesdrop. He lingered by a table laden with soft drinks and energy bites where two delegates were discussing the morning's proceedings while hesitating over the platters.

"Come on, Jameson, download. I know you've had a ship orbiting Lyria for the past cycle. What is it? Black-market Lyrian metals?" said one around a mouthful of something pink.

The other delegate continued loading his plate.

"Haze then."

"You'll see."

Arno caught the look that passed between the delegate and Elector Gogard. Put Arno and the elector side by side and no one would be in any doubt that it was Gogard who was the hero. Yet there was something in his smile, which never penetrated beyond skin depth, that made Arno uneasy. Seeing that smile shared with the trade delegate gave his uneasiness a sour taste. The elector must have felt Arno's look. His gaze shifted to the former astro-explorer, and the insincere smile grew wider as he approached with hand outstretched.

"So, our 'hero' has come to keep an eye on us."

Arno would have ignored the hand, but Melian had glided away from a group of the curious and came to stand beside him.

"Melian." Elector Gogard hesitated then bowed. Humans could still only see things as either-or. Even the elector felt awkward in face of and-both.

"You didn't think we would miss such important discussions, surely." Arno gave the elector's hand a firm shake, and was gratified to see Gogard wince.

"The country air suits you, Melian. You're blooming. Naturally, since your retirement from public life no one believed you would want to come, otherwise I would have ensured that you and your... er... partner were invited."

Arno glanced at Melian to see if she-he felt the sting of the compliment. His-her smile remained serene. She-he shook his-her head at Arno's anxious expression. "The time is long past," she-he said. Yet Arno could still smell spring.

A ripple of muttering spread from the doorway.

"Ah, the intercessor returns. Time, I think, to find our seats again." Gogard signaled a steward. "Make sure our guests have places on the dais."

There, they would be in full view, honored guests or exhibits. Arno did not like it, but there was no time to argue. Intercessor Chell swept past, a trail of grey acolytes in his wake creating eddies of disturbance that started a flow of delegates back into the counsel chamber. They took their places. As Elector Gogard recapped the meeting so far, Arno's gaze skimmed over the audience. When Arno had returned to Earth with Melian, the looks that she-he drew might have been full of fear or respect but there was always awe as well, even on the faces of the followers of the Sanctified Path. Arno searched for it now and in many faces it was missing. The trade delegates, in particular, tended to whisper and grin as if she-he was a party doll. Arno tried to breathe in the remembered calm of Lyria. Melian sat at his side with hands folded in his-her lap as if listening to music that no one else could hear.

"So, there it is. For fifteen years we've respected the Lyrian restrictions on trade with the planet. We've done everything they've asked—and now they're claiming that we're threatening the future of their species." Before Gogard could sit down there were shouts from the floor.

"How are we supposed to make a living?"

"They just want to push the prices up."

Intercessor Chell rapped his fist on the arm of his chair. "Leave them to their corruption and foul practices. Their metals are bought at too high a price. All you need to do is step outside to see how their unholy ways are tainting our youth. It's Earth's future that's at risk here, not Lyria's. There are those among you," he pointed accusingly and the audience squirmed, "who trade in their filth..."

"And why not?" Gogard interrupted without raising his voice. The intercessor's shock gave him the silence he needed. The elector produced a phial from his pocket. "I have here a sample of this so-called quickening catalyst, known to our lavender-dressed users as 'haze.'"

Arno was half out of his seat. Melian took his hand. The Lyrian's eyes glittered and she-he sighed. Arno had seen that hunger before and it was not on the faces of the users outside.

Intercessor Chell sat further back in his chair as if simply being close to the dust could pollute him.

"Don't worry, Intercessor," Gogard said, shaking the phial. "The container's sealed, and even if it wasn't there's nothing to fear. I've had the dust analyzed, and you know what? Our poor deluded youths have been breathing in nothing more harmful than amino acids and traces of minerals. Reproductive catalyst? Lyrian sweat." He sat back enjoying the uproar.

"Liar! Tricks!" Someone threw a glass at Melian and the meeting erupted. Arno held his breath, ready to get between Melian and the crowd.

"They've robbed us!"

"Liar!"

Melian's eyes remained fixed on the phial of dust.

Gogard rose once more. "Not liars—mistaken, perhaps. The Lyrians sincerely believe that dust like that in this phial is an essential part of their reproductive process. I'm sure once we enlighten them, they'll remove all their restrictions."

"And how do you propose to do that?" Arno was on his feet. "With battle-liners and strike teams?"

There was a low rumble from the audience that could have been a growl of consent.

"I'm sure that won't be necessary." Gogard's tone was fatherly, but he brandished the phial as if it was a trophy. "No, the Lyrians will see sense, especially with missionaries from the Sanctified Path there to persuade them of their mistake."

Intercessor Chell's tirade against the politician's outrage stopped mid-flow. Elector Gogard was offering him a chance to convert the population of a whole planet—to his glory or God's, it was all the same—and in the process avert a war. Earth would probably bow down and adore him too.

Except that there could be no war. The Lyrians had no missiles and could not launch them if they did—not without destroying the very thing they were trying to protect. The first attack by Earth would disrupt the weather patterns, burn the dust... It might take a generation but then Earth, without directly killing one Lyrian or setting foot on the planet, would have an empty world to take over. Greed and prejudice; both were unknown on Lyria, where the catalyst parent might have come from a few feet away or the other side of the planet. There were no bloodlines or races. All Lyrians were valued equally, for who could say with certainty from whose heritage they sprang? Arno glared at the faces around him, seeing only prejudice and contempt.

"How can you believe him?" he demanded.

"Ah, Arno speaks, the 'hero of Lyria' with his alien lover. If you want proof, it sits right there." Gogard pointed at Melian, who sat with eyes half-closed and his-her breath coming rapidly. "In all the years it's lived here, has there been even a hint of it quickening?"

Arno felt his own breath becoming more rapid. He wanted to mash the elector's face against the table. He turned helplessly to Melian. His-her eyes met Arno's. There was no other way.

"We have no one's word for this except Elector Gogard's. How can we even be sure that it's Lyrian dust in that tube?"

"Is that your best argument?" Gogard held the phial up to the light so that the contents seemed to glow.

"There's only one way we can all be sure: give the dust to Intercessor Chell and let him have it tested."

"Yes." The intercessor's face was exultant. His fingers were already twitching to hold the phial as he approached the elector.

Arno turned to Melian and she-he nodded.

"Ridiculous! The intercessor has a vested interest."

"And you don't? Proof should be left to those who are only interested in the truth and not financial gain." Arno was aware of an angry swell of conflicting noise from the supporters of both groups. Chairs were being scraped back and scuffles breaking out. "He has no right to that dust. If it is real, he stole it. How can you trust the fate of two planets to a thief?" Arno gave the pot another stir, holding his hand out to Melian, who rose as if dazzled by the glow from the dust.

"Only the pure can do God's work!" Intercessor Chell made a grab for the phial. Elector Gogard flung his arm back to keep it from reach. The phial slipped and his fingers tightened around it. There was a crunch as Arno stepped forward and wrapped his fist around Gogard's, pressing it against the shards of glass. Gogard struggled to release his hand and Arno let go so that the elector's arm swept up in an arc scattering a trail of lavender dust that leaked between his fingers. Intercessor Chell snatched his handkerchief in front of his face and fell back, but Arno was only dimly aware of the chaos in the rest of the room. His skin tingled where the dust touched him. Through a blur of tears he watched Melian let his-her robe fall to the floor and enter the cloud of lavender. She-he seemed almost to float in it, his-her arms and body as sinuous as plants in a slow-flowing river.

"Melian," Arno whispered the name, knowing that she-he would not hear him now.

"Obscene! Obscene!" Intercessor Chell's cry brought the rest of the room to a halt. Then even he fell quiet, mesmerized by the slow, graceful dance of the quickening. At first Arno was not sure that he was actually seeing the darker violet hue and that it was not merely an effect of the light, but then Melian's swirling movements made it certain. Arno led him-her by the fingertips through the packed counsel chamber and outside where the spring winds joined Melian in his-her dance and took his-her dust higher and higher, hazier and hazier.

The haze users, the followers of the Sanctified Path, the news holo teams and the curious all saw and all were held by the quiet ecstasy of Melian's quickening.

