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SCIENCE FICTION, FANTASY, AND HORROR

Fantasy Scroll mag

ISSUE
10



E. E. King • Hank Quense • Jeremy Szal • Johnny Compton • Josh Brown
Julie Novakova • Lynette Mejia • Paul Roberge • Rachel Hochberg • Tim Ferraro



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Speculative Fiction — Issue #10 — December 2016

Featuring works by E. E. King, Clint Spivey, Hank Quense, Jeremy Szal, Johnny
Compton,
Josh Brown, Julie Novakova, Lynette Mejía, Paul Roberge, Rachel Hochberg

This collection is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, organizations, places, events,
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Editorial, December 2015

Iulian Ionescu

Welcome to Issue #10 of Fantasy Scroll Magazine.

I am really excited to welcome everyone to our 10th issue. Year two is behind us, and what year it has been! We published 55 short stories, 40 of which original, and 181,000 words from 53 authors from around the world.

This year, we also launched our podcast which is, at the time of this writing, at episode 25. We received a lot of good feedback on the quality of the podcast, so we will continue with it in 2016.

Another thing that saw the light of day this year was our first anthology. *Dragons, Droids & Doom: Year One* was released in November of 2015 and it includes all the short stories published in 2014 by *Fantasy Scroll Magazine*. The anthology has been released as an eBook and trade paperback. To learn more and to purchase the anthology, please visit the book's site: <http://www.DragonsDroidsDoom.com>.

One thing that would help us a lot are more reviews on Amazon. So, if you've purchased our anthology, or if you've read the stories in the magazine, please spend just a few minutes to give us an honest review on Amazon. It's extremely helpful. Here's the

Amazon link for the book:

<http://bit.ly/dddyear1>.

Before I move to the issue at hand, allow me to extend my thanks to everyone who has contributed and helped with this year's six issues. I'm talking about editors, copyeditors, first readers, proofreaders, narrators, and reviewers. Nothing would've been possible without you. Thank you very much!

And now, let's see what we got in store for you in this issue.

We start with *The Genie and the Inquisitor*, a new and fresh take on the genie myth by Johnny Compton, partly funny and partly horrific, but definitely bone-chilling.

The Hummingbird Air by Paul Roberge is next, a fantasy story that follows the path of a boy and his growth into a man, ready to deliver a life-long awaited revenge.

Next is *The Empty Faux-Historical Residential Unit* by Rachel Hochberg, a science fiction story that takes place in a future dominated by robots, but brings us back into an old-fashion London scene.

Jeremy Szal delights us in his epic fantasy story *Last Age of Kings*; there's a lot of bloody action in this story, but also depth of character, all happening in an interesting setting.

Kara's Ares is another science fiction story, by Clint Spivey, who follows the

struggle of a mission to Mars and its aftermath.

For some comic relief, we follow with *Protecting Nessie* by Hank Quense, who tells the story of three sisters with magical powers, fighting hard to defend the pet of their queen.

Dancing an Elegy, His Own by Julie Novakova is next—a science fiction story that focuses more on the relationship between characters than on the setting, creating an emotionally loaded atmosphere, and closing with an unexpected twist.

Lost Souls by E. E. King is the shortest story in this issue, but it's packed with emotion and unusual developments.

The Answer by Lynette Mejía concludes the short story portion of the issue, presenting the quest of one man that ends in quite unexpected way.

We close the fiction section with part one of the next installment in Shamrock's

adventures, written by Josh Brown and illustrated by Alberto Hernandez.

In the non-fiction section, we have an interview with author Matthew Kressel and author and editor Maurice Broaddus. We then spotlight the artist who created this issue's cover, Joshua Hutchinson. We end with a book review for *The SEA is Ours*, by Julie Novakova, and a movie review for the popular flic *The Martian*, based on the book with the same name by Andy Weir, written by Mark Leeper.

And that's it. Year 2015 is done and we hope to see you all next year.

Have a wonderful holiday season!

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The Genie and the Inquisitor

Johnny Compton

Gray smoke billowed from the broken glass ornament, and from the smoke emerged a face. The chin appeared first—a sharpened cone with a beard, pointed like pencil lead—then the grin, wide and bright, two parallel rows of pristine teeth. The eyes blinked, then opened, circles of clear water with tight blue orbs for pupils. The genie pitched its head back and laughed, a raucous sound, like boulders racing down a cliff.

“Come!” it said, its voice rumbling and welcoming. “Surely you know what I am. There have been stories of my kind as long as there have been stories! Surely you must know, or must I tell you?”

The man shook his head. He was a short and plain man. He spoke with a meek but clear tone and the hasty cadence of an uncertain salesman. “No need to explain. I know what you are.”

“Well then, come! Wish! Surely you’ve dreamed of this moment. Do not be overwhelmed, and do not doubt this is real. Come, make your first wish!”

“Why the rush? Are you in a hurry?”

The genie chortled. “Are you not? Your dreams await you, dear man. Come!”

“Yes, yes, ‘come make my first wish.’ I only get the three, don’t I? Isn’t that the rule?”

“It is.”

“So why the rush? Wouldn’t it be wise for me to take a moment? Be sure of what I want to wish for?”

Another avalanche of laughter. “Trust me, dear man, I’ve met many of your kind. You’re all interesting in your own way, and yet you all have an unbelievable talent for outsmarting yourselves. The wish you should speak is whatever has lived in your heart the longest. Whatever you’ve dreamed of wishing for in this very moment, which I know you’ve dreamed of, as all of your kind has. Happiness is not born of mind, but of the heart! What you *think* you’ll want, you’ll come to regret. What you’ve *yearned* for is what you’ll cherish.”

The man shook his head, removed his glasses, and rubbed his eyes. “You really are all the same,” he said.

The genie narrowed its eyes. “What was that?”

The man put his glasses back on and stepped forward. “You want my wish, here it is. I wish for you to answer any question I ask you with absolute, unambiguous honesty.”

A brush of wind seemed to pass through the smoke, scattering the djinn’s face into a scowl.

“I’m not sure I understand. You wish for me to—?”

“I won’t repeat myself,” the man said. “You heard me. You’re suspicious, too. It’s an odd wish. But it is what I want. I won’t reconsider or rephrase. Now grant what I’ve wished for as you are meant to do.”

His last words held no true sway, but as a reminder to the djinn of its role, they were effective as a command. The genie composed itself, regained its humanoid presence, and nodded. “Granted,” it said. Then it forced a broad smile worthy of a devil that had come upon a trove of unclaimed souls. “So what questions do you have for me, little man?”

“If I were to be careless in how I phrased my next wish, would you use that as an opportunity to turn my wish against me?”

“What precisely do you mean by turning your—?”

“You know *precisely* what I mean.”

The genie remained silent, though its wraith-like face appeared to harden around one eye. Small gray pustules budded where its smoky countenance had solidified.

“You’re going to make me elaborate,” the man said. “Fine. If I were to ask for a sum of money, but didn’t specify how the money should come to me, would you take the liberty to provide the money in a way that you know will bring me harm? Let’s say, give me the money due to an accident. I do have insurance that covers me for death and dismemberment. I didn’t specify that I’d have to live to enjoy my money. Or that I’d have to remain physically intact. Or perhaps the money would come to me by illegal means for which I’d soon be convicted. Rich men go to prison all the time, where their money’s no good to them. But that wouldn’t be your concern. You’d have held up your end, right? At least technically.”

The pustules under the genie’s left eye had clustered and grown so thick that they forced the eye shut.

“Those possibilities are all dependent on your definition of careless,” the genie said.

The man sighed. “You’re dodging the question.”

“No, I’m telling you the truth. That is what you asked for.” The malformations sprouting in the genie’s face began to fade and the genie could not mask its relief.

“*No*,” the man said, “I asked for honesty, not truth. The truth is merely factual, and facts can be used to deliberately deceive. Honesty is truth that is free of deceit. I wished for you to be *honest*. You’re violating that wish.”

A convulsive snarl curled half the genie’s mouth. It fought to remain silent, to remain as it wanted to appear, but the infected pustules reformed on its face, migrating and ballooning into larger deformities. The pain was soon apparent, but the genie continued to fight to defy its calling, deny a granted wish, until one of its eyes snapped open like a snake’s mouth and revealed

rows of bent needle-thin teeth within. The genie emitted a short scream that could have sheared iron. The man plugged his ears, winced. Then he laughed.

“Outsmart ourselves,” the man said. “That’s what you think? Well, who’s being outsmarted now?”

“I am,” the genie roared before realizing the question had been rhetorical. But providing an honest answer released it from the torture of violating its purpose. Too much damage had been done for it to reassume its adopted form, however. It now stood naked before the man, a bipedal mass of huge gray worms melting into and devouring one another, consuming and expelling themselves. “What do you want?” the genie said.

“I want my initial question answered,” said the man.

“Yes,” the djinn rasped in a hundred voices, more a spasm than a response. “*Yes*. I’ll take any wish you speak, any dream you desire, and turn it into nightmare. Do you know what I am? Do you know the wrath you have provoked, *little man*?”

“Not any wish,” the man said. “But we’ll come back to that. For now I have more questions. Why would you want to turn a man’s dreams into a nightmare? What could you possibly gain from doing that?”

“Watching your kind suffer is its own gain,” the djinn said, and tried to laugh, but succumbed to a fit of retching instead. The throng of worms fell to the floor, growing arms to brace itself, its thin legs folding under the weight of its hopeless defiance. “It is . . . a delight . . . to watch you suffer—”

“Please stop. Save yourself the misery. You’re well past the point of impressing or intimidating me. For God’s sake, look at you. Look at what you were when you first showed up and look at what you are now. What you truly are. If I wasn’t so disgusted I’d be embarrassed for you. Do yourself a favor and just answer honestly.”

The djinn tried to stand and failed. A large, misshapen head sprouted from the top of its torso and flopped to the floor, the neck a wilted wet stem. A shiftless blue eye surfaced on the side of its head, blinking slowly, as if drugged.

“Answer the question,” the man said.

“I do it because . . . *because*. We do it *because* . . . stop this . . . please.”

The man smiled. “‘Because.’ That *is* your answer, isn’t it? You don’t really know why you do it. Twist people’s wants and hopes. There’s no point to it. It’s just what you do. Just ‘because.’ I keep waiting for one of you to give a more satisfying answer. But at this point I’m thinking you’re all the same.”

“One of us?” the genie said, its back and chest heaving, its arms trying to push its body upright. “One of us? How many? Who are you?”

The genie’s eye burned into a shade of red the color of pain. “How many of us have you done this to? Who are you? How have you done this?”

“I’m not finished,” the man said. “Next question: what is the one thing you fear most?”

The genie shrieked and shriveled, its limbs recoiling into its body. “Please! Please stop this! I’ll grant you any wish, and I’ll leave it a dream. I promise no nightmares, no corruption, only what you ask for as you want it, I swear. *Please!*”

The man stood over the djinn’s head, stooped to look into its eye. He knew he needn’t ask again, or coax the genie to answer. Its agony would compel it to do so.

“Alone . . . forever,” the genie said. “What I fear most . . . I cannot die . . . none of my kind can die. Ever. We exist . . . across . . . worlds. Can never die . . . and are always found. Always. But to be lost forever. Alone forever . . . that is . . .”

“It’s okay,” the man said, going down to one knee and lightly patting the genie’s head. “You don’t have to say any more. You’ve been very honest. And that answer is one I actually haven’t heard before. So thank you for that. Now I’d like to make my next wish. My last, in fact. There won’t be a third. But before that, there is just one more question I need answered. And remember, truth without deceit.

“Now, how exactly should I phrase my next wish to ensure that your worst fear comes true?”

Too weak to scream, the genie wept and simpered and tried to slither away from the man. But the resistance did not last very long. There were, after all, rules to obey, and a final question to be answered.



A week later, after a pleasant dinner with friends, the man returned home and treated himself to a glass of wine. One glass soon became four, which soon became an empty bottle, and looking into the empty bottle made him think of the first djinn he’d encountered. The one who’d given him a hard lesson in the danger of carelessly worded wishes. The one he was still acquainted with.