"Let any of them try to deny it now."

Melian gave no sign of being aware of any of it. The Lyrian's movements were gradually slowing as the moment Arno had dreaded for so long began to pass. He watched, clutching the robe she-he had discarded, ready to wrap the Lyrian in it as if it was a shield of love. At last Melian's arms dropped to his-her sides. She-he shivered and took a deep breath, before raising his-her head and seeing Arno. He could say nothing.

She-he stroked his face. "All things pass."

Arno draped the robe around Melian and he guided him-her away.



They went back to the desert and let the vibrations that Melian's quickening had triggered ripple around the planet faster even than the Lyrian's wind-borne dust. News holos of his-her dance of life were repeated on the hour, it seemed, for days afterwards. Arno recorded them, but could not watch: perhaps one day he would find release in the pain of seeing it again. Extremists and politicians of all shades demanded access to them; the hero of Lyria had become indispensable in devising the new accord between the lavender planet and Earth—and then came the polite enquiries after Melian.

"Blooming," Gogard had said in the counsel chamber, and for a while she-he was. There had always been something of the tall stately flower about him-her.

Intercessor Chell came to their aid. "If I did not believe what my eyes saw, I would have to believe what my heart felt when... "

When Melian had given his-her life. At least the intercessor could now understand Arno's guilt. Melian would have none of it, and Arno could never be quite sure exactly where the real sacrifice had been: avoiding the quickening or embracing it. Either way, Melian's

actions had been driven by love for him and for Lyria, but mostly for him. Looking at the rosy-cheeked fruit of the quickening, Arno could not doubt it. As Melian had begun to brown and wither, his-her hair crinkling and breaking like strands of old leaves and his-her movements becoming jerky as his-her limbs dried to old stalks, the newborn, at first as delicate as a lacewing, had wrapped tendrils of affection around Arno's heart. It did not matter that Arno was not the fruit's progenitor. She-he was Melian's gift to him.

"Don't grieve," Melian had said, his-her voice like the rustle of dry grass. "She-he will love as I have loved."

Arno had tried to promise him-her that he would take the fruit to see Lyria, that he would protect it, even that he would do as Melian asked and not grieve, but no words had come. Melian had smiled.

It was the same smile Arno saw now on the face of his-her offspring. They stood hand in hand and watched as the wind took the sere remains and scattered them across the desert while the intercessor read the service. Melian had always thought the words the most beautiful of all the human rituals: ashes to ashes, dust to dust.



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# For The Heart I Never Had

Raluca Balasa

**T**he shadow fell over every palm and limestone arch. A hush washed over the market as shoppers set down their baskets and gazed up.

In the distance, a gong announced the strike of noon.

That was Azai's signal. Some people spent a few seconds in prayer, others minutes, but merchant and beggar alike took at least a moment to ask for health and a good fall crop. A moment was all Azai needed.

He'd been sitting against the baker's shop, linen draped over his head to keep the sand-flecked wind from his face. As soon as the Sundial tower's shadow touched this part of Sector Twelve, he slid up the wall and ducked into an alley.

For most people, noon meant the Sun had climbed highest in the sky and was at his most powerful, making him more likely to hear their petty little prayers. For Azai, though, it was the only time the Scarab gang fixed their eyes upward instead of on this passage. Why didn't more street rats take advantage of it? Hell, you could cross the Dial to Sector Six and not find a better dumpster than the one behind the baker's hovel. Who'd pass up a feast like that just to respect some god who never respected you back?

*Not everyone can be fearless. They still have souls to lose.*

Two knobbly-kneed Scarab kids were scouring through the dumpster when he arrived, but they scattered like mice at the sight of him. Anyone older than twenty in the Dial's slums wasn't to be taken lightly, and he knew his beard made him look near forty. He snarled at them as they passed, just for good measure.

"Get out of here. Go pray for Lord Kubrick's happy marriage or something."

One of the boys glanced over his shoulder before skidding around the corner, as if surprised someone so wild-looking could talk. Another had once looked at Azai like that, with mingled fear and wonder and a touch of jealousy. If only he'd paid more attention to those looks.

Suppressing the memory, Azai leapt into the dumpster. He'd need to be quick. Those shits would come back with the Scarab elders in a few minutes, assuming the elders had finished their prayers by then. Amazing how the worst people he knew were some of the most pious. He grabbed a husk of bread and didn't bother scratching the mould away before sinking his teeth in it. The taste of mould had made him gag seven years ago, but now it had

become food's most basic component. You couldn't dislike mould any more than you could barley or grain or rice. To think he'd once—

*"Ahem."*

Azai pulled the onyx dagger from the sheath at his side, and in another second whirled and threw it at the newcomer.

There was a startled "Oh!" as it sailed an inch above her head.

The woman—at least two hand-spans shorter than the Scarab leader he'd expected—stood frozen with a wrinkled hand pressed to her chest. Azai studied her. The braided white hair and bangles around her wrists, the pleated black dress, the kohl-outlined eyes—this was no beggar come to steal his spot.

"I've heard of you," she said. "The one whose weapons answer his call. You walk invisible in the moonlight and charm with a flick of your eyes."

Azai's mouth went dry. He forced a mad chuckle and stuffed more bread into his face until the half-masticated stuff slopped into his beard. "You charmed yet, or am I losing my touch?"

She looked unimpressed. Azai returned to the dumpster, feigning nonchalance, but kept his calves tensed in case he'd need to make a quick move, aggressive or otherwise. Yet another reflex that had never left him, like hurling daggers at people who surprised him. You didn't forget that sort of instinct. Even if you no longer remembered your favourite songs, you still knew how to read music. You would always *know*, but what good was knowing when all the papyrus had been burned and the music lost forever?

"Call your dagger," the woman said suddenly.

He sighed, setting down his bread. "Mother, if I could call things at will, I'd be eating cake instead of this. I am *not* the one you seek."

"No," she agreed, "but you will be again. The master of all trades, they called you once. The Faceless Mercenary. *Nightstrider*."

Slowly, Azai turned. Her small eyes were bright even in the all-encompassing shadow, searching him. "You're an Oracle," he whispered.

She smiled.

Before Azai knew it, before he even processed leaping from the dumpster, he'd grabbed her by her robes and slammed her against the wall. She didn't flinch, but he hadn't expected her to. Oracles went out every night, unveiled from the Moon's evil, to gaze upon the stars. Nothing frightened them. He'd been the same, once.

"I need my cards re-made," he hissed.



"What you need," she said calmly, "is a bath."

"There must be a way."

"Of course! You simply walk into the bathhouse and—"

He slammed her again. "Damn you! Without them I'm nothing, Mother, lower than an animal! If you need my services, I need my cards." He managed to control himself long enough to release her and pull back. Every muscle in his body shook. "Otherwise all I can do is exterminate the fire ants in your hovel, if you have any."

Her look spoke of pity. "Is that what people hire you for these days? Sun's rays, how many cards have you lost?"

"I've lost nothing," Azai growled. "They were stolen." She frowned and he added under his breath, "All of them."

His Fearlessness card had blinded him. He hadn't believed anything could hurt him, let alone the mousy young man with jet black hair who shadowed him on every job. He'd chosen to ignore every spiteful gaze, tear, and cautioning word from that man. Even after the poisoned wine had paralyzed Azai, he had laughed in his attacker's face. *You are nothing without me*, he'd said.

The man had nodded as he heated his tools over an open fire. *That's why I'm taking you with me.*

The Oracle's voice jolted Azai from his reverie. "You mean to say that you haven't tapped into a single card—"

"In seven years," Azai finished. It was like losing every brain function save the basic bodily rhythms, like his senses had dimmed to the point where he wasn't sure he was still sentient. You could live like that, unaware that you were alive. Most animals did. He rubbed his beard, remembering the way he'd growled at those Scarab brats. *I don't have enough humanity left to even mourn its loss.*

"How did you find me?" he said. "I've spent years looking for one of you people."

The Oracle shook her head. "A man who doesn't pray at noon is a man with nothing to lose. You are by far the sorriest of these men I've tracked, Azai Nightstrider. I'd hoped you still had *something*."

"I don't. Find another mercenary to do your dirty work."

"It has to be you," she said. "The stars demand it. Only you can kill him."

Great. Of all jobs, she wanted an assassination. Much to ask of someone who no longer even had the resolve to wash himself.

"I can't kill a fuckin' gnat without my cards," he told her. "My Bravery's gone, my Invisibility, Disguise, everything. I can't even move soundlessly anymore."

"That dagger didn't throw itself. Reflexes like that—"

"Are useless without Precision, which I no longer have. If I did, you'd be dead."

Her mouth tightened. "I cannot make you a new deck, Azai. As long as your cards still exist, they are bound to you. No Invisibility card will take you for its master when one of its brethren has already claimed you."

"Give me new abilities, then," he urged. "Make me fly, breathe fire, *anything!*"

"If your original deck didn't include Flight, that power is not yours to harness."

Sun above, this was too much. Azai banged his fist against the alley wall, savouring the *crack* of grinding knuckles, the pain that lanced through his wrist, and the fire in his chest filling him with life. "*His* deck didn't include anything worth spitting on!" he screamed. "But now he uses my Disguise, my Silence, and all I have left is—"

She leaned forward. He bit his tongue.

"You still have cards," she finished for him. "Show me."

"They're worse than nothing," Azai said. "The bastard left me two of his weakest traits, and trust me when I say they are all pathetic. He thought I wouldn't resist tapping in. Even though they'd make me weak, he thought I'd use them."

The Oracle raised an eyebrow as if to say, *And this degenerate state is what you call strength?* Sighing, Azai reached past his waistband and pulled out two cards encased in glass. Most people didn't carry cards on them for fear of being mugged, but Azai didn't care much if these ended up stolen. They were so thin they all but disappeared when turned to the side, and silver designs curled like smoke around their edges. Azai's old cards had never *moved* this much. These seemed almost alive, the way they extended long tendrils in and out again.

The Oracle studied them with a frown. "You didn't let them adhere," she said.

Azai's hand went to the place over his heart where Bravery had sat. You could still see the groove in his flesh. He showed her the undersides of his arms, Disguise and Precision respectively, now just scar tissue. Catuna had pried them off with hot pincers. Despite getting rid of his weaknesses—the cards Azai now held—the bastard had cried as Azai screamed. The only thing worse than being betrayed by a brother was when that brother didn't really mean it.

"These pieces of shit aren't mine," Azai said. "They're part of *him*. I won't have anything to do with them."

*I won't have them!* Catuna had screamed at the Oracle on his tenth nameday. *They hurt, Mother. I want cards like Azai's!*

*You know nothing*, the Oracle had answered. *Your cards must be opposites if you are to work together as one.*

"You know nothing." Azai snapped his gaze up, a shiver running down his spine to hear those same words from this woman's lips. The Oracle stared down at his cards.

"Wittingly or not, Catuna Cardthief has left you a great gift. These can make you a more celebrated mercenary than Nightstrider ever was."

"Do you take me for a fool, Mother?"

"I took you for a killer," she said. Her eyes snapped to his, challenging. "Was I wrong?"

"You expect me to kill with Empathy and Selflessness?"

"If you were so certain of their uselessness, you would have destroyed them."

And he would have, if only he... would have. *Damn it!*

"Tell you what," he said, squeezing the cards in his fist. He could feel them squirming against their glass casings, trying to reach his flesh. "Ask Catuna to kill your target. He has all the skills I no longer possess. *He's* the best mercenary in the Dial now, not me."

The beginnings of a smile wrinkled the corners of her mouth. "I doubt very much that he would oblige me, Nightstrider. A man that powerful isn't likely to kill himself."

Silence stretched between them. In his fist, Empathy and Selflessness trembled.

"Tell me how," Azai whispered.

"You're incomplete. Empty. Bond with those cards and you will have what you need to destroy the Cardthief."

It was rumoured that Oracles worked in strange ways, that their methods should never be questioned nor their visions doubted, but how in all the hells would these things help him when they'd only deterred Catuna?

*These are the best and the worst of me, brother. Treat them well.*

Azai unclenched his fist and stared down at the traits Catuna had resented so deeply, shuddering in their casings, weeping to be so alone. Only the thought of their suffering had kept him from bonding with them on those nights the withdrawal effects had made him delirious. As long as he suffered, some part of Catuna would suffer too. That had been good enough.

Now he carefully lifted Empathy from its case and held the card over his forearm. He paused there, watching it squirm. A scowl twisted his lips. Disguise would have never whined like that.

*A man who doesn't pray at noon is a man with nothing to lose.*

He let go, and Empathy settled over the scar in his forearm, its grooves and designs melting into his skin. Azai fell to his knees as a burning warmth spread through him.

In the distance a gong rang, and the shadow of the giant Sundial tower lifted from the edges of Sector Twelve to settle over Sector One in the southeast.

That was just before the mudbrick smacked Azai across the temple.



Day had become night when Azai woke, and his lips were powdered with dust. Sand had settled in his eyelashes and beard, choking him every time he drew breath. Out of instinct, he stifled his cough.

Slowly, testing every muscle, he struggled to his knees. He'd been moved down into a deep, open cellar without a staircase in sight. His wrists and ankles were bound, but he'd woken up in worse situations. That wasn't why fear strangled him. It was something else, something all around him, something cold, pervasive.

The moonlight.

Legend had it that the Moon imposed evil thoughts upon the peasants who passed under her gaze as surely as the Sun warmed those he looked upon. Pure-blooded nobles had the Sun's favour on their side and less to fear from that seductress, his counterpart, but Azai's blood was as common as it came. Still, even after losing Bravery, he'd never been superstitious. Now he wanted to shrink away from the Moon's milky light as if it were poison.

Leaning against the cellar wall, he tried to spit but found his mouth too dry. Blood trickled from his temple where he'd been hit, and sand crusted the side of his face. He couldn't stop clenching his hand into a fist, an anxious mannerism that felt somewhat familiar. What the hell was going on?

Then he saw it: the human outline at the other end of the cellar, standing just shy of a beam of moonlight. The figure flickered in and out of view, posture hunched, right hand clenching over and over again.

Azai looked down at his own restless hand. He forced it still.

A ten-year-old boy had once stood with him in a perfumed parlour room, clenching his fist in that same agitated way until Azai had smacked him across the face and told him to get a grip. The boy had sobered, but the tension had never left his body. He'd looked ready to bolt. It was like he'd known, even then, he would never be whole. That his cards would be useless for a life in the black market without Azai's cards to balance them out. After all, their master's funds were limited and the man had already spent most of his money on Azai five years earlier.

It wasn't his own unease Azai was feeling, but this boy's.

The shadow's.

As if on cue, it turned and ambled toward him. The patterns on Azai's forearm stretched to his shoulder, and warmth spread through his body again. For that moment he saw everything through the shadow's eyes. He understood. *Catuna*.

The bastard was using Invisibility, but his fear of the night took up too much of his concentration and caused him to flicker. A carefully contained anger burned within him. Despite the smirk on his face, he felt as uncertain as he'd been on his tenth nameday when his older brother had first taken him to see the Oracle.

"How are you enjoying Empathy, Azai?" the shadow asked, his voice resonating like a drum in a cave.

"I feel nothing, brother," Azai lied.

Catuna settled into view. "What gave me away?"

"You were convincing enough with Disguise—in the sun. Now you're overusing Bravery to control your terror of the Moon, and that makes Invisibility weak."

Catuna grinned. "Was that a genuine piece of advice from He Who Brings the Night? Empathy works better than I expected."

Shit, it was true. Azai hadn't said that to poke fun at Catuna's fear; he'd just felt this perverse need to... *help*.

"What's the point?" Azai demanded, leaning against the wall. "I was weak before you did this. I was no threat to you, but you always have to make a show of things—"

Catuna aimed a kick at his ribs, but Empathy flared again and Azai dodged the blow. He fell sideways, sending a swirl of dust into the air. Catuna looked down at him with a frown. "I'd almost forgotten," he murmured.

"That Empathy lets you read people's minds?" Azai laughed, but it didn't reach his heart. "What'd you keep complaining about? This is great!"

"Empathy is understanding and feeling," Catuna explained, as if to a child. Azai saw the blue patterns of Patience grow starkly visible against his brother's arms and neck. "That's different than mind-reading. You understand what I'm inclined to do because you feel the same inclination. You're paralyzed by my fears and limited by my weaknesses. What was my greatest weakness, Azai?"