While the bottle reminded him of that first djinn, and all that he’d lost and learned with that first wish, it was the wine that inspired him to wonder if they really were “all the same.” Likely so, but perhaps not. Exceptions could exist, after all.

With this in mind, he went upstairs to the second floor of his home and unlocked the hall closet. Something on the floor—something shapeless and as thin as a day's layer of dust—shivered to life and slunk away into the corner.

“Sorry, I know it’s a bit late,” said the man, leaning on the jamb, “but I was thinking I’d like to meet some more of your kind. I’d like to see if they’re any friendlier. Or see if they’re like you and all the rest I’ve met. Come on, you’re not really going to make me ask, are you? Okay, fine. Just remember: honesty.

“Now, where can I find another one of you?”



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Johnny Compton lives in San Antonio, TX. His short stories have appeared in several publications. Read more from him at JohnnyCompton.com.

The Hummingbird Air

Paul Roberge

The outlander sat cross-legged on the lip of the oasis at Nagba, a pure, infinitely deep turquoise well-pool set in the chalk-stone of the Drakat. His eyes were closed, or seemed to be, under the shadow of a plain broad hat circled by a shimmering band of feathers. One hand upward to the sun, one inverted to the earth, he meditated the Driftage rune of transience. Drone bees thirsting to drink at the pool gave voice to the heat of a Drakat noonday: fierce and constant, fierce and unwelcoming.

The old woman, elder of Nagba, cursed when she found the outlander there on the edge of the Water where no outlander had business to sit. She strode forward, steeled for a quarrel over the ground rules of the well-pool. She let her basket of laundry fall to the hard, blanched earth, seized the wooden wash-paddle, and gave the stranger a stiff, righteous spank on the shoulder.

“Do you not know a wash-stone when you see it, trespasser? Move off!”

The stranger remained motionless and silent.

“*Niin Drak’msapya ne?*” she shouted, and answered herself with a puff of scorn, “*Neh!* Knows not Drak-tongue.” So she resorted to dumbshow, jabbed a finger at the pool and pointed with a grunt to the basket at her feet. “Wash-stone! Here women *wash!* You no stay! *Vakyash!* Go!”

The trespasser, a Drift adept at many tongues, finally replied, serenely in the speech of the Drakat. “I mark the pool at fifty-seven paces around. Is that not room enough for wayfarer and washer alike?”

“*Vab!* Speak Drak, do you?” she snorted. “But no less outlander, and fool to idle where you do not belong! If wayfarer you are, then fare away. Go! Have you not the whole world else to squat upon when the washer has but here where the stone is smoothest? *Vakyashim! Be gone now! Go!*”

She waved her paddle like a warrior’s mace, eager to join battle for the stone where generations of women pounding soil from wet wool had worn the chalk-stone smooth as ivory. But the outlander served her a great disappointment. True to his Driftage vow of impermanence—to live as a ripple riding upon water, a breeze of wind as soon here as gone, a passing fold in the fabric of being—he rose, wished the woman *wah-ilsapyat*, wisdom of silence, and went, ceding the place where she said he ought not to be.

Left feeling cheated of a good quarrel, the woman screamed after him, “*Outlanders be damned!*”



The streets of Nagba radiated outward from the pool at the hub, narrow spokes fronted by houses built of chalk-stone whitewashed with lime-mortar that flaked like dried dough under the baking sun. The Drift came to a stop outside an inn where, the evening past, he had watched hard-minded folk of Nagba break stride and linger as the song of a solitary flute from the inn made them pause and listen.

Noon now, and the same street was empty but for a stray red dog that yapped from a cautious distance.

The Drift entered and took a corner table, alone in the small common hall where desert swallows nested in the open rafter. He signaled for drink. The girl brought him a jug. He took a mouthful of wild-honey mead, chilled from a cold cavern below, and felt at ease in the place where he was.

In a short while, a young man barely of age happened to enter the room, stopped when he saw the Drift, and wavered for a second before making up his mind. Shoulders set, he strode in, challenge in his voice.

“*You!* You’re the one I saw back in Avocere. I know I did! And then on Grimswale Bridge, I saw you! In other places, too. Uncle sent you!” He pointed to the back of the traveler’s chair, where hung the plain hat sporting an iridescent band of small plumage. “*Like a feather on the wind.* Isn’t what you fellows say? You’re a Drift assassin.”

Without unlocking his eyes from the youth’s, the Drift took another long drink of cold mead. The boy seemed to grow uncertain under the transfixing gaze. He dabbed at the weeping blisters of sunburn above his eyes with the sleeve of a tunic whose once noble indigo had been paupered by days of sun, sweat, and gray dust of the road. He might have been taken for a beggar outfitted in a prince’s cast-offs, but the reddish hair worn loose in the manner of the Sadrals and carefully tended despite his ordeal suggested he was more than that.

“You are a Drift,” he insisted in an accusing voice, “I know you are!” But doubt crept through. “You are one of them . . . aren’t you?”

The Drift seemed amused.

“Lad, why do you voice your certainty so uncertainly? Your mind quarrels with itself. But, aye, it’s true. I walk the Driftage way.”

“I knew it! I knew it! Uncle sent you to kill me!” The boy flicked his fingers below his chin, a sign of contempt. “Do your worst! I’m not afraid to die! I’m not!”

“That may be. But why do you think I mean you harm?”

“Drifts are assassins for hire. Everybody knows it!”

The Drift set his cup down. “Your mind is overwrought. It hops about like a wee Drakat mouse on hot stone.”

The boy jutted his chin. “Take care how you speak to Andwyn, Heir of Sadral and true Lord of Bhedawan—”

“I know your tale, Andwyn of Bhedawan. I know it well enough. Uncle Ervral holds the throne as regent since your father’s death and now that you’re of age he has no intention of ceding it—”

“*Is that a threat?*” The boy clenched his fists till they whitened through the sunburn. “Uncle had Father killed. And maybe you’re the same cursed Drift that he hired to do that!”

Before answering, the Drift rapped the table three times for service.

“The inns of Nagba are notoriously uninviting,” he said by the way. “The hostlers seem to resent visitors. But the drink is cold. Now as to the death of your father, Driftage teaches that the deed of one is the deed of all, the name of one is the name of every, and the soul of each is the one soul. Therefore, if Drift had slain Lord Var, I would accept responsibility. But your father’s death, though rumor might have it otherwise, was no deed of Driftage.”

“That’s what somebody like you *would* say, true or not. Father was a scion of Sadral, and he wasn’t such a fool as to tumble out a window like they say he did! Uncle hired someone to make it look like an accident, and it’s the sort of underhanded thing a Drift would do—”

“Nay!” the man retorted with uncharacteristic force. “Driftage walks in shadow, true, and does not cry out its deeds, true, and slays with a whispered word, true. But the Drift does not disguise slaughter as happenstance. The Drift pays death no disrespect.”

“So you say,” the boy countered, though the Drift’s directness subdued him a little.

“So I do say . . . and it is true. Sit down.” It was a softly spoken command, but enigmatically firm, and the heir of Hero Sadral found himself dropping into a chair opposite. Still, he wasn’t ready to let go of his mistrust.

“Tell me this, then, Drift. Why are you following me if Uncle didn’t hire you? Why play cat and mouse? Be straight about it! If you mean to kill me, *say it!*”

The servant girl had come in. Overhearing, she hesitated at the boy’s words. The Drift gently crooked his finger, and she approached, warily. He asked for bread, sausage, cheese, more mead, and also a small bowl of marrow grease.

“Marrow grease, sir?”

“Marrow grease.”

The girl grimaced at the odd fancies of outlanders and went. Once she had left the room, the Drift told Andwyn to be silent until she returned.

“Why should I?” the boy snapped, angry to be spoken to like a schoolchild.

Without answering, the Drift took a slow deep breath and, one hand turned palm upward, the other down, he sank into contemplation, seeming to leave only a figment of himself behind.

Andwyn had every intention of getting up and walking away, but the moment of making the decision somehow never came. When the girl returned, the Drift raised his head and slipped her a coin of gratuity. Then, mixing a brown powder into the marrow grease, he urged the boy to smear it on his sunblisters. Andwyn hesitated, but eventually did as told. They ate and drank in silence for a time. The mead set Andwyn more at ease. And thanks to the Drift’s marrow concoction, his skin felt less tight, the nagging itch gone.

“I suppose if you were going to kill me, you wouldn’t bother to make me feel better, would you.” He drained his cup of mead, “Look . . . I want to know why you’re following me! I did see you, and not just once! I’ve got sharp eyes. All Sadralis do.”

“Don’t congratulate yourself on your eyesight, Andwyn. Crossing the Grimswale, you overlooked the beggar huddled at the summit of the bridge in the rain.”

“Beggar? Why would I notice a beggar?”

“You might learn something by it, Lord of Bhedawan. The world is greater than Clan Sadralis. This beggar, though, was no true beggar. As you passed him by, the fellow rose nimbly to his feet and produced a wickedly thin knife. I intervened, and the fellow slumped back dead into his sodden rags. The knife clattered from his hand.”

“Yes, I remember that. I heard the noise and turned and saw you through the rain—”

“You mouthed a curse and hurried away, under the impression that to be Drift is to be assassin. Yet the Drift usually serves as wayguide and bodyguard—seldom assassin.”

Andwyn frowned through his sunburn. His wariness was giving way to curiosity.

“If you did kill a man Uncle sent . . . How? You were back at the foot of the bridge, nowhere near. How did you do it? You don’t carry a bow. Did you throw a knife?”

“Waste of a good blade.”

“Then how?”

“A hummingbird.”

“Hummingbird? Is that another Drift riddle?”

“Perhaps.”

The Drift seemed unlikely to say more. In any case, Andwyn had been struck by a different thought.

“How did you even know? Verner! Someone did send you and it was Verner, wasn’t it? The chancellor. He’s the one that hired you to bodyguard me. That’s it, isn’t it? Only Verner would bother. The other grandees are all toads and cowards.”

The Drift nodded.

While Andwyn was grateful for being saved from the knife, he resented the fact that he was seen as unable to protect himself.

“Now you can go back to Bhedawan. Tell Verner I owe him a favor, even if I’ll never be able to repay because I’m never going back there. I’m headed for Ellorsith on the Brine Sea. I can sail to anywhere from there, anywhere *else* so long as it’s not Bhedawan! And I didn’t run away because I was afraid!” he insisted, answering a question that hadn’t been asked. “I had a reason!”

The Drift looked at him long with eyes of silence. To Andwyn it was a gaze of profound rebuke.

“I had a reason?” the boy shouted angrily. “I’m never going back—I can’t!”

“Chancellor Verner fled not to avoid his shearing.”

“So, Uncle went through with it. Verner of all men—”

“Verner lost his beard, true, but the shearing failed to shame him. His worth endures even without the trappings of a beard.”

Andwyn impulsively snapped up a bone knife that lay on the table and stabbed the block of hard cheese.

“Devil shit on Uncle’s head, damn him! If it weren’t for the griffins guarding the throne, he’d be dead!” He pulled the knife out of the cheese and pointed it at the Drift, as if daring him to say otherwise. “I’d kill him myself! Don’t think I wouldn’t!”

The Drift sat back and gazed musingly at a rafter corner of the inn hall where quarrelsome swallows were mobbing a lizard that had settled there to snap up passing flies.

“Your uncle struck me as the sort of man that, were the griffin to fly away, folk would trip over themselves to be first in line to kill.”

“I’d pull rank on the lot of them!” Andwyn declared, and gave the knife a gouging twist in the air.

“Much ado about a beard,” the Drift remarked.

“Maybe you think it’s jolly gags to cut off a man’s beard! In Bhedawan, the beard’s a badge of honor and manhood! Sadral had a mighty one that was never cut! Uncle’s done it to others, too, forced them to get their beards shaved. Just a prank, he says. Now Verner, who’s the best and most noble person in Bhedawan! And Uncle wanted me to play tunes on Sadral’s feadog

while they were shaving Verner. A merry caper it would be, he said. I told him I wouldn't, never, and the wretch told me if I didn't he'd crush the feadog himself—*Hero Sadral's own feadog!*"

"Much ado about music."

"*It's not!*" Andwyn shouted, brandishing the knife. "The feadog's not one of those cheap fipple pipes you can buy in the market for half a shilly. Sadral himself played it. And Uncle promised to destroy it. *That's* why I left Bhedawan."