Azai could think of a million snide retorts, but his heart ached at the thought of saying them. Empathy wound around him like a snake, bleeding him dry. Breathing heavily, he closed his eyes and said, "Being my brother."

"And what made that a weakness?"

Azai remembered the Oracle's words like the clear ring of glass, words he'd never comprehended until looking through Catuna's eyes. *You will bind your soul to him. You will understand him and be the conscience he cannot have. He will be the blade in your hand, the speed in your legs. Together you will make a whole. The most talented whole the Dial has seen in five hundred years.*

"Empathy," Azai whispered.

"And Selflessness. I was to sacrifice my own life to serve *you*, my better half. Tell me, brother: is that fair?"

White-hot rage washed Azai's insides. He struggled to his knees again, then stared up at Catuna's silhouette against the pale moon. "I was bound to you just as you were to me. I needed your Strategy, your Patience."

Catuna shook his head. "You still don't understand. You needed my skills to make you the master of all trades, so you put up with me. Ambition is one thing you never lacked. What kept me shackled to *your* side? I never received recognition for a job well done. No one would know how often I stopped you from an imprudent assassination or kidnapping. So the Oracle chained me in another way: with Empathy."

Again that pang of rage, and Azai realized it was Catuna's. *His chains were tighter than mine. They left him raw.*

"You couldn't hurt me any more than you could hurt yourself," Azai said for the both of them. "If I bled, you suffered. Your fear of pain kept you from destroying me all those years you dreamt of stealing my cards."

Catuna grabbed a fistful of Azai's hair and dragged him to his feet, then slammed him against the wall so hard Azai saw purple splotches, as if he'd been staring at the Sun. *That's right. He's got Strength now.*

"You're a shit, Azai." The voice came in waves. "But the Oracle was right; we're incomplete separately. I need Empathy to temper Ruthlessness. Otherwise..." His hand tightened on the front of Azai's ragged tunic. "I do things no man should do, unforgivable things. They're bad for business."

Looking into his brother's eyes, Azai saw the truth. Empathy snaked around his arm and branched onto his chest and neck, constricting every muscle it touched.

*I grow stunted in the shadow of your greatness. I'm the brain nobody sees, the heart that pumps when you forget it's there. What are you? The muscles, the tendons, the bones. I hate you, but I can't hurt you without hurting myself.*

Hatred? But that had been Azai's card.

"You learned Hatred from me through Empathy. Then you ripped Empathy from yourself so you could hurt me," Azai said. He wasn't even biding for time anymore; he wanted to understand. "And you left Selflessness for good measure."

Yet the Oracle's words had held true. Without those cards Catuna was still incomplete, as both a human and a successful mercenary. He needed Empathy; he just didn't want to suffer the pain of it. And because bonding with a card could only be done willingly, his best chance had been to trick Azai into making the bond.

"Now you've reversed our roles," Azai whispered. "Only you kept Planning and Patience and everything else you needed to be your own mastermind."

Moonlight danced in Catuna's eyes. "Enjoy your new chains, brother."

With a flick of his dagger, he cut Azai's bonds.

No sooner did the rope fall than Selflessness began expanding up Azai's other arm until its cold silver tentacles snaked up his cheek. He shook with the power flowing through him, more terrible than the physical power he'd held before. It was certainty, clarity, and a deep suffering that brought the world crashing down on his shoulders.

"Even with Empathy and Selflessness," he heard himself say, "you couldn't love me."

Catuna blinked. "Oh, I did. I just couldn't keep it up. I understood you too well, and after a while I had to stop pretending I saw something there." He stepped forward until only a sliver of moonlight separated them. "You're empty, Azai."

*I sit in the shadows, crying as you complete the murder I orchestrated on our master's order. When you come for me, you smell of blood and dirt and rain. I look into your eyes and see nothing, not even the pride of a job well done. The cards I'm missing make me physically weak, but you are nothing but a vessel of death.*

"Not you, though," Azai murmured. His eyes stung. "You have a good heart that you've poisoned with cards meant for someone else. Someone with nothing to lose."

Catuna's anxiety speared through him, though Azai saw none of it on the man's smiling face. "Nice try, but I'm not giving them back."

Azai barely heard him. His mind worked furiously, putting together the pieces that had never before fit. Of course he hadn't been able to mourn the loss of his humanity after losing his cards. He'd never had any. He hadn't really been alive until now.

*I try to wake you up, but you refuse to think. You smile at me but there's no one home. Charm tells you the words to say, but you don't know their meaning.*

There was still a sliver of life in Catuna, life he'd unwittingly breathed into the tool in his hand. The man had grown attached to his sword and then resented it when it couldn't love him back.

"You miscalculated just one thing," Azai said. Selflessness met Empathy on his arms and they intertwined. "I've never feared pain."

Catuna stopped mid-turn. Though he had Dexterity and Strength on his side, Azai could anticipate how Catuna would react. He feigned left—he was left-handed—and then darted for the dagger on Catuna's right as his brother took the bait. Seeing him with the dagger in hand, Catuna paled, then forced a laugh. Empathy shot pangs of fear down Azai's spine.

"You can't hurt me," Catuna said, dark hair vivid against the pallor of his skin. "Empathy won't let you. I'm stronger than you are. Smarter. Don't you see? I'm finally *whole*."

"No." Azai flipped the dagger in his hand. "Not yet."

Catuna's eyes grew impossibly wide. He tried to become invisible, but his natural tendency toward anxiety had him flickering in and out of view again. *What sort of creature,* Azai felt Catuna think, *can break Empathy's bonds so easily?*

But Azai wasn't breaking Empathy. He was using it, and Selflessness, to right his master's wrongs. He and Catuna had been created greedily, he with too much physicality and not enough mental and emotional intelligence, Catuna the opposite. There needed to be a whole.

The dagger found its way between Azai's ribs and black blood oozed between his fingers.



Catuna came into sharp focus again. He stared at Azai even as Empathy and Selflessness detached from their dying host to reach long tendrils toward him. Azai crumpled to his knees. He grabbed Catuna's robes in a shaking fist.

Catuna stepped back.

"Take my hand," Azai said. "Take the cards. Don't be afraid."

Still Catuna hesitated. Using his draining Empathy, Azai blinked away the darkness and said, "Don't let me die alone."

Hands eased him to the ground. Empathy and Selflessness bled from him like the life from his body, and he only vaguely became aware of the black mist that was Ruthlessness evaporating from Catuna into the night. There was no room for it now... no room...

Disguise went too, and Invisibility, replaced by intertwining strands of silver and purple that made Catuna glow. He was screaming something, holding Azai's face in both hands. Azai knew too well how it felt having all your best cards chased away. Oh, he knew.

And as the last strands of Empathy left him, he smiled. Nightstrider always got his revenge.



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**Raluca Balasa** recently graduated from the University of Toronto with a major in English and a double minor in Cinema Studies and Psychology. Her short work has appeared in *The Lorelei Signal*, *The Danforth Review*, and U of T's speculative fiction magazine, *The Spectatorial*. When she's not writing, she can be found playing the piano or spilling things. Raluca's approach to writing is character-oriented. She's fascinated by love-hate relationships, antiheroes and antagonists who make you agree with them. She believes speculative fiction and literary fiction are not mutually exclusive terms, and that anyone who thinks so is a snob. Currently, Raluca is the agency assistant for a literary agency in Toronto. Her favourite living things are birds.

## Graphic Story: Shamrock #3

Shamrock, part 3  
Fury Uncaged

Josh Brown  
Story

Alberto Hernandez  
Art















# Interview with Author Fran Wilde

**F**ran Wilde is an author and technology consultant. Her first novel, *Updraft*, is forthcoming from Tor/Macmillan in September of 2015. Her short stories have appeared in publications including *Asimov's*, *Beneath Ceaseless Skies*, *Nature*, and *Tor.com*. Her interview series *Cooking the Books*—about the intersection between food and fiction—has appeared at *Strange Horizons*, *Tor.com*, and on her blog, [franwilde.wordpress.com](http://franwilde.wordpress.com). You can find her on Twitter @fran\_wilde and Facebook @franwildewrites.

## Q&A

**Julian: Fran, give us a little history of you: how/where did you grow up, what were the influences in your life, and what do you think steered you toward who you are today?**

Fran: I grew up outside of Philadelphia and on the Chesapeake Bay. I was raised by several sailboats and a library.

Influences in my life: always books, fantastical stories, poetry, music. A dear teacher gave me a copy of Louise Erdich's collected poetry, another introduced me to Borges, a third to Milton; the choral group I sang with in high school performed *Carmina Burana*; and the local indie bookstore and the town library fed my hunger for Jack Chalker and C.J. Cherryh, Flannery O'Connor, Elizabeth Bishop, and Anne McCaffrey. An art teacher taught me how to sketch on the run. Later teachers introduced me to the poets I still visit with in the mornings: Wyzlawa Szymborska, George Oppen, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Louise Gluck, Ana Ahkmatova and Italo Calvino. My father in law gave me Bulgakov. The programmers I studied and worked with and the writers who have grown from teachers and mentors to friends and colleagues—Gregory Frost, Elizabeth Bear, Steven Brust, Sherwood Smith, Debra Doyle and James D. Macdonald, Patrick and Teresa Nielsen Hayden, Walter Jon Williams, Nancy Kress—they're all influences. So is, frankly, everyone I meet—but listing everyone here would go over your word count.

I think all of it—poetry and code, fiction and nonfiction, sailing and singing—brought me here. I'm as curious as you where it will take me next.

**I can trace your earliest short stories to 2011, but you also published some poetry before that. How did you get involved with writing?**

My earliest poem is traceable to second grade and it is a very dire thing about the horrors of winter sports. The only known source of this poem has been hidden away on an island set



within a trunked manuscript draft placed in a box and shipped to the international space station. After that, I got better, and I still write poetry, as well as fiction.

I am a writer in a family of engineers, and so I think I was encouraged to keep up my writing so that I could better proofread their papers. This has served me well as other engineers and scientists have let me interview them about *their* projects—from microfluidic bubble pumps, atomic teleportation, and biochemical computers, to bridges, nuclear power plants, and aquariums. It helps pay the bills.

**Can you name a defining moment in your writing career?**

When someone dared me to write a novel in 90 days, and I did it. When I mailed back my first *Asimov's* contract. Signing the deal for *Updraft*.

**When did you decide this is what you want to do for the rest of your life?**

I don't think I've ever not wanted to write. But I also work on a lot of different projects, both to stay current with various industries, and to remind myself that there are always problems to solve and different ways to solve them.

**You also teach writing and digital media. Tell us a little bit of that part of your life. What is teaching for you?**

I love talking with students about their work and their inspirations, and introducing them to new writers and methods. I've taught high school, college, and graduate school. The energy in a classroom when students find what they love and find new ways to shape it? That's amazing no matter whether we're talking about words or code.

**In the past, you've attended the *Viable Paradise* and *Taos Toolbox* writing workshops. How was that experience for you, how did it help your writing, and would you recommend young writers to try them out?**

Workshops aren't for everyone, but for me, they meant community and still do. When I went to *Viable Paradise*, I was fairly widely read, and had experience with critiques, but had never spent a week with as many people who loved to read what I loved to read, and who loved to write it too. There, and at *Taos*, I was encouraged to push myself beyond what I was already doing, and that means everything, including finding those people who will challenge you, and who want you to challenge them right back.

**Let's turn to your short stories: you published many and most of them in well-known magazines, such as *Asimov's*. Among your works, what are some of your favorite stories and why?**

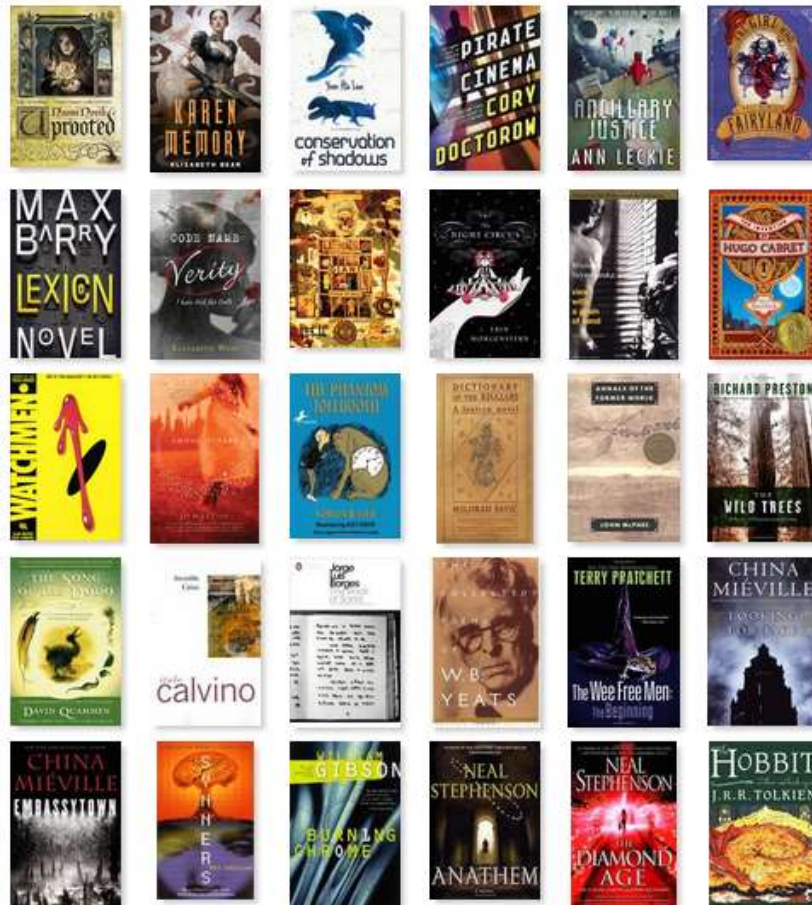
This is the dreaded "which of your children do you love best" question—and for me it's often the short story or stories I've finished most recently—"How to Walk Through Historic Graveyards in the Post-Digital Age," (*Asimov's* April/May 2015); "You are Two Point Three Meters from Your Destination," *Uncanny*, April 2015; the short story coming from *Beneath Ceaseless Skies* in September, "Bent the Wing, Dark the Cloud," (set in the *Updraft/Bone* Universe); and the novella "The Jewel and Her Lapidary," coming from *Tor.com* next year.

**Since we're talking favorites: could you name some of your favorite authors and stories/novels in the genre?**

And this is the "Which of your parents do you love best" question!

In the genre, favorite authors include (In no order whatsoever, and mixing short story writers with novelists): Erin Mortgenstern, Genevieve Valentine, Vernor Vinge, N.K. Jemisin, William Gibson, Neal Stephenson, Nalo Hopkinson, Aliette de Bodard, Andy Duncan, Mikhail Bulgakov, Borges, China Mieville, Elizabeth Bear, Ann Leckie, Vandanna Singh, Ken Liu, Max Gladstone, Joe Haldeman, Daryl Gregory, Pat Cadigan, Yoon Ha Lee.

Books in particular? The pic below is a random selection from my Goodreads favorites shelf—not all genre, not all fiction either, but it gives you a good start...



And as for new books/authors coming out this fall: Zen Cho's *Sorcerer to the Crown*, Jaime Lee Moyer's *Barricade in Hell*, China Mieville's new short story collection, Greg Van Eeckhout's *Dragon Coast*, Michael Swanwick's next installment in the Darger and Surplus series, and my fellow Tor debuts: Ilana Myers *Last Song Before Night*, Seth Dickinson's *Traitor Baru Comorant*, and Lawrence Schoen's *Barsk*.

***Updraft* : your first novel is coming out in September from Tor.com. First of all, congratulations! I can't wait to read it. How did the novel come to you and can you give us an overview of the Bone Universe?**

Thank you! I am looking forward to September when everyone gets to read it.

The first draft of *Updraft* nearly wrote itself in about six weeks, after I realized that the short stories I'd been writing were part of something much larger. Revisions took a lot longer, as they tend to do.

The Bone Universe includes cities of living bone that have grown so high they rise above the clouds. The clouds themselves are regions of terrifying history, current dangers, and loss. Few go there, and fewer return. The citizens of the towers feel safer as they go higher; they construct man-made wings to get them from place to place, and their cultural memories and their Laws are passed up to future generations in songs.