The squabble by the rafter nests had turned into a furious stalemate of chatter and hiss.

"Has it not occurred to you, Andwyn, that your uncle concocted the quandary knowing it would force you to flee Bhedawan, thereby betraying the blood of Sadralis? The assassin on Grimswale Bridge was additional assurance that you would not return."

Andwyn reddened through his sunburn at the thought that he had let himself be tricked. He stabbed the bone knife so fiercely on the table that the blade snapped. "I'll stick the bastard so far up Baalzebub's ass—griffins or no griffins, I'll kill the wretch. I'm going back!"

The Drift interrupted mildly.

"Your mind is slave to a commotion of noise. And yet . . . Yesterday evening, Andwyn, I stood outside the inn to hear music in the falling dusk. I was not alone there on the street. Nagba folk are a hard-minded lot full of purposeful haste and not accustomed to loiter. Yet I tell you they stood enthralled on the paving stones to listen to your airs and tunes. It takes a fine player, Andwyn, and a noble instrument to beguile Nagbaim. I doubt the sirens of the Shoal Isles could do as much."

Andwyn opened his mouth to speak but found his mind roiled with such a confusion of thoughts and feelings that no words came to him.

The Drift seemed to smile.

"Your soul, as I said, is thrall to commotion and noise. Silence alone can break the shackles. Song, after all, is not reckless noise but silence given voice. You will follow me."

"Do all you Driftmen talk like blighty oracles?" Andwyn retorted. "And just because Verner made you my bodyguard doesn't mean you can tell me what I can or can't do."

"The chancellor sent me not only as bodyguard but wayguide as well. You owe Verner a favor, you said. Let it be this. Accept me as your guide on your journey into silence." He rose to his feet. "Rest today, for this evening we continue on the road to Ellorsith, traveling by the cool of the night, for you've been roasted to a ginger already. I will hire ponies for the journey."

Before Andwyn could find words to respond, the Drift had taken his hat and pack and slipped from the room.



It was a long journey to Ellorsith through the barren Drakat. The road ran straight, seeming endless in the nebula-lighted night. The moon in that season was haunting day. Andwyn was often left with little to do but to think thoughts of grievance, hope, anger, despondency, eagerness. In the long, silent nights of riding, his mind roiled with a storm of thought and his temper careened from pole to pole. There were spells of despair when he lagged far behind the wayguide, cursing himself as coward for having abandoned Bhedawan. There were nights when a racing impatience to get as far as possible from his past made him spur his pony ahead to exhaustion. The Drift, however, never altered his pace.

Yet, as night followed night and the road went ever on toward Ellorsith and the banks of the Brine Sea, the noises of the mind seemed increasingly pointless in the all-embracing vastness of the Drakat, and gradually abated. Andwyn found himself ever more often falling in step with his wayguide. Under the milky swirl of heaven, he let go the reins, let the pony pace itself, and played the feadog from the saddle, his fingers effortlessly racing over the stop holes. The airs spread across the empty barrens unheard, but Andwyn grew to sense a harmony of spirit forged between his music and the Drift's meditative silences.

Another dusty roadside hostel, another meal of dried goat meat stewed with red beans and purslane. The table stood at a window overlooking the long road east. Andwyn broke the silence.

"On and on and on—is this what Driftage life is like? Endless journey, eternal silence. But I'm beginning not to mind it. Still, Uncle sits in the Chair of Sadral, guarded by eagle-eyed griffins."

"Does it matter?"

"Yes."

"Because the throne belongs to you?"

"Because the throne is the Chair of Sadral and he offends it. Bhedawan suffers under his rule. He shames the ghost of Hero Sadral."

"Have you decided what you'll do?"

"I'll decide when I reach the Brine Sea. Then, I'll know. Assuming this road ever ends and we get to Ellorsith."

Done with his meal, the Drift fixed his hat firmly on his grizzled head. "This is the last night of travel. At dawn you'll look down upon Ellorsith on the banks of the Brine Sea."

And so, in the first glimmer of the next morning, colder than any other so far, they paused at the summit of a sand hill capped in gorse and blue heather. The road ahead descended by steep

turns to a city on the shore of a misty expanse of sea, at the far edge of which the crescent moon piloted the sun up over the horizon. Pale breakers parted from the dark green waters to roll against the shore and lap against the long wharves.

“That’s Ellorsith?” Andwyn asked. “It doesn’t look anything like it should. It’s so . . . ordinary and familiar. Like Bhedawan, except with docks. And only two ships, and they don’t look very promising. It’s not like I imagined at all.”

“What did you expect, lad?”

“I thought . . . You know: sleek ships, bright pennants, billowing sails—” He spread his arms and laughed. “Childhood fancies gone up in smoke. I’ve decided, Drift. I’m returning to Bhedawan, and on the way you’ll teach me your secret.”

“And what secret might that be?”

Andwyn laughed.

“As if you didn’t know. The assassin beggar on Grimswale Bridge! You killed him from a distance thanks to a *hummingbird*, you said. If that’s not a secret, I don’t know what is. Can this hummingbird get past a ring of griffins?”

“As well as any other air played on a pipe.” The Drift drew from his old way-pack a dented but well-polished silver canister in the form of a long tube.

Andwyn gawped at him. His first thought was that the Drift played the feadog. “What do you mean? *The Hummingbird* is a tune?”

“A simple air that frees the soul. Regent Ervral cares not for Sadral’s feadog. In that case, you’ll play my pipe for him.”



Bhedawan had a mighty wall, raised in a more glorious age, impressive seen from the surrounding heath, but the city within was little more than a meager town spread large: acres of timber houses, unpromising shops, and dusty market spaces, with few structures of any prominence left standing. The most imposing was the citadel that occupied the center of the city, unyielding as a fist punched up through the stony earth.

The sentry at the gate blew his nose as he read half-aloud the document that the Drift showed him through the iron bars.

“Aye,” he sniffled. “Driftman, are ye? And here’s the chancellor’s own seal letting ye in.” He grimaced toward Andwyn. “And the scruff that’s with ye. Yer apprentice, as it says here.”

Andwyn loosened the scarf he wore over his mouth and nose as protection against the blowing dust. The burn was gone, as well as the rosy pallor of the boy who had fled Bhedawan. The journey had weathered his face. The silence had weathered his eyes.

“Do you know who I am?” he asked the guard.

The man shrugged, throwing an indifferent backward nod at the tower behind him. “Ye look like ye might be one of *them*. But they don’t much show their faces to the likes of poor souls like meself, so who’s to say?” He poked a massive key into the gate and turned it.

The two, Andwyn leading, strode into a dismal stone-girt courtyard that smelled of stables and dead bonfires. The half a dozen grooms throwing dice on a barrel by the wall paid no attention.

“So . . . I’m your apprentice, am I?” Andwyn said to the Drift.

“My more than worthy apprentice,” he answered. “It was Verner that put you down as such on the passport, no doubt for fear that the scion of Sadral might regard ‘servant’ or ‘slave’ as an insult to his majesty.”

“I suppose ‘apprentice’ is more true than not,” Andwyn remarked, as much to himself as to the Drift. “I ran away as a child. I return to stand before my uncle and take the throne he dishonors.” He raised the silver canister, which glinted in the sun like a scepter. “Uncle says he’s fond of japes. *The Hummingbird* ought to be a fine one.”



The Chair of Sadral: a massive throne hewn, according to legend, by the Hero from a single giant block of oak. It was arrayed with the pelts of the Five Dire Bears, which the hunter warlord slew by his own hand. Ervral slouched among the mighty skins, a small, scruffy man in a throne several sizes of majesty too big for him. A dozen griffins ringed the dais, facing outward, descendants of beasts captured and trained by Sadral himself in the Tors Vahr. They might have passed for statues, so motionless they were, their silver-scale wings folded back over gold haunches, and their heads, maned and eagle-beaked, held high and vigilant. Only the slow blink of their sharp eyes betrayed their feral alertness.

Outside the dread ring, ministers and grandees stood gathered for the day’s chapter. A few beards among them, shaven in the near past, were in various stages of regrowth, among them Old Verner’s. His gaunt cheeks were gray with emerging stubble. The shearing meant to shame him had instead laid bare his unassailable soul.

The court had fallen speechless at Andwyn's return. After a moment, Ervral stirred in the shadow of the throne and pierced the silence with a voice infused with irony.

"I would leap up in a joy of welcome, dear nephew, but alas you return a day late. You will recall that when Sadral's eldest son left Bhedawan to dwell among the tree-dreamers of Nahl, the Hero declared him—his own son—traitor for forsaking his duty to the clan. Who can supersede such a precedent? This very morning the Iron Chamber passed judgment on your desertion: traitor to Sadralis!"

Ervral paused, waiting for a reaction of some kind: fear, supplication, bluster. But Andwyn stood expressionless and silent.

"Such a difference . . ." the regent hissed in spite after a moment. "Such a great difference a few hours make in a man's prospects. But for a few short hours you would not be facing the fate of the gibbet. Ah, destiny's a jester and life's his jest, and there's naught we can do about it. Who's the gaunt knave there?"

"One that walks the way of Driftage," the gaunt knave answered.

"A Drift! Yes, I thought as much. And what do you hope to accomplish, Nephew, by hiring—what is he?—your bodyguard?—this Knave of Drifts!" He couldn't help but smirk at the witticism that came to mind. "Not a valueless card, the Knave of Drifts, but I, you see, hold trumps." He flared his hands to show the circle of motionless beasts surrounding him. "All the trumps. The whole suit of griffin!" He giggled at his own cleverness, and the sycophant toads tittered in echo. But the silence that had gripped the hall at Andwyn's return seemed to choke the noise of it in their throats.

Andwyn spoke in a voice of plain fact. "My knave is not so powerless as you think, Uncle. Already he's trumped your assassin on Grimswale Bridge."

Ervral visibly started, but recovered at once.

"Instead of foolish accusations, boy, you should reflect on your own treasonous behavior."

"The true traitor here is the man that killed my father, his own brother, and would kill me to hold the throne that he dishonors."

"Too late, boy!" Ervral exclaimed. "You won't save yourself with lies and accusations. Your father . . . stumbled at a window. Too drunk to stand steady. Too great a fool, your father. And you, son of the father!"

Andwyn resisted the urge to rage at the provocation. He spoke quietly. "You desecrate the Chair of Sadral."

"Fool boy! Tell that to my suit of griffins!"

"Not good enough, Uncle. I hold a higher trump."

“Oh, yes . . . your Knave of Drifts . . .”

“I don’t mean the Drift, Uncle.” Andwyn held up the silver tube. “The pipe is my trump.”

Ervral stared in disbelief before throwing up his arms and laughing. “Ah . . . of course! How could I not have guessed? Tunes and airs! The power of music to make all things well.” He turned to the gathered court, smirking. “The boy himself stands as proof that music is thin beer for weak-minded fools. The poor child has it in his mind that his foolish pipe is inspirited with the might of Sadral himself. No doubt he’s under the illusion that a tootle or two will unleash the untold power of the Hero upon us all and save his skin!”

The tension in the hall had grown so ominous that only a few of the most determined sycophants tittered in response.

Ervral hissed viciously, “What’s the name of the tune you mean to play us, Nephew? *The Fool’s Errand?*”

“*The Hummingbird.*”

“*Hummingbird?* Then I do tremble in dread. *Hummingbird!* Why not *Swan?* For it’s to be your swan song. And when the swan is done singing then *Magpie* will feast on your carrion flesh!”

Andwyn had quietly uncapped the silver tube and withdrawn a pipe—a little wider than his thumb, a little longer than his forearm, and fashioned of smooth oiled wood. It lacked stop-holes and was larger than the feadog, but near enough to deceive.

When he put the pipe to his lips, the room set into a silence so concrete that it seemed only a thundering shock could shatter it. But it was a gentle puff they heard, no louder than breath, a ripple of silence as sound is a ripple of air. To those who heard it, it seemed *Death* had been whispered.