Breaking a law means wearing Lawsmarkers-bone chips made heavier depending on the severity of the crime. Too many of those and it's impossible to fly. In a city where one of your greatest enemies is gravity, Lawsmarkers and the Singers who dole them out are as feared as the monsters that prowl the clouds and the skies.

**Given that *Updraft* is listed as the first book in the Bone Universe, there will be more, I am sure. What is your plan for the series?**

The next book in the Bone Universe, *Cloudbound*, is on my editor's desk. I'm working on a third book now. It was important to me to have *Updraft* be a complete arc, and stand on its own. For those curious about the larger world of the bone towers (and I hope there will be many), *Cloudbound* answers many of those questions. It might also raise more questions...

**I can't conclude this without asking you about "Cooking the Books." I can't say that I've ever thought of food in conjunction with genre fiction, so the concept is actually fascinating to me. How did you get the idea, where is it now, and where is it going?**

*Cooking the Books* is an interview series that went podcast last summer. We've interviewed over forty authors, editors, and agents, including Joe ("How to make a pizza in a foxhole with

plastique") Haldeman, Ann ("The Word for World is Tea") Leckie; Scott Lynch and Steven Brust; Rajan Khana, Aliette de Bodard, and more. You can find it here:

<https://franwilde.wordpress.com/cooking-the-books/>.

The interview series began when Steven Gould and I were talking about strange recipes, and I mentioned one from an old cookbook—"How to Cook an Elephant" that began (jokingly, I think) with "First cut elephant into bite-size pieces..." Steven said, "That sounds like how to start writing a novel." And we were off to the races. He was my first interview.

**I like to ask this from all interviewed writers: what is your advice for the young writers of today?**

"First cut elephant into bite-size pieces..."

Seriously. Small steps, every day. Write scenes. Write outlines. Do it regularly until the story is finished. Then write another one.

**What else can we expect from you over the next year and is there anything else you'd like to add?**

In the next year, I'll have another short story or two out, plus the novella "The Jewel and Her Lapidary," from *Tor.com*'s new novella imprint—that's high fantasy set in the Gem Universe, so I'm really excited to see what they do with the cover. *Tor* does such beautiful covers. *Cloudbound* will be out next fall. Meantime, I'll be touring a lot in September and October and I am looking forward to seeing folks! And there are a few more things I can't reveal yet. Tune in to [franwilde.net](http://franwilde.net) for irregular updates.

**Fran, thank you so much for this interview and all the best from FSM!**

Thank you so much for having me!



## Interview with Author Martin Millar

**M**artin Millar is a critically acclaimed Scottish author from Glasgow, now living in London. He is the author of such novels as *Lonely Werewolf Girl*, *The Good Fairies of New York*, and *Suzy, Led Zeppelin and Me*. He wrote the *Thraxas* series under the name of Martin Scott, and won the World Fantasy Award in 2000. His novels have been widely translated abroad.

### Q&A

**Julian: Give us a little bit of background on Martin Millar, the man behind the writer.**

**How/where did you grow up, what was your upbringing and were there any particular influences in your life, especially ones that steered you towards your current self?**

Martin: I grew up in Glasgow, or more accurately, a little town on the edge of Glasgow called Bishopbriggs. My father worked in a large cigarette factory and my mother was a shop assistant. I don't remember any particular encouragements to write. My school was good at teaching literacy but not good at encouraging creativity. However, there were books around the house, and I did read quite a lot as a child. My brother had a large science fiction collection which I started reading while I was young. Growing up, I'd say I was more a fan of music than books.

**How did you get involved with writing? Give us summary of your path.**

I can't really say why I wanted to write but I did feel creative from a young age. I used to play music though I was never very good at that. I wrote a few stories which I liked doing, though I had no particular idea of what I wanted to write. Also, I would have suffered some inhibitions about writing a whole novel, because my Scottish childhood and schooling was really not geared toward encouraging creativity. Quite the opposite at times. I left home at a young age and I was in London in 1977. I was very influenced by the Sex Pistols and punk rock in general. The Sex Pistols ethos of believing in your own talent, doing exactly what you want to do in artistic terms, and not relying on other people's opinions greatly influenced me, and still does. The Sex Pistols gave me confidence to write, in a way that nothing else in my background would have. I didn't feel particularly confident about it at first, but with punk rock, you could just have a go anyway. It still took a few years before I managed to write anything good, but I'd probably never have started without the Sex Pistols as an example.

**In 2000 you have received the World Fantasy Award for best novel for *Thraxas*. First of all, tell us the history of *Thraxas* and what does it represent for you, and then tell us about what the award meant and how did it change your future?**

I've written ten books about Thraxas by now. I write them under the name of Martin Scott but I've no idea why I ever used a pseudonym. I can't remember why I thought that was a good idea.

I started writing Thraxas in the late 90s after I'd delivered my last novel to my publisher and there was quite a long gap before it was published. I wondered what I might do to earn some money. I'd always liked sword and sorcery, having read Michael Moorcock's Elric books when I was at school, and Anne McCaffrey's *Dragonriders of Pern*, and also *Lord of the Rings*, back when that was rather an obscure work. I also liked Raymond Chandler. I thought a detective in a sword and sorcery world be a good idea. So I just started writing it. Probably I should have thought it through more. Nonetheless, it came out rather well. I did intend for it to be more noirish but that didn't really happen, it ended up being funnier than I'd expected.

As for the World Fantasy Award, I was very pleased to win that. However, it didn't have much effect on my life. Orbit, the UK publisher, did not manage to promote the books very successfully, and in fact it was almost a year after the award that Baen published them in the US, by which time any momentum had disappeared. Neither of these publishers were effective in promoting the books. These days, I publish Thraxas as ebooks, and I'm more successful doing that than Orbit or Baen ever were.

**What do you consider to be the defining moment in your writing career, the moment when you knew this is what you will do for the rest of your life?**

There was no such moment.

**Let's talk about the Kalix series for a bit. How did you start with this project and what were the inspirations for it? Second, being that it's 2015 and we've seen endless books and TV shows tackling similar subjects, is this something you consider continuing or do you feel like the market is already saturated?**

I really enjoyed Buffy the Vampire Slayer and I wanted to write something with a similar tone. That's really why they were sometimes classified as Young Adult books. I hadn't intended that, and I didn't do anything to moderate the content to make it suitable for young adults. They just sort of came out that way because I'd liked the general tone of Buffy.

I thought a young Scottish werewolf would be a good idea. There didn't seem to be quite so many werewolf books around at the time—although there might have been for all I know, I'm not very well read in contemporary fiction. I liked the idea of a Scottish werewolf clan. I didn't much like the idea of werewolves being uncontrollable savage beasts, so I mostly ignored that. My werewolves are usually intelligent, though capable of being savage, especially Kalix. I wrote three long books about Kalix. I get requests for a fourth and I may

write another, but I had to write some other things first or my writing would have gone completely stale. However, I wouldn't worry about the market being saturated. You should just write what you want to write, and not worry about the market.

**Now a few things about *Suzy, Led Zeppelin, and Me*: you've mentioned in the past that this is really a memoir as most of the stuff is based on real events. How much of it is true? And how does music influence your writing overall?**

It is sort of a memoir, as most of it is based on real events. I did go to that Led Zeppelin concert in Glasgow. I did know people like all the characters in the book, and most of the events happened at some time or other. However, I had no hesitation in re-arranging events, adding characters, merging real-life characters into fictional characters and so on, to make it a better story. Music had a big influence on my writing, as I said above, with the Sex Pistols.

**In our issue #8, we've included a review for your most recent book, *The Goddess of Buttercups and Daisies*—tell us about this new novel. What was the inspiration and how do you feel about it?**

I'll start with a quote from the afterward I wrote for the book:

*"I admire the ancient Athenians for many reasons. I like their architecture, their statues, their pottery and their writing. They had good armour too. I admire their bravery. They were responsible for repelling two huge invasions from the east, defeating the Persian Kings, Darius and Xerxes. Other Greek states helped in the wars but, in my not-to-be-relied-upon historical opinion, the Greek successes were mainly down to the Athenians. Mostly I admire them for inventing democracy. It was a new idea that all citizens should have a say in the running of their nation. It was a brilliant innovation, and a step forward for the world."*

I had wanted to write about Ancient Athens for a long time. I'd made several attempts before, but I wasn't happy with the way these turned out, and I abandoned them after a few chapters. I love Aristophanes and the whole idea of the Athenian comic drama, and it occurred to me that this might be a better way of writing my book, making it revolve around Aristophanes and his plays. That was a good way of writing about Athens because his plays did take in everything about the city-state. He wrote about the politicians of the day, and also the general population, and he mixed it all up with appearances from Gods and mythical creatures. So in a way, even though his comedies are both un-naturalistic and farcical, the whole of real Athenian life appears there. When I started writing my book around Aristophanes' play 'Peace'—performed in 421 BC—it worked out much better than my previous attempts.

I was happy with the way it turned out. In keeping with Aristophanes' plays, it concerns both a real life situation and some mythical interlopers. 421 BC was an important year for Athens. They were negotiating peace with Sparta after ten years of the ruinous Peloponnesian war.

The peace conference is part of my book, but I mixed this actual history with appearances by an amazon and a water nymph, both sent to the city by the Goddess Athena. I also pre-resurrected Lux, giving an earlier existence to a character I wrote about in a contemporary novel about London, *Lux the Poet*. He worked out well as a young Athenian.

**Do you have any works in progress? If so, can you tell us something about it?**

I am working on something but I wouldn't like to say anything about it. I think that talking about work in progress is a mistake. I find it odd today that people share their work on forums and writers groups and so on before it's finished, and ask other writers for advice. If you talk about your ideas too much they're liable to wither and you'll lose energy before you're even started. If you want to write, then just write, don't waste time talking about it.

**What is your advice for today's young writers who are trying to break through this ever more difficult market?**

Go away and leave me alone.

**What's next for you? Is there anything else you'd like to add?**

My new book is coming along quite well, though it's still hasn't passed the stage where it could go disastrously wrong, and be abandoned. Apart from that, Thraxas continues, and I have a few more books about him I need to write.

**Dear Martin, thank you so much for participating in this interview and looking forward to reading your upcoming books!**





# Science Center: A Whirlwind Tour of the Human Genome

Dan Koboldt

**T**he human genome is present in virtually every cell of our bodies, and contains the complete set of instructions to build a human being. The first effort to read that instruction book—the [Human Genome Project](#)—wrapped up in 2001. Even then, it was clear that our genome was a large, complex, and puzzling thing. Fourteen years later, we're still working to unravel all of its mysteries. Here's a whirlwind tour of what we know so far.

## Short Glossary:

**DNA:** Deoxyribonucleic acid, the material that carries genetic information and is present in virtually every cell in our bodies. The structure of DNA is a double helix: a sugar-phosphate backbone and nucleotides ("bases") that pair up -- adenosone with thymine, guanine with cytosine -- between the backbones to encode information.

**Chromosome:** A thread-like structure comprising DNA and the scaffolding proteins that package it. In humans, chromosomes are either autosomes (numbered 1 through 22) or allosomes (the sex chromosomes X and Y). Everyone has two copies of each autosome and either two copies of X (females) or one X and one Y (males).

**Gene:** A structure in DNA that encodes proteins, the building blocks of cells. Structural elements of genes include the promoter (where RNA polymerase binds), exons (which encode for amino acids), introns ("spacers" between exons that are spliced out before translation), and untranslated regions (UTRs, which are transcribed by RNA polymerase, but not made into protein).

## The Big Picture

The human genome comprises 3.2 billion base pairs, spread across 22 autosomes and two sex chromosomes. The autosomes are generally ordered by size; chromosome 1 is the largest (about 250 million base pairs), while chromosomes 21 and 22 are the smallest (48 and 51 million, respectively). Amusingly, the two sex chromosomes are dramatically different in size: chromosome X is 155 million base pairs (about the size of chromosome 7), but chromosome Y is just 59 million.

There's also a tiny, often-overlooked chromosome in mitochondria, the energy-producing organelles found in human cells. The mitochondrial genome is miniscule in size (16,500 base pairs), but a single cell might have as many as 2,000 copies of it. Unlike autosomes and sex chromosomes, the mitochondrial genome is only inherited from the mother. Between that and the multiple-copies, it can give rise to some odd patterns of genetic inheritance.

### **Chromosome Structure**

Most of us picture chromosomes as the X-shaped things we learned about when studying mitosis in high school biology. That's how they look under a light microscope during metaphase, when two sister chromatids (the original and its shiny new copy) are joined together at the centromere, a region of highly repetitive DNA sequence where proteins bind to pull sister chromatids apart.

Because the DNA replication machinery can't copy all the way to the end of the molecule, chromosomes also have special structures at each end called telomeres. These are stretches of a six-letter sequence (TTAGGG, in humans) repeated over and over again. They're essentially disposable bases, and they have to be, because a DNA strand gets progressively shorter every time a cell divides. The telomere-shortening process is so uniform that, by counting their size, it's possible to estimate the number of times a cell has divided, and from that, the approximate age of the person.

### **Genes and Functional Elements**

There are about 20,000 known genes in our genome that encode proteins (i.e. make messenger RNA that's translated into protein). The fraction of bases that eventually encode protein sequence is exceedingly small: about 1.5%. The rest of the genome, the non-coding genome, nevertheless contains many other types of elements that can regulate things happening in a cell. Many of the elements you've probably heard about—promoters, untranslated regions (UTRs), splice sites, exons, and introns—are structures that help govern transcription (making messenger RNA) and translation (making proteins). We've discovered, however, that there are many other kinds of noncoding elements that help regulate when and how proteins are made:

**Transcription factor binding sites** are short, specific base sequences that are recognized and bound by the proteins that drive transcription. For example, the sequence TATAAA is usually found in the gene promoter (upstream of the gene) and likely helps position RNA polymerase II—the enzyme that makes messenger RNA from DNA—to start in the right place.

**Enhancers** are big stretches of noncoding DNA that help drive the activity of certain genes. These regions are believed to have binding sites for transcription factors and other proteins. Often, they are near the genes whose activity they enhance, but they can also be located thousands of base pairs away.

**Repressors** are elements that do the opposite: they prevent genes from being transcribed. Usually this is accomplished by recruiting proteins that either bind or make chemical modifications to DNA so that it's inaccessible to the transcription machinery.

**Noncoding RNA genes** are transcribed into various kinds of functional RNAs, such as transfer RNA (tRNA; matches amino acids to specific codons) and ribosomal RNA (rRNA aids in translation). There are also about 800 genes that encode micro-RNAs, which are very short sequences (18-24 nucleotides long) that can block messenger RNA from being translated into proteins. They do this by binding complementary sequences in the untranslated region of the target mRNA.

If you counted the bases in all of the genes and other functional elements I've described so far, you'd come well short of 3.2 billion. Even if we understood all of the elements above perfectly well (which we don't), it begs the question, what the heck does the rest of the genome do?

Honestly, we don't know. I think that a lot of it will probably turn out to have no function whatsoever. Other parts might have a function that we simply don't know about.

### **The Genome and Genetic Diseases**

Get ready, because I'm about to make this relevant to speculative fiction.

When people hear the phrase "genetic disease," the examples that often come to mind are severe inherited disorders, like sickle-cell disease, cystic fibrosis, and Huntington's disease. Most of these are caused by very rare mutations in the coding region of a gene. This makes sense, because a mutation that disrupts or alters protein sequence is understandably capable of having a severe, immediate effect. Yet the vast majority of human traits that are "heritable" (i.e. have a genetic factor) are not so simply explained.

Many researchers, myself included, think that the genetic variation behind these is outside of the known coding regions. Think about it: a subtle change to a regulatory element could easily have an effect on a human being. For this mental exercise, let's use the low density lipoprotein receptor (LDLR) gene. It makes a protein that transports LDL (the carrier of most cholesterol) out of the blood. Severe mutations in the coding region of LDLR cause an autosomal dominant hypercholesterolemia, a severe lipid disease. Instead, picture a subtle

change in a regulatory element that influences the LDLR gene activity. It might not cause a severe, obvious effect. Over the 70+ years of the average human lifespan, however, even a very minor change can have long-term ramifications.

Now, picture the same scenario, but change "transports LDL" to "prevents magic use" or "protects against becoming a zombie." There's your SF/F story.