Ervral jerked to his feet as if Sadral’s Chair had forcibly spat him out. There was manic astonishment in his eyes when he looked down at the ruby-red feathered wee bird that had lodged its needle beak in his breastbone. He felt no pain, just a seething narcosis, not unpleasant. So odd. A spasm of laughter shook him. Such a jest that a hummingbird should come to drink nectar from a man’s heart. His hands moved awkwardly about the fixed dart.

“Shoo,” he muttered idiotically. “Shoo. Shoo. Shoo!”

His legs failed and he sank toward the abyss, his ears deafened by a thunderous hammering that sounded: *Trump! Trump! Trump!*

Stamping the floor with his staff of office, Chancellor Verner raised a voice of stern authority.

“The Chair of Sadral stands vacant. If any dare ascend it by right of Hero’s blood, let him ever remember that heavy is the yoke and grave the burden of power.”

The Drift whispered to Andwyn, “Trust no one, friend, that says otherwise.”

Returning the weapon, Andwyn told him, “I’m grateful, Drift. Now it’s Sadral who must be my wayguide. When I ran away to be free of this place, I never thought . . .”

His voice failed as he stared up at the vacant throne, which had never loomed so massive as it did at that moment. He had rid Bhedawan of a tyrant and avenged his father’s death, but now the reality of the deed and the daunting consequence of it overwhelmed him. On his own shoulders now lay the burden of Sadral’s legacy, and that was no jest of destiny. Andwyn dreaded the way forward, the step that would take him into the forbidding ring of griffin and to the throne where the ghost of Sadral seemed to wait in fearsome silence.

It was a nearly unnoticed nod of encouragement from Verner, who stood otherwise expressionless, that finally gave Andwyn the strength to overcome his reluctance and take the fateful first step.

Hardly breathing, he crossed into the ring of dire guardians and turned about at the foot of the throne. The Drift was no longer present, having gone in silence, unnoticed—as Driftage taught. His disappearance seemed like a final lesson. The erstwhile runaway now fully accepted the legacy that was his and took the throne, lowering himself among the bearskins on the Hero’s chair.

At that moment—tantamount to a coronation—the assembled court erupted in a storm of thunderous hurrahs, led by Verner, surprisingly animated for once, and echoed by well-wisher and toady alike. The enfolding roar of congratulation was heartening, but, thanks to the man he had once scoffed as a blighty oracle, Andwyn knew better than to let a passing squall of noise deafen him to the music of silence. There, he understood, and only there, could the wisdom of Hero Sadral’s voice be heard.



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Paul Roberge writes speculative fiction in southeastern New Hampshire. He and his wife live in a house that’s ancient even by New England standards. He is a former monk who spent some of his youth in a medieval Belgian abbey where he learned that a low, vaulted XIIIth century crypt produces uncanny echoes when the ping-pong table in the middle of it is being used. Paul mines material from a life of an enthusiastic jack-of-all-trades: clam-digger, math geek, monk, home brewer, webmaster, hiker, medievalist, boatyard carpenter, knitter, Java programmer, kayaker, technical writer, traveler, oysterer, artist (analog and digital), grandfather, RPG gamer, tin-whistle player—but a life-long pathetic failure at sports.

The Empty Faux-Historical Residential Unit

Rachel Hochberg

Data incoming
Galactic Medical Corps system tracer alert
Query “Watson_J+Earth+reintegration” returned

Watson, J - Identity confirmed w/ DNA scan

Spaceport 762 - Earth re-entry approved

Reintegration Center 12 - New London - arrival logged

23:14 05032195

Loading program “consciousness_backup33_2”

12.75 hrs remaining

Ping “Holmes_M”



I wake to sunlight—real, natural sunlight—streaming in through the naked window, for the first time in a decade. It drills right through my eyelids, hot and inescapable, and for just a moment I’m helplessly homesick. Then I remind myself that the bleak, black edges of space were not my home and carefully crack open my eyes.

The room would probably seem dim to a real Earther (I *am* a real Earther, must remember), but to me natural sunlight is painful. The eyemask I wore to bed has lost its adherence from some combination of night sweat and tears. Not a problem. It’s disposable, and also the one meager comfort that the GMC will provide to returning frontier doctors, free of charge.

There’s another mask waiting on the bedside table; I fumble for it and tear off the paper backing, sticking it carefully to my face, sealing the natural light out with tinted UV paper. The relief is immediate, though the startling heat of the room is still uncomfortable. It doesn’t matter. Today I’ll pick up my GMC “reintegration support” chit and find a room somewhere out of the sun. I’ve gotten good at starting over.



Like so many government buildings, the Reintegration Center is staffed almost entirely by robots. When I leave my room, a robot maid is waiting to strip the bed and clean the tiny bathroom. As I make my way through the temp residence floors and down to the Support Office, robots of all sorts zip past me like water around a rock. They make me feel slow, clumsy. Superfluous. It's very different from a morning in the deep space colonies. The robots here are low-end, government-made tech, nothing like the nearly human androids employed by private companies and citizens for customer or home service work. In deep space there aren't robots at all. A doctor can still make something of a living out there in low-grav, far from the sun, where robots haven't yet replaced human judgement. Of course, if you ask me, no robot can replace human judgement. (No robot other than *him*, anyway. But he's gone, been gone a long time, and it's only being on Earth again that makes my chest hurt when I think about him.)

Here in the RC, the robot behind the steel desk in the office scans my retinas and pricks my fingertip, processing identity markers before dispensing my allotment on a flimsy paper chit. It's just a receipt; my housing credit goes into my account instantly. Even the basic modern conveniences seem strange, now, but they are at least *convenient*.

I think of Mary, shaking her head with fond exasperation as I tallied up the baskets of hydroponic vegetables, the freeze-dried hens from the terraforming farms on Ceres, and the only-sometimes-useful mechanical bits and bobs I accepted in lieu of payment. "*We'll never go hungry, at least,*" she'd say with a grin, game for every adventure, even those simple domestic ones. I should have known better by then. Adventures are only fun until—well.

The robot beeps, and this time dispenses a temp-pad, the cheap, mass-produced kind you can pick up at the chemist or the grocery. Basic net connectivity, public access browsing and communication software. It scans my thumbprint as I turn it on, and immediately produces a list of available housing within my budget. The list, a notification informs me, is optimized based on every factor the pad can get about me through public record, which is pretty much everything: past residences, medical history, job history, consumption and purchasing trends. The algorithm somehow settles on a top ten. It's a bit much to deal with on an empty stomach.

I glance through the options, then shove the pad into my pocket and slide a finger around the edges of my eyemask, making sure of the seal; shapeless, one-size UV parkas hang on hooks beside the door, and I slip one on before stepping outside into the fierce daylight.



Data incoming

Galactic Medical Corps system tracer alert

Query “Watson_J+Earth+reintegration” returned

Watson, J - Identity confirmed w/ DNA scan

Reintegration Center 12 - New London - funds transferred

10:38 05042195

Loading program “consciousness_backup33_2”

1.5 hrs remaining

Loading program “hardware_model4.2_operationdiag”

Run “hardware_model4.2_operationdiag”

Operational diagnostic 0% complete

ACK received “Holmes_M”



The main doors are on hoverstreet level, but I noticed a public lift outside last night. As brave as I felt striding out into the world, in reality the light and heat that greet me are unbearable. I stand in front of the lift, hesitating. Perhaps this time it would be better to find a flat on a sunlit level and look for a sunlit job; dark places haven’t brought me anything but—

The thought is so blatantly untrue, I can’t quite finish it. Mary’s laughter rings through my head. Softer, farther back, I hear the mournful cry of an old-fashioned acoustic violin, played with mechanical precision but peppered with bursts of emotion like knots in a fine chain.

Dark places have brought me more joy than pain, in the end, so I step into the lift and make my way Below.



Lower London is a crazed mashup of pre-hover eras, going back hundreds of years. Some sections are almost modern, if ground-bound, and see a brisk trade. Other areas are crowded with houses, still livable, from the reigns of Victoria I and the four Georges before her, squashed between faux-historical constructions from the Preservation and Re-Creation craze a few decades back. It was all over the news when I was a kid—tearing down obsolete Tube stations and ugly twentieth century architecture to bring back the romantic scenery of older times.

It's been a while, but I still have much of the map in my head; down here change has moved out and up, leaving a static world behind.

As I stroll, pitying looks from strangers on the street remind me that I'm still wearing the UV mask—so it's not quite as dim down here as I think—but I've just got the one, so it'll have to stay on. It's not entirely unheard of to wear a mask Below; people live here because they can't afford the Upper City, or they're like me, returning from work or service (or, sometimes, pleasure) in colonial space and getting too old to fully adjust to the bright life.

"The Dim is where crime happens," says an almost gleeful voice in my head, and I push it away. My stomach's voice is louder. I haven't eaten since lunch yesterday, so I slip into the next pub I see with "cooked breakfast" on the signboard.



The Nine Balls Pub and Games Hall is, at this time of the afternoon, a quiet and mostly empty establishment. A few grizzled-looking older men, probably regulars, sit with pints at the far end of the bar; they glance up when I enter, and one of them gives me (and probably my eyemask) a long, hard look. He's got a military sort of bearing; maybe he sees the same in me. The bartender, a muscled and gruff-looking woman perhaps a decade or two younger than I, is scowling at a vidscreen as she loads glasses into the body of a dishwashing/drying robot. The gaming tables are entirely empty. Not surprising—instead of more modern games, virtual pachinko and pneumatic snooker and the like, they've got old-fashioned wood tables for billiards and what might be bagatelle. An effort to fit in with the historical chic, no doubt, but I notice layers of dust, varying in thickness, on the tables. Clearly they haven't seen much use.

When I realize I'm idly deducing which billiards variant has been most recently played from the paths in the dust and the wear on the cleanest table, I shake my head to clear it and plunk myself down at the bar.

"Fry-up and a coffee, please," I tell the bartender before she can ask, and I try to distract myself with the newsfeed screen in the countertop.

“... found dead in his flat late last night. According to Scotland Yard inspectors, Adair was last seen alive at the Nine Balls Pub in Lower London, where he frequently indulged in turn-of-the-century table games ...”

Well. No wonder the place is so quiet.

“Good bloke, good customer,” the bartender is saying on the vidscreen, frowning at the camera. *“We’ll miss ‘im.”*

“Caught my bad side, they did,” she says in real life, setting a steaming cup of coffee in front of me and blocking my view of the feed. “Wish they’d stop nattering on about the Nine Balls, no good for business.”

“I don’t really think much could *hurt* this business,” I mutter, warming my hands on the mug, and she scowls and leaves me to it. Young people today, no sense of humor.



Data incoming

Galactic Medical Corps system tracer alert

Query “Watson_J+Earth+reintegration” returned

Watson, J - Identity confirmed w/ DNA scan

Nine Balls - Old London - funds charged

12:02 05042195

Galactic Medical Corps system access alert

Record “Watson_J02145” updated - author “Holmes_M”

Loading program “consciousness_backup33_2”

Program loaded

Operational diagnostic 100% complete: All hardware fully functional

Run program “consciousness_backup33_2”



I’ve been away from Earth long enough to find the newsfeed quite absorbing—*everything* is news to me—but I’m snapped out of it when an alarm notification sounds from the other end of the bar. The bloke who’d given me the long look coming in fumbles for the pad in his pocket and

silences the chime. He stares at it a minute, and then, for whatever reason, looks back at me. His sudden scrutiny is so intent, it makes my fingers curl convulsively into a fist. Before I can react any further, he's up off his stool and out the door.

The back of my neck prickles. Probably I just remind the old guy of someone he knows. I've been told I have the kind of face that blends in. Still, there's a familiar voice in the back of my head, and I don't even have to listen to it to know what it's telling me. My tab's already paid, I'm just picking at my food. Time to go.

He moves quickly, purposefully; the military bearing is more evident now in his stride and the way he watches the street around him. If he knows I'm tailing him, he gives no sign. Even after a decade away, I'm slipping back into this like a fish into water; my blood's up, the old wounds don't ache. I'm ready for anything: a sudden chase through hidden alleys, a quick and dirty fistfight, a dramatic citizen's arrest. It's exhilarating.

Six blocks later, Military Man swipes his way into an unassuming residential building on Park Crescent and leaves me stuck, jittery and frustrated, on an empty street corner. I can't follow him without attracting attention, and I don't want to get arrested for breaking and entering on my first day back on Earth just because some bloke looked at me funny.