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# Artist Spotlight: Chris Drysdale

**C**hris Drysdale is a Canadian artist and illustrator living in British Columbia.

**Julian: Tell us a little bit about yourself: where did you grow up and how did your early life influence your future as an artist?**

Chris: I grew up in western Canada and spent most of my time reading, drawing, and enjoying the outdoors, which led to my enjoyment of sci-fi book cover art and dramatic landscapes.

**What are your favorite design tools and how did you get to learn them?**

My favorite tools are pen, pencil, markers, and Photoshop. Most of what I know about digital art and Photoshop I've learned gradually through experimentation and tutorials.

**Are there any other artists out there that you admire and whose work has helped shape your work?**

I admire so many artists I can hardly list them all... John Berkey, Syd Mead, Craig Mullins, Feng Zhu, Darren Quach, just to name a few. Also, many artists on DeviantArt and other sites inspire me daily. In general I enjoy loose and textural work, but also hard-edged industrial design, so these artists all influence me to some degree.

**Where do you find inspiration?**

I find much of my inspiration in reading, writing, the outdoors, playing games, and the work of other artists.

**How would you break down your workflow in steps?**

Vaguely—I start loose and in greyscale, work the largest forms first, and add detail, color, and focal points towards the end of the process.

**Your work is very science-fiction-driven. What drives you to that subject?**

I enjoy imagining new worlds of infinite possibility. Science fiction allows me to escape, however briefly, to those worlds.

**If there was one piece of advice you could give other beginning artists, what would that be?**

Start with fundamentals... any weakness there will return later and cause trouble!

**We selected one of your pieces for the cover of our magazine. Tell us a few words about how that piece came to be.**

*Industrial Sprint* was an experiment with using existing 3D objects from my junk files to create a background, and painting over it in Photoshop to achieve a loosely painted result.

**Where can we find you on the web?**

<http://spex84.deviantart.com/>

<http://www.chrisdrysdale.com>



# Book Review: The Goddess of Buttercups and Daisies (Martin Millar)

Julie Novakova

**The Goddess of Buttercups and Daisies**

**by Martin Millar**

**Soft Skull Press (May 12, 2015)**

## **A Light-Hearted Story of Peace, Poetry and Love**

**S**cottish author Martin Millar, well-known especially for his novel *Lux The Poet* and *Kalix The Werewolf* book series, set his newest work, *The Goddess of Buttercups and Daisies* in Athens during the Peloponnesian war.

Both Athens and its rival Sparta are exhausted by the ongoing war and peace negotiations taking place. However, not everyone wishes the conflict to cease and several generals and weapon-makers summon Laet, a demi-goddess and bringer of discord. The goddess Athena wants peace for the cities but cannot interfere directly; therefore she sends her ward Bremusa, an Amazon warrior, to stop Laet's work. And that's where the main protagonist comes in.

A river nymph should help Bremusa find Laet but she is no longer around—instead, Bremusa encounters her daughter Metris who's most prominent power appears to be creating daisies and buttercups. Meanwhile, the playwright Aristophanes struggles to get his upcoming Dionysia play "Peace" in shape, and a young would-be poet, Luxos, is desperate to finally become a lyric poet. Needless to say that their fates intertwine in an entertaining, fun way.

The beginning felt a little slow and the novel took some time to pull me into the story. Each short chapter centers on a particular character and the opening chapters introduced the characters briefly but contained little story. We have to wait a bit for more interaction between the characters and to learn more about them. However, when we witness Luxos and Aristophanes meet in the first longer chapter, the story starts moving forward. We get a glimpse of the less famous attributes of Greek theatre and a problem that is a serious matter for the playwright and fun for the readers.

After Laet arrives to Athens and Luxos is sent on an unusual secret mission, all the cogs of a story are already in place and we can start a smooth and fun ride through a somewhat different ancient history. I became most interested in the characters of Laet and her servant

Idomeneus, whose centuries-spanning feud with Bremusa complicates both sides' missions. If a story is as good as its antagonists, *The Goddess of Buttercups and Daisies* is certainly good, though I would like to learn more about the charismatic demi-goddess of discord.

Aristophanes is another very intriguing character; with his cynicism and mood swings stemming from his upcoming play and the uncertainty about the outcome of peace negotiations, he's delightfully human and believable. His conversations with Socrates or the clever and beautiful *hetaera*, Theodota, are among the best parts of the book.

Millar's humor takes many forms ranging from conversational humor to penis jokes (how could a Greek comedy do without them?) or satire, which suits him very well and in a way pays homage to Aristophanes. After all, each of us perhaps sometimes feels like the last sane person in the world and wishes to do something like ride a giant dung beetle to heaven because it's the most logical thing to do—and why on earth does no one else see that? Millar also introduces most of Athens' famous personalities of that time and a couple of witty nods to history and mythology. Readers familiar with Millar's older works featuring Lux The Poet will also spot some "inside jokes". The greatest fun as well as a gripping resolution then comes with the staging of "Peace".

Though Millar had previously worked with fantastical elements combined with a satirical note in a modern world settings, he did a good job for ancient Athens as well. The story as a whole was uncomplicated and somewhat predictable but the light tone and well-done satire managed to balance that more than enough. *The Goddess of Buttercups and Daisies* is a light, fun read I can honestly recommend if you're looking for something short and charming to cheer you up, with more serious topics underlying as a bonus. However, if you're in for deeper insight into characters, complex story arcs or some crunchy food for thought, let the novel wait for when you're in mood for something lighter. *The Goddess of Buttercups and Daisies* is very much like its titular character: optimistic, light-hearted, and fun.



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# Movie Review: Time Lapse (Bradley King)

Mark Leeper

**CAPSULE:** Time Lapse offers a nifty little time paradox story. Three people in their early twenties manage an apartment building. They discover that one of the residents has died, leaving a mysterious camera that takes pictures 24 hours into the future. This is a machine that should be able to give them the world if they use it correctly. But soon they find all their plans are going askew. The science fiction tale is co-written and directed by Bradley King. Rating: high +2 (-4 to +4) or 8/10

In 1960, the public was impressed by Polaroid instant cameras that developed pictures in 60 seconds rather than through a slow chemical process. Perhaps inspired by Polaroid, the television show "The Twilight Zone" ran an episode entitled "A Most Unusual Camera." The concept was that there was a camera so fast it could produce a photo minutes before the picture was taken. So the camera told the future. As was too frequently the case with "Twilight Zone," the producers had neither the time nor the money to do a really good treatment of the idea. I am not aware of any science fiction or fantasy film that used the idea until now, 2015, other than a 2009 Hindi film, AA DEKHAN ZARA. A new film, co-written and directed by first-timer Bradley King returns to a story of a camera that produces a picture of a scene that will occur 24 hours after the picture is snapped.

Finn (played by Matt O'Leary), Jasper (George Finn), and Callie (Danielle Panabaker) manage an apartment where a dead resident has left behind a magical camera that takes pictures of what it will be seeing 24 hours into the future. But the recipients of the picture must make sure that they stage the tableau that the camera had seen a day earlier. For reasons not entirely clear, the rule is that if the scene the camera saw is not reproduced everyone in that picture will die when the timeline is corrected. Destroy your future and you die. And just because they see a picture does not necessarily mean that they know how to interpret it. The obvious first use (the same as in "The Twilight Zone") is to send race results back in time. But soon the fact that the three always win on their bets brings them unwanted and dangerous attention. And before long the camera is controlling them. What is a good time travel story without unexpected complexity? But this film has fairly believable people caught up in the twists of the time travel plot.

As almost a pleasant relief, this is not a spectacle film. There are no big explosions. There are only a few gunshots. The viewer feels that if they were involved in a time paradox, this is a

very credible and down to earth set of situations. Then the plot twists around on itself unexpectedly. As the tangle of ideas and motivations gets complex, the viewer may well wish to back up the film and repeat it. Still, TIME LAPSE is easier to parse than other good low-budget time paradox films like TIME CRIMES or PRIMER.

Director King manages to keep the budget down by staging the whole story in one apartment complex. Still he keeps the film from seeming claustrophobic. What was a rather pedestrian "Twilight Zone" episode may have inspired this nice little fantasy thriller. That makes it well above average for time travel films. I rate it a high +2 on the -4 to +4 scale or 8/10.

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Film Credits: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt2669336/combined>

Originally appeared on: <http://leepers.us/timelaps.htm>

Official Trailer: <https://youtu.be/7BzYpF24LpY>



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