It's not an adventure, after all. That's not what I do anymore.

Grudgingly I pull the pad out of my pocket and consult the top ten recommended residences list. The list has shuffled since I last checked it, which is . . . odd. This time I ignore the back-of-the-neck prickle. Sometimes odd things happen; not everything is a conspiracy. The new top suggestion is on Allsop Place, just a few blocks from here. Old stomping grounds, for me. Worth checking out. I turn away from Military Man's building and head west without looking back.



Marylebone Road to Allsop looks much like I remember. The walk is nice enough, and the Prez-and-Rec “electric flame” lamps flicker pleasantly above my head. It's prodding the edges of a healing wound, to house-hunt so studiously near but never on the old street. I suppose even a doctor can't help picking at scabs sometimes. At least the residential units here aren't original Georgian and Victorian. I can deal with a place that needs fixing up, but original houses are far more costly to repair. I still have nightmares about the red tape and expense inherent in keeping up a historical building, and we were just renters then. Well, *I* was a renter. *He* was just a menace. No, a Prez-and-Rec house will suit me just fine, and that's what I find when I come to the address my pad indicates.

The building, tucked into the sharp corner where Allsop turns into Park Road, doesn't look terribly inviting. It's an eyesore, paint worn away and brickwork chipped, and the ground floor windows are all papered over. It doesn't even have a "For Sale" sign, like some of the others on this block. Why did my "optimized list" decide on this one? Price, perhaps, but once again I can't help but feel that something is . . . off. As if there's more to this place, this whole morning, than I can see. Discerning the patterns has never been my strong suit, though. There's nothing for it but to press on and see what happens; if someone wants me here, I'll find out soon enough.

I try the door. It's not locked, but it is stuck; an ungentle shove with my shoulder pops it open quick enough. The inside is dark, more so through my mask, enough to wish I had a torch. The front room is empty of furniture and smells musty and unused, but not foul; the floors seem solid, and the stairs hold my weight when I follow them to the upper floor. The windows here are uncovered and let in a little more light, so I glance into each room to get a sense of the layout.

At the back of the house, furthest from the street corner, I find a robot.



It's dark.

Low-light vision adjustment

Working...

Complete

The house is empty, thick layers of dust.

Formula thickness/dust accumulation per year= x

Calculating...

9.923 years

Conclusion: out of use for a decade. Extensive physical self-repair completed over duration. Last conscious data recorded: preparations to go into hiding. Current consciousness backup created as part of said preparations. Last physical data recorded:

Review hardware sensor readings

Data sort: 10 years

Compiling...

Complete

Conclusion from available physical data: J. Moriarty deceased. Current physical body damaged in altercation, distress signal activated. Body retrieved by M. Holmes, returned to residence for self-repair cycle. Query: remaining risk factors?

Aggregate newsfeed search

Keyword string “Moran_S”

Data sort: 10 years

Compiling...

Complete

Still at large. Last recorded positive identification 09122186. Conclusion: identity altered.

Run program “identity_trace” startpoint “Moran_S”

Compiling...

Estimated run time 06:23:02

Extent and skill of identity alteration may indicate awareness of my survival. Conclusion: Moran remains a danger.

Consciousness backup program triggered by data alert re: J. Watson. Query: status of J. Watson?

Review data all sources

Keyword string “Watson_J”

Data sort: 10 years

Compiling...

Complete

Conclusion: Error 808 - Sentiment

Conclusion: Error 808 - Sentiment

Load subprogram “human_emotional_range_factors”

Loading...

Complete

Load subprogram “personal_emotional_expression”

Loading...

Complete

Conclusion: Strong desire to locate J. Watson as soon as possible.



The dust-covered robot is a straightforward sort, with an entirely clear purpose. Visual sensors trained out the window, a visual data processing unit, and a mechanical arm assembly made for remote virtual control. I encountered them often enough in my service days, mass-produced robots built to take the place of human soldiers, controlled from home base by virtual reality software. A way to get closer to the enemy, track their movements, and take out targets, without putting troops in danger.

Like the army robots I knew, attached to this mechanical arm assembly is a laser sniper rifle.

Everything goes cold, and clear. I should have trusted my instincts, should have been trusting them all day. Trouble always finds me, and I can't say I'm sorry about it. I step cautiously toward the window to follow the sensors' trajectory. A glance confirms my suspicion; though the front of the house faces Allsop, it's a narrow corner building, and the back is street-facing as well. Beyond the glass, I can see Baker Street, precisely as I remember it; following the sightline of the rifle and the visual sensors, I find myself peering into the windows of 221B.

Windows that should be shuttered and dark, abandoned. Windows that are, instead, blazing with light through the UV shades.

A shadow passes from one end to the other, then back again—a figure, pacing. The figure pauses, revealing its profile. High forehead, aquiline nose. A profile I would know anywhere, a profile that cannot possibly, possibly—

The robot's visual sensors engage with a whirl, zoom in, and the time it takes me to register the sound and look at the robot and *comprehend* is much too long—but when the mechanical arm swings up, dislodging thick layers of dust, I throw myself onto the butt end without thinking. The laser slices a line through the UV shade and cuts up into the roof of 221. The robot shudders with effort as it tries to correct itself, but my weight is enough to hold it off-target for a moment or two. Finally the rifle arm swivels, knocking me off balance, and the visual sensors sweep around to find me. I tear off the UV parka I wore out of the RC this morning and shove it hard against the sensor panel, tying it in place with the sleeves before throwing myself onto the rifle arm again, wrenching it down toward the floor.

The world narrows down to my own body and the mechanism is spinning and bucking. My weight isn't enough now; I can't get purchase on anything to force it still. It's just a robot, but there's *someone* on the other end who's fighting me blind, and I'm not used to this sort of thing anymore, and I'm going to tire out before this robot will, and I've *got to get to Baker Street*—

At which point several inexplicable things happen in rapid succession. The robot shudders to a stop, as if all the fight's gone out of it. The rifle arm swerves sharply toward the floor, which was my goal but still sends me tumbling. Then the rifle is torn, physically, from the robot's base with a horrible screech of metal and a startling shower of sparks. A voice asks, close to my ear, "Are you all right?"

I am reeling and dizzy and blinded by afterimages of the sparks on my retinas, but I know that voice all the way down to my bones. I reach out and a hand steadies me, long fingers, warm to the touch, but skin that isn't quite skin, no muscles or bones or blood underneath. I haven't felt that hand, that skin, in a decade. I blink hard behind the mask, and when I open my eyes, he's there.

His face is exactly the same, except for the slice across the side of his head where the laser struck, revealing the wiring inside. It's already repairing itself. It's not a wound, but I'm still a doctor, and I can't help touching my fingers to the edges of the damage. He holds still, peering at me with something like concern and something like joy. "Are you all right?" he asks again.

When I've eliminated all the responses I find impossible to speak aloud, I am left with a merely improbable truth. "Yes," I say.

He grins and rises, tugging me to my feet.

"Hurry, then," he says. "The game is on!"



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Rachel Hochberg spends her days matching young readers with good books at an independent children's bookstore in the Philadelphia suburbs, and her nights thinking about all the good books that have yet to be written. Her free time is filled with reading, cooking, haunting Tumblr like a particularly nerdy ghost, singing along to the radio, and watching television with her attention-seeking rabbit, Percy. Someday, they may both be trapped beneath the profuse and teetering piles of books cluttering the apartment—but until then, the piles will inevitably continue to grow.

Last Age of Kings

Jeremy Szal

Fog approached the town. Roshar knew it would happen, but it was still unsettling to see it touch the outskirts of his home. The day before, you could still see the fields. And the week before that Lithgard was still visible if you looked hard enough. But they had all been swallowed up by the spectral fog that scrubbed them out of existence.

And soon it would be Northam's turn.

He was almost glad that Robin would never have to see this.

Roshar slipped on his mud-caked boots, the door groaning as he opened it, and bundled his furs around him, fighting to keep warmth in his body.

He started down the corkscrew staircase, shoes echoing in the tower. Felix was sitting on a bench with his broadsword leaning against the table. His ringmail rattled as he lifted a rusted tankard to his cracked lips, drinking greedily.

Roshar raised an eyebrow. "Isn't it a little early for that?"

"Aye, but who cares? It doesn't matter anymore. Might as well get a couple o' drinks in while you can, eh? I heard the ale they serve in hell is piss poor." He chuckled as Roshar walked passed him, shaking his head. There was only one hell that he knew of. *The one that we're living in now.*



Roshar pushed open the tower's steel door. Wet gravel crunched under his feet as he made his way to Gaeon's hut. He didn't care for the gods from the south that the old mage worshipped, but he had saved his life on more occasions than he cared to admit.

He stepped around an empty shell of a burnt house and the splintered timber paneling of the market stalls, flakes of rust and ash floating down. He hammered on Gaeon's door. Carved into the wood was the face of a solemn god, staring back at him. The old man thought they gave him protection, warded off enemies.

Gods don't protect anyone now. Not anymore.

The door edged open, a draft of musty air floating his way. “Ah. You’re early.” The olive-skinned mage was squatting on the floor, cocooned in woolen blankets, tending to the dying embers of his hearth.

“Couldn’t sleep.” Roshar closed the door and sat down next to Gaeon, lifting his fleece so Gaeon could examine the fading scars on his chest.

Gaeon rubbed his bald head. “Count yourself lucky you’re still breathing, young man. The poison alone would have killed most men.”

He didn’t doubt it. They hadn’t even reached the mist when a volley of arrows spat out, thudding into flesh and bone. The arrows had slaughtered half his squad and injured others. He had managed to crawl close enough to the village for some scouts to find him. The ague had gripped him for a fortnight, sweating and vomiting and thrashing and twisting in Gaeon’s hut while the old mage nursed him back to life. Robin, his newlywed wife, had come to visit him every day. Although he’d barely been able to register her presence, he knew she was there beside him. She had kept him strong. He clawed his way back through hell for her. And when he woke up, the old mage told him that the plague had taken her just minutes before.

He sometimes wished that Gaeon hadn’t bothered.

“Did you learn anything from the arrows?” Roshar asked, lowering his shirt.

“You could say so.” Gaeon waddled over to the bench and picked up the broken shafts with a strip of boiled leather for protection. He handed them to Roshar. “Careful. There’s still poison within them.”

The metal was wreathed in what looked like twisted black thorns, but on closer inspection seemed to be some sort of runic inscription. The arrowheads themselves were slick and oily, tiny barbs jutting out from the head, tips swathed in sickly green syrup.

“Those barbs hooked themselves deep in your flesh,” Gaeon murmured. “They too were coated with poison. Ghastly stuff.”

“And the runes?” Just being near the thing made him feel ill, like something was niggling in his guts. He handed them back to the old mage and felt the sensation fade from his body. “Can you read them?”

“I’ve pored over every map and scroll I have and found nothing.” He whisked the arrows away again. “Best it stays that way.”

They sat there for a long time, soaking up whatever heat the miserable fire was prepared to give them. Roshar wasn’t even sure how the old man managed to find dry wood. Everything in the town was drenched to the bone by the freezing weather. None of this was natural. Wasn’t hell at *least* supposed to be warm?

It was a while before either of them moved. Roshar shifted slightly as he turned to Gaeon. “I’m going back. I’ve got to try.”

The mage blinked. “I didn’t spend weeks raising you from the dead for you to kill yourself again.”

“I have to do *something*,” Roshar hissed. “Anything is better than this.” It had been building up for a while, but Robin slipping away had been the final blow. Whoever, or *whatever*, had destroyed his world, he wanted to spit them in the eye before he died.

“Hundreds of men walked into that mist,” Gaeon said, poking the fire with a blackened poker like he was dueling with it. “Some of them tough as iron. Others held weapons older than themselves. And they all died the same.” He cursed as the fire started to fade. “What makes *you* any different, eh?”

“I don’t know. But I’ve got to try.”

Gaeon murmured something and the door swung open, icy wind sweeping into the hut and finding the holes in his clothes. The embers shriveled back in dismay. It seemed that the meeting was over. Roshar stood up, aching bones clicking with protest.

“You’re going to die there,” mumbled Gaeon. “You won’t be coming back.”

“I know.”



Roshar stood on the edge of the field, watching the mist through the slits in his helm. Bodies were piled around him, some old, some new, rotting and letting off an odor that churned his stomach. Others were on fire, emitting a sickeningly appetizing scent. They had tried getting rid of the bodies that way at first. But now the corpses outnumbered the living by the hundreds, so no one bothered.

Ravens cackled and hissed as he moved through them, flapping back to the gables of the church, munching on flesh and observing him with inky eyes.

Gods, it stinks. He moved closer to the mist’s edge, longsword gripped firmly in hand. His father had given it to him on his eighteenth winter. He’d never planned to use it. But ever since the blacksmith hanged himself in the early days, weapons were in short demand.

The ravens fluttered, mocking him with their caws. He glanced at them, and out of the corner of his eye spotted something unusual shifting in the mists. *There.*

A fury of arrows spat out, zipping toward him. He rolled to the side, arrows punching into corpses. He picked himself up, the mud trying to hold him down as another volley came his way.

He charged ahead, slashing out with his sword at the mist. He heard a wet crunch, blood running down the shaft as a freshly made corpse toppled forward and splashed into the mud, flatbow in hand. Someone was yelling, ringing a bell. Roshar didn't wait. He sprinted forward, charging into the ethereal mist.

He tottered into a small sentry tower, shocked faces staring at him. *Zwang*. A bolt hissed past his cheek and thudded into the parapet next to him. It should have broken off, but the arrow buried itself in the stone, vibrating. A corrosive stench wafted over to him. *Acid*. The shooter was readying his crossbow, loading up the crank. Roshar ducked under the archway and sprinted up the moss-slatted stairs, sweat streaking down his chest.

The shooter gaped in surprise when he reached the top, desperately fumbling with his weapon. Roshar lunged with the sword, burying it in the sentry's heart with a squelch. Blood sprayed in his eyes, half blinding him.

A hiss. Two bolts spat out and hammered into the stonework, burning through the brick. There was a rattling of chainmail circling the stairs, pants and a torrent of curses. Roshar darted across the slippery stones and launched a kick just as the other two sentries rounded upward, knocking them down in a pile. He twisted the sword and plunged downward, spiking through the two bodies.

He found himself there what felt like hours later, down on one knee, gloved hand wrapped around the hilt of his sword and sweat dripping down his face. He dragged in a shuddering breath, his lungs bleached of air. He yanked out the weapon, flicking away strings of blood. The bodies lay sprawled on the uneven flagstones, crimson dribbling down the uneven steps in a rhythmic *pat, pat, pat*. They must have been the ones firing the arrows out from the mist. He lifted their helms, still faces staring back at him, their eyes hollow. They weren't people anymore. Just lumps of meat. Lumps of meat he'd killed.

Something was strange here. The sky was covered with a layer of dense fog, only letting the faintest shavings of light flit through. The way he came was still shrouded in the mist, as if it was thickening near a certain point and forming a barrier. It moved as he watched it. Closer and closer, it curled forward, slowly but surely, eating up the world.



Approaching the town, it took a few minutes to recognize Lithgard. The battlements were empty, the once finely kept entrance now caked in sopping mud and dripping with filth. The trees that once bore ripe fruit had dozens of bodies hanging from the twisted branches with thick ropes,

swinging in the icy wind. He picked his way down the rolling steppe, sodden grass clinging to his legs.

The town was nightmare made real. Bodies spilled from crude huts, limbs tangled and contorted like ruined dolls. Old houses had caved in, blood-spattered walls turned to splinters, wooden beams jutting at odd angles like broken fingers. There was a fire somewhere, charred wood billowing embers. Blood ran in little rivulets, seeping into the mud. Stones had been crushed, weeds and bramble climbing over the mess in an attempt to hide the chaos. Stray dogs scampered around, flea-bitten and mangy.

And of course, the ravens had shown up to enjoy their feast. There were probably more of them living here than humans now. As he got closer to the tree, Roshar noticed that one of the bodies was much smaller than the others.

It was a child.

For a moment Roshar saw his own son's face there, ginger-haired like his mother, grinning in the sun. But it was snatched away, back to the little pale corpse. Roshar felt tiny ice shards pick at his heart, memories holding him back. He shrugged them off and kept moving, feet sinking into the mud.

There was someone kneeling down by the tree, head bowed. Roshar's hand found the hilt of his sword, lifting it out off the scabbard by a few centimeters.

The figure didn't move. He walked over, curious and cautious. It was a woman; hands clasped together, eyes turned up at the tree. Roshar reached out and shook her by the shoulders. She didn't even flinch.

"She hasn't moved for days." Roshar's heart lurched and he drew his sword, spinning around. "She's not going to move now."

Roshar retreated, searching for the source of the voice. A bored sigh. "Up here." Roshar craned his neck upward. On the second story of a house sat a man, his once-white clothes tattered and soaked in muck. The furs of an arctic fox were draped around his shoulders. The whole front of the house had been ripped away, the bones picked clean. The man grumbled again, taking a swig of something foul-smelling from a bottle. He caught Roshar looking. "You want some?"

"Won't say no." Roshar just managed to catch the flask. He took a long drink, sour wine burning down his throat and warming his stomach. The man hopped down and retrieved his bottle.

"Glad to see some help came along." He swept his hand around at the town. "Might want to work on the timing."

“What’s she doing?” Roshar asked, pointing at the woman kneeling by the tree, her lips quivering.

“Praying.” Another swig. “She thinks that if she remains locked in prayer with the gods, they’ll bring her son back.” A bitter laugh. “There ain’t no gods here. Just me. And the ravens, o’ course.”

“Who are you?” Roshar queried, still on edge.

“Gilliam.” A long swig this time. “Used to be a watchman for this glorious hellhole you see before you.” He licked purple liquid from his lips. “Course, that changed when they came.”

“Who came?”

“Not sure. Came with the mist. Carried no banner and no sigil.” Swig, slosh, swallow. “They pillaged the town, slaughtered us all. Women and children alike. We barely even had a chance. Been hiding in here ever since.” He walked into the house, beckoning to Roshar. “And then I found this one.” Chained to the wall by his wrists was a dead soldier. Bloodied daggers were strewn about. Roshar stooped down next to him. He noticed the man was missing a couple of fingers. “You can ask him questions, but I don’t think he’s going to answer.” Another swig. “Not anymore.”

“Did he talk?”

“Not at first.” Gilliam cursed and hurled the bottle to the ground, glass shards scattering across the floor. He retrieved another from the cupboard, popped it open with blackened teeth, and spat out the cork. “Took a while, but he talked in the end. Said that he came from the Kingsguard.”

“The Kingsguard?” That didn’t make sense. “Why would the Kingsguard do this?”

“That’s what I asked him. He just told me to ask King Valloth when I see him. Then he died.”

“He didn’t say anything about the mist?”

“He did. Said it was the king’s doing. And *his pet bitch*.”

“Hmm.” It was better than nothing. Roshar stood up, his mail clinking. “Then I’d better get going.”

“Where?”

“The castle, obviously.” The door squeaked with protest as Roshar shoved it open and trudged outside, the rancid air filling his nose. Gilliam followed, still drinking. “If the answer’s there, I’ll find it.”

Gilliam snorted wine out of his nostrils. He was still chuckling as he scraped it away. “You’re going to march up to the castle and interrogate the king?” He shook his head in bewilderment. Roshar stood there, silent. The smile wilted. “You’re serious.”

“Got any better ideas?” Over the hills a wolf let loose a deathly howl. “We’ll all be dead soon enough.”

“Aye, true.” Gilliam seemed to be thinking. “Oh well. Might as well go down fighting.”

“What?”

“I’m not going to die here.” Gilliam flung the bottle away and scooped up the bearded axe leaning against the door. “Who wants to live forever, eh? Besides, you need someone to watch over you, right?”

Roshar bit his lip. He couldn’t very well say no. And whatever happened, he didn’t want to die alone.



The town went downhill from that point. Carts and bloodied weapons littered the streets, the flagstones painted with sickly green moss. Glass crunched underfoot. And everywhere he looked there were cudgeled bodies, all rotting and stinking, shriveling to a leathery brown. The sight made his skin crawl and his veins prickle.

Gilliam almost seemed to enjoy his discomfort, clapping him on the back like an older brother. Roshar forced himself not to recoil.

“You get used to it after a while.” Gilliam stepped over a stack of shattered shields, lovingly emblazoned with house motifs. “It does get lonely. The dead don’t say much.”

Roshar was beginning to realize that Gilliam wasn’t quite sane.

“This way.” The man beckoned to what looked like the remains of a forge. The smelter hadn’t been heated up in some time now. Roshar followed him inside the house, still uncertain.

It was a somber sight, seeing all the weapons collecting dust and slowly starting to rot. Slits of gray light poured in through the windows, drawing pale lines across the flagstones. Roshar ran his fingers along the rows of swords, flakes of rust peeling away at his touch.

“Here.” Gilliam threaded his way through to the back of the shop, fingers finding a hidden door in a small crevice. He flung it open, dust stirring in the watery gloom.

“You might want to get one of those.” Gilliam pointed to several torches hanging on the wall, tips swathed in bandages. Roshar fetched two of them, soaking them in a basin of black oil.

“How do you propose we light them?” asked Roshar.

Gilliam didn’t answer. He clenched his fists and murmured quietly, beads of sweat forming on his brow. His palms snapped open and the torches blazed to life, chasing the darkness away.

Roshar looked at Gilliam. “You’re a fire mage, aren’t you?”

“Is it that obvious?” Gilliam scooped up a torch for himself, the light playing sinister shapes across his face. “I was taking lessons. I was damn good at it, too. Then my master saw fit to die and that was it.” He beckoned toward the back room. Roshar noticed a gaping hole in the floor. “You coming or not?”

Gilliam hopped into it, landing with a thud. Roshar cursed and followed him down.



Roshar kept up with Gilliam’s pace, maintaining a slow jog through the passageway. It was threateningly suffocating in here. The light peeled blackness away from the walls as they advanced.

“How do you know about this?” Roshar asked.

Gilliam chuckled. “Used it often myself, back in the day. Paid the princess a visit now and then. When she learned of her arranged marriage they became less frequent.” He shrugged. “I expect she’s dead now.”

“You think the king’s dead as well?” Roshar brushed filthy cobwebs out of his face. He noticed that the trail was slowly inclining. He was also starting to get that prickly feeling in his gut, like the one in Gaeon’s hut when he brought out the arrows. It was only mild, but it pulsed through him nonetheless. He squashed it down the best he could.

“No idea. You heard what the soldier said. We’ll go from there.” The man barked out a brittle laugh. “What do we have to lose?”

After what seemed like hours, Gilliam halted. The dancing flames exposed a wall with a rickety ladder leading upward. “We’re here.” Gilliam clamped a hand over his torch, gutting it out. He didn’t seem to be in the slightest pain. He placed one foot on the lowest rung and started to climb with a slow rhythm. The ladder didn’t look safe, bound together with string and twine, but it was the best they had. Roshar followed him up, the tortured wood groaning beneath his feet.

“Stop.” Roshar froze, his fingers wrapped around a rung. Gilliam seemed to be pushing against something hard above them, swearing and grunting from the effort. At last it gave away and he shoved the hatch open. Light poured in, sweet and delicious. Roshar clambered up the last few rungs and hoisted himself out of the hole. He found himself in what looked like a large storage room, steel-rimmed kegs of wine and ale along the walls. They’d been chopped into splinters, the colors gushing out and bleeding out on the floor. Light eased in through a stained-glass window.

“All that fine drink, all gone to waste.” Gilliam nudged an empty barrel with his foot. “Aha. No wonder I couldn’t lift the hatch.” He pointed to the shrunken corpse curled up on the ground. “Of all the places to die . . .”

Roshar peeked through the window. They were high up, probably on one of the castle’s top floors. He could see the yards, towers, and steeples, but the distance was obscured by the mist, thick, hazy, and impenetrable as always.

“Oh,” he murmured to himself. This was *not* good.

“What is it now?” Gilliam demanded.

“Look.” Roshar pointed downward. Marching in the streets, in the courtyards, on the flat roofs, on the battlements, were countless guards, all armed and armored. There didn’t seem to be an objective, any order, rank, or discipline. Ballistae sat useless and gibbets still held ancient skeletons in their bellies. They plodded around, sitting about and leaning against the walls.

“Good thing we didn’t come that way.” Gilliam sauntered toward the door. “You coming?”

“Can’t you feel that?” The sensation was back, and it wasn’t just uncomfortable this time. His mouth was dry and his intestines were trying to tie themselves into bows. It was working its way under his veins, turning his blood to gravel.

Gilliam gave a low chortle. “Course I can. Means we’re getting close.” He swung the door open and made a mocking bow. “After you.”



The scent of death hung heavily in the air. The hallways were smeared with grime, bodies pinned to the walls with iron arrows. What had once been ornate furniture had been splintered into countless wooden fragments. Paintings had been stripped down and shredded, vases smashed, old plates of armor and bloodied gold coins scattered about the floor. Roshar had never seen so much gold. And there was no one to use it, no one to spend it.

“Ah.” Several soldiers were sprinting down the hall, rusty armor clanking as they moved, brandishing halberds and falchions. Gilliam stood there, his fists clenched, perfectly still with his eyes fastened shut.

“What the hell are you doing?” Roshar yelled.

No answer. Then Gilliam’s eyes flipped open, glowing a crimson red. He stepped forward and clapped his hands together with a bang. Fire sprouted up in the middle of the soldiers, engulfing them in a roaring, scorching cocoon. Tapestries on the walls were eaten away in seconds. Men reeled away, burning and screaming and tumbling.

It didn't take long before they were all a smoldering pile of bodies, ropery coils of smoke spiraling to the blackened roof. Gilliam turned around, sweat gushing out of his pores. He nodded toward the sizzling bodies. "Hungry?"

Roshar just shook his head and tried not to gag. Gilliam chuckled, then led the way through an arching doorway, revealing more staircases. This had to be the way. Roshar was aware of the pain mounting with almost every step, scrubbing away at his bones.

Gilliam twirled his axe. "You may want to step aside."

"Wha—" Roshar threw himself forward as a portcullis gate guillotined down, bolts slotting into place and dividing them from the castle's entrance. Gilliam's face split in a grin, tapping the broken wheel spoke, the rusty chains collapsed on the floor like a lifeless snake. He gave the humongous gate a rattle. It refused to budge.

He grinned again. "Now let's see them try and follow us."

"And what if we want to get out again?" asked Roshar curtly.

Gilliam just laughed.



Gilliam stood in front of an ordinary looking iron-bound door. "Can you feel it?"

Roshar nodded as the pain flushed through him like a river, nearly forcing him to his knees. They had to be close.

Gilliam scraped open the door. The room was something between a library and a laboratory, bursting with old tomes and manuscripts. There had to be thousands of them, black ink on faded parchment, recalling the histories and the songs and the battles and the kings. None of which mattered anymore. The desks were cluttered with dried herbs and resin, gnarled roots and metallic utensils. Drawers hung half open like tongues, more papers spilling out.

And in the middle was a woman. She was small and lithe, her hair flowing down in beautiful ebony waves. She turned around and gazed at him with brilliant blue eyes that pierced into his heart. In her hand was a small green herb. She placed it back on the bench with care. "Hello there."

... it was the king's doing. And his pet bitch. "Who are you?" Roshar demanded, drawing his sword as spikes of pain skewered through him.

"Kill her! Now!" Gilliam made an attempt at springing forward, axe in hand. Yet he froze like an ant in amber, his silhouette outlined with the rippling of air.

“Don’t listen to him, my dear. He’s not important.” Her voice wafted over to him in silky ribbons. He found his sword grip loosening, the weapon clattering to the ground. “You’re here now. That’s all that matters.”

Roshar nodded vigorously, turning away from Gilliam. “Yes, yes, that’s right.” He found himself drawn to her, this mysterious woman with a voice like the gods. How could one *possibly* resist?

“Come closer, slowly now.” Roshar obeyed, hanging on every word. She padded toward him, something in her hand. A familiar voice called him from far away. What was it saying? Roshar shoved it away. It didn’t matter. Nothing mattered anymore. Everything would be fine.

Her body was the center of the room, center of the entire world. She smiled, subtle sunlight glistening on her hair with an indigo shimmer. She lifted her hand, showing a dagger. But that didn’t matter. She wouldn’t hurt him. She couldn’t.

“Poor fool,” she said, her voice draping over him like honey, swathing him in syrupy bliss. “It’s too late for you. It’s too late for us all.”

She raised the dagger.

Gilliam let out an ear-splitting roar, snapping Roshar out of his trance. He remained rooted to the ground, yet managed to swing his arms. His axe went scything through the air with a whistle. The woman sprang backward with an unnatural agility, the glinting blade nearly touching her. Instead, it smashed into the table with a shower of splinters, throwing up a cloud of resin.

“*You.*” A cold smile twisted on her face and she spun around, flexing her hand to fling the dagger in Gilliam’s direction. Roshar fumbled for his sword, yanking it out with a sharp scrape off the floor, and without thinking thudded it into the bridge of her skull. He staggered backward, the world swimming around him as white noise whined in his ears. He sucked in a ragged breath and looked at the woman, the sword well and truly buried in her head. She had to have been a mage of some sort. A powerful one, too. Was *she* the cause of all this?

“That wench has a good throwing arm.” With a lead heart, Roshar noted the dagger protruding from Gilliam’s chest, wedged between his ribs. He collapsed onto the stone floor, breathing hard. Roshar knew it was over for him. They both knew it. He stooped low, holding Gilliam’s coarse hand as the life poured out of him.

“You finish this, you hear?” ordered Gilliam through bloody teeth. “Find King Valloth and kill him. I didn’t come this far for nothing.” He spat weakly, tears welling in his fading eyes. “Leave me. I’ll see my family soon.”

Roshar nodded, swallowing the lump in his throat. He’d seen many men die, some old, some young, all trying to put on a brave face in their final moments, trying to be heroic. They never

succeeded. Never. No matter how bold and hardened, in their final moments they all wanted their mothers. To be in the arms of their loved ones.

Roshar stayed with Gilliam, this madman who'd gone through hell with him. He stayed with him until he stopped breathing.



There was no better place to find a king than in the throne room.

It was almost anticlimactic, seeing King Valloth sitting on his rusted throne, his pathetic figure swaddled in faded robes. He'd been a notoriously obese man, his face pasty and rosy. Now he was bitterly thin, loose flesh spilling down in sagging folds. He didn't even look up as Roshar approached. The bodies of his vanguard were piled against the throne, a mountain of rusted mail and greatswords.

"Someone finally made it." His voice was low and quiet, but somehow it carried an eerie force that echoed throughout the entire room. "I'm afraid you're too late."

"Your mage said the same thing," said Roshar. A javelin of pain shot through him. He absorbed the impact with a shudder.

Valloth looked up, revealing a sunken face with hollow eyes the color of festered flesh. "Is she dead?" A pause. "It should have been done years ago."

Roshar blinked. "What?"

"It was *her*," Valloth hissed, his voice grating against Roshar's skull. "That stupid woman and her experiments. They caused all this."

"How?"

"It got out of control," Valloth murmured. "We just wanted to unravel the enigmas of the world. But the power was too great to contain. So many things went wrong. So much *death*. That ghastly poison." He nodded weakly toward the glass window. "It took hold of the kingdom. It created the mist. It drove men mad, turned them into the bloodthirsty soldiers you've fought your way through."

Roshar stepped forward and was immediately hit by a sudden force that ripped through his stomach, almost doubling him over. He gritted his teeth and took another step, the fibers in his legs burning. "There had to be a way," he rasped, "to stop it."

"There was." The king shut his eyes and lowered his voice down to a whisper. "I was greedy. I saw the power she created and I took it. I didn't know how powerful it would become. Now it

resides in me. I'm its vessel." He hunched over with a hacking cough, putrid saliva dripping from his lips. "I could have halted it if I took my own life. But I could not perform the deed. Now I don't have the strength to stand up." His eyes seemed to bore into Roshar, burn through him. "It scrapes a man clean. Gives him power and tears it away, piece by piece."

Roshar felt the sickly stuff seeping down his throat, spreading through his system. He had to hurry. "I can still do what you couldn't."

Valloth froze, then gave the faintest of nods. "Yes. Do it. Quickly, now."

Roshar tightened his grasp on the sword's hilt, preparing to strike.

"*No!*" Valloth's voice intensified, a raw lust for control that nearly blasted Roshar off his feet. His face sagged, his eyes becoming black as night. "*Don't you dare take my power away!*"

The pain was nearly engulfing him now, his muscles contracting in spasms, bones rattling. Tears of agony were trickling down his cheeks, old wounds weeping blood. He started up the dais, the thrumming in his skull mounting by the moment. Every cell in his body begged him to leave, to turn away and run. He thought of Robin and the way she would smile at him. She started to slip away between his fingers like ashes in the roaring wind. He clamped his teeth together and latched onto her memory, the last thing he had, and took another step. And another. And another.

There was a shriek from Valloth as he readied his sword, nearly blowing out his eardrums. "*Don't! Stop!*" He was scrambling back, trying to hug his throne for protection "*It's MINE!*"

Roshar didn't waste his energy on words. Gathering up every drop of strength he had left, he twisted his sword and pierced it right into Valloth's heart.

The world exploded in a suction of dark energy, a whirlwind of glistening dust. Roshar screwed his eyes shut and tightened his grasp on the sword grip." *Fool!*" the king screamed, barely audible above the howling. "*Now it passes onto you! Nothing has changed!*"

Roshar shook his head, gritted his teeth. He would *not* take it. He would not cave in like Valloth. Roshar sunk to one knee as the dark venom coiled and writhed around him, trying to find a way in. He squeezed his eyes shut as it burned down his throat, expanding in his lungs and spreading out through his body, finding every crevice, every vein, filling him with the poison. The king flopped back on his throne, dead.

And then the universe was quiet.

Roshar felt his heart boom in his chest, pumping toxic blood into his body. He raised his head, slowly, and gazed through the slits of his helm.

And he saw it—no, *felt* it. The power the king had spoken of. It shifted in the air, thrashed inside him, begging to be harnessed, to be taken and used. It *needed* to have a home, a vessel.

Roshar pinned the power within his sights, a loose thread that coiled out to him, seeking him. Roshar swallowed a mouthful of sour saliva, fixing his eyes on the rust-eaten throne. He shouldn't take it. He should just let the poison choke him. But how he *wanted* that power. How he *deserved* it.

Mine.

He scrambled to his feet, struggling as he shuffled toward the throne, dragging Valloth's corpse from the seat and leaving him slumped on the floor, one more body on the pile. He planted himself down on the seat and closed his eyes, his body a hollow cavern that echoed with darkness. The power took root in him, hooking itself deep in his body. He reached for the tiny thread of power that dangled in front of him, holding on for all he was worth. It was his and his alone. No one was ever going to take it from him. Never.

This was his world now.



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Jeremy Szal is a Writers of the Future finalist and the author of more than forty publications. His fiction has appeared (or is forthcoming) in venues such as *Nature*, *Abyss & Apex*, *Perihelion Magazine*, and his nonfiction has appeared multiple times in *Strange Horizons*, *Grimdark Magazine*, and *Fantasy Scroll*.

Kara's Ares

Clint Spivey

Kara didn't need to turn to know whose steps halted behind her, their sound a discord against the soothing thrum of the ship's rotating gravity cylinder. Their destination, still a dull red disc, glowed at the corner of *Lightwell's* tiny, transparent observation bulb.

"Take a good look." Salat crouched behind her, his whisper pointless aboard the empty ship. "I will one day walk beneath the Martian sky. You won't."

She squinted in consideration of his words. *This* mission had barely begun. Why speculate on a follow up? A question died on her lips as he spoke in answer.

"Without my recommendation, you'll never see Mars but through this glass."



"I'm sorry," Kara said, distracted by thirty-year-old memories of Mars lost. "Can you repeat the question?"

The writer sitting across from her, a man named Derrys and at least twenty years Kara's junior, said, "Did you find it unfair when Cdr. Salat withheld his recommendation of you for the next Valor mission?"

Steam drifted from their two mugs to the table-side window, clouding the pane and the falling snow behind it. The drifts accumulating on the pines surrounding Kara's property sagged their boughs like shrouded white priests.

"I respected the board's decision," she said.

"They denied you Mars." Derrys pushed his small recorder across the table. Its single LED burned red. "Salat returned. Was one of the first humans to set foot on the planet. Even after your several appeals, why do you think he was against your selection for Valor Two?"

Kara brushed wisps of her straight hair back over her ears. Gray crept up her scalp while lone white strands mingled against auburn ones. Watching the young man, she wondered if she should have dyed it before their meeting.

"This ought to be quite the book you're writing," she said. "Most interviews deal with such scandalous issues as our freeze-dried cuisine aboard *Lightwell*."

“Much of history mentions Valor One as a mere footnote. Prologue to the several landings that followed.”

“That they do. No one cared much for our mission, which amounted to little more than a cargo drop. Not after humans walked on Mars.”

“So why was Salat against your return?”

“Because,” she said, “after being forced to share Valor One with me, he would never share Mars.”



“My voyage aboard *Lightwell* will provide valuable data to the colonists who one day make this same trip,” Kara said into her tablet’s camera. “I’m thrilled to have such an opportunity while contributing to the future through this noble endeavor. Thank you for your question.” Despite being limited to canned responses approved by an Earthbound mission control, dealing with the numerous pre-recorded questions blasted at them from Earth was a pleasant part of Kara’s duties. She keyed the comm icon on her tablet. “Salat, I have a bundle of interviews ready for transmission.”

The voice of the only other crew member aboard flooded the tiny mess space from the intercom. “Understood. Take a look at these while you’re at it.”

On her screen, Salat’s messages settled in like unwelcome guests in place of Kara’s own.

She looked up at the camera’s black dome mounted on the ceiling, where Salat could see her from his perch in the cockpit. “Those are yours. Answer them yourself.”

“You’re better suited for them. They’ll benefit from your . . . perspective.”

She tabbed open a batch. Kindergartners and elementary school kids; their letters in the hundreds.

“Dammit, Salat. You can handle some of these, you know.” The dome camera’s red light dimmed, switched off along with the intercom. It wasn’t until a week later, when sifting through their daily message traffic, that she read the published interviews.

“You changed my answers?” Kara’s balled fists shook. “Those were my interviews.”

“They lacked professionalism,” he said. “We’re on a mission, not out shopping. They must have told you that during your selection.” Salat finished his drink and set his mug on the table.

“Take that to the dishwasher.” He departed the mess space.

She was halfway to the automatic dishwasher’s chute when she stopped and stared at the mug in her hand. Was it Salat or her own instant assent to his bidding that warmed her face with

anger? Kara's knuckles went white as she resisted flinging the mug into the bulkhead. Instead, mindful of the several sensors monitoring and recording her physiological responses, she placed it in the dishwasher.



"Mind if I refill this?" Derrys motioned with his empty mug to Kara's kitchen.

She nodded. "Help yourself."

"Thanks." The red light glowed on his recorder. "The decision to crew *Lightwell* during Valor One was made rather late." He poured his tea. "Crew selection was equally hurried."

"The original mission was to bring supplies for future trips," Kara said. "The habitats and a lander. Nothing more." She looked at the piling snow outside. "This was before the Global Space Agency. Back then, nations vied for prestige through underfunded space programs." She looked back at him. "But once the joint Russian/Chinese mission was disclosed at the time, and NASA learned it included manned orbits of Mars, well, they decided to include us for the ride."

"Space missions of the day didn't usually handle crew selection so casually."

She shrugged. "I was young, fit, and already established as part of the team because of my work on the lander. They wanted a civilian to accompany Salat. I fit the profile."

He returned to his seat. "There was . . . concern, with your selection, since you'd never trained in the space program. Do you think more qualified personnel were deserving of a place on that mission?"

"Sending engineers to space wasn't unheard of, you know."

"So you disagree with those who criticized your selection?"

"The eventual colonists weren't astronauts. There were valid questions at the time as to how such people, without extensive training, would respond to long-duration space flight."

"Your vitals came under increased scrutiny during the mission. Signs of stress and anger emerged aboard *Lightwell*. How did conditions affect your performance during the mission?"

She was beginning to discern his technique. Far from the vanilla softballs lobbed underhand to her by interviewers over the years, he baited his questions like traps, slamming them shut when she defended herself. She took a deep breath before answering.

"My performance was unaffected."

"Only two people on an entirely automated ship. It's like mission control was encouraging strife."

“Valor One’s primary mission was our payload. Salat and I were just passengers.”



“You locked the cargo bay again,” Kara said, crossing the threshold into *Lightwell’s* darkened control center. Salat was a ghostly silhouette against the dull glow of LEDs and monitors.

“Release the door, please. I need to make some checks.”

“No, you don’t,” he said without looking from his screen. “There isn’t a single thing you can accomplish by toying with the shell sealing the lander. Why not straighten up the mess deck?”

She flung the dimmer switch to max, the brightness sending Salat wincing.

“Release the locks, please.”

“You spend hours of your off time with the payload,” he said, rubbing his eyes. “Do you want to damage it?”

“Off time? This whole mission is off time. Five pages of codes are required to alter *Lightwell’s* course. The ship is piloting itself, no matter how much you pretend to aid it by hiding in here. And damage the payload? We’re going to cast it down to the Martian surface. I’m pretty sure it will endure my reading a book atop the hatch.”

“You seem agitated.” His voice was level; had been during the entire exchange. Had hers?

“I’m fine.” She resisted grinding her teeth.

“Have you transmitted your logs for the day?”

“They’re not due for hours.”

“Then why waste time reading in the cargo bay?”

“Please release the locks, Salat.”

He turned his chair to face her. “Must have been quite the surprise when they selected you for this mission.”

“Not this again.” Kara rubbed her temples.

His voice remained even. “The people that trained with me spent years in anticipation of this trip. But I imagine the politicians didn’t consider them when they gave you the job.”

“And who will the colonists eventually be?” she said. “Subsequent voyages won’t all be crew-cut soldiers. Shocking as it sounds, they might actually send *farmers* to grow food on Mars instead of pilots.” She balled her fists in a failed attempt to steady her shaking hands. “They need to see how regular people will adapt out here. Did you sleep through that part of the briefing?”

“It must have been like hitting the lottery.” He shrugged. “Go do some token engineering work on our payload and get a ride to Mars.”

After so many months she knew to resist his baiting, but continued. “Tell me, Salat. Did you have so much as a summer job before Daddy the admiral got you into the Naval Academy? Or have all your paychecks been signed by Uncle Sam?”

He turned away and flipped a switch on the console. “The locks to the cargo bay are released.”

And he was through. A simple sabotage to tweak her vitals before the daily transmission Earthward. Stress, anger; a host of negative indicators revealed to mission control. And he hadn’t even raised his voice.



“Salat claims you were under no more stress than what any Mars mission would entail.” Derrys said. “He argues that the records of your vitals don’t lie.”

“Only during the very beginning. Upon the final approaches to Mars, my records reflect no such issues.”

“What was so interesting about the cargo bay?”

Kara halted her scrutiny of the dregs in her empty mug. “I’m sorry?”

“The cargo bay. You mentioned spending a lot of time there. The mission logs confirm it.”

He had the same, friendly smile. She discerned nothing different in his tone, yet feared the question’s hidden snare.

“It was a private place.”

“You had all of *Lightwell* to yourselves. I’ve toured the museum where it now sits. Seems there would be plenty of places for privacy.”

She shrugged, unwilling to meet his gaze. “I just liked it down there.”



Each encounter set Kara on edge. While the majority were benign, Salat reserved one per day to rile her vitals past the numerous thresholds that caused mission control and the flight surgeons back home to fret. Her response to his bullying didn’t matter. Whether argument or avoidance, mockery or insult, he met her every fusillade with indifference and calm, until the mere sound of his footsteps brought her to a trembling knife—edge balancing upon rage or retreat.

It was Ares that rescued her. Tucked away knees-to-chin in *Lightwell's* cramped observation bulb, at the forward end of the narrow, cylindrical ship, her salvation became clear. If she were at war with Salat, though the casus belli remained unclear, perhaps Ares offered aid. It leeched away her crimson-tinged rage, replacing it with an iron oxidized plan to free her from Salat while propelling her to a place of peace as well as a spot in history. With a thankful nod toward the ancient god of war, she departed to search out a parts list.

Later, at the table in the mess space, she tabbed through a monstrous 1,000 page file. Fortunately, as an engineer, she'd not only slogged through such tomes before, but had even been known to contribute a hundred or so pages on occasion. Such was her skill that she navigated with a deft hand until she located the shipboard system that contained the first component her scheme demanded.

Was all that she required on board? For if so, surely providence guided Kara toward her destiny. Her searching revealed one vital component after another. The more she located, the greater her fear that the entire, crazed scheme would be undone by the lack of a single, key item. Yet there they were. Spares tucked away in lockers, primaries and backups waiting to be cannibalized, they all awaited her.

A single item remained. She flung pages aside. System after system; diagrams by the dozen flashed by in her search. Her breath slowed as the longer she looked, the more the absence of the final part demonstrated the madness of her pursuit. Had Ares taken her this far, only to illustrate, at the precipice, how twisted was her plot? She lowered the tablet to her lap.

"What are you doing?" Salat's voice, even as ever, set a twitch to her eye.

"I was just—" she stopped, for the tablet page had shifted. Her finger, dragged across the screen in fallen despair at his approach, had flipped the page, revealing another schematic. Before her, in unremarkable black and white, was displayed the final piece.

She stood with a smile, flipping the tablet beneath her arm like a schoolgirl carrying a text.

"Just studying up on the lander," she said. "It is, as you're fond of saying, a mission that we're on. Never hurts to be prepared." She departed with a lightness long absent in her step.

The first theft was the hardest. Beneath *Lightwell's* deckplates, with pipes snaking around her like a bed of serpents, Kara located the required part. A green light, curiously bright in the dark space, illuminated the component's connection to the system. Fingers wrapped around it, she paused.

What was she doing? This first fraud was step one in the biggest theft in all of human endeavor. Is that what she desired?

Footsteps vibrated through the deckplates against the comforting motion of the gravity cylinder. Kara closed her eyes. She was discovered. A sob rose in her throat. Such was her tormentor's gift that she accepted her failure without pause. Had she truly believed escape so easy? Her trembling hand was all the answer she needed.

Only now, there was light. Opening her eyes, she saw red. Crimson bathed the dark space, drowning the feeble LEDs from other systems in its fury. Alone, buried beneath the endless pipework where none could see, a welling tear trickled its course down her cheek. Ares, once more, lit her purpose with its ancient, martial glow.

Her trembling hand had disrupted the small module from its socket, filling the space with red light indicating a broken connection. Behind it, feeble green, lost in the red, indicated the backup coming to life.

The footsteps above faded, carrying away her vile counterpart. Ares had not abandoned her. Palming the small module into a pocket, she slithered her way out of the piping.

Over the final weeks of their approach, as Mars turned, Ares crept ever closer, and Kara's collection grew. Ensuring her work went unnoticed, she bypassed and rerouted what she removed from the ship's systems, while she plundered the rest from storage lockers. Smuggling them in ones and twos to her hiding spot, she tucked them away beside their growing compatriots. Silent conspirators in her cabal.

Kara made sure to read for at least an hour in the cargo bay before moving. She tucked the yellowed paperback, a gift from her father, into a pocket of her coveralls and rolled over the bulbous hatch covering the lander. The size of an SUV back home, it took her two full turns to roll to the other side out of the monitoring camera's view. Nervous moments passed, waiting for Salat's voice over the speaker indicating he'd noticed her. There was only silence.

Kara unzipped her coveralls past her chest and reached inside. The component, wrapped in cloth, fit inside her hand. She removed a panel on the bulkhead beside the lander and placed the piece with the others. She replaced the panel, removed her book, and rolled back to within the camera's field of view to continue reading.



“Some say it was your behavior during Valor One that resulted in your being passed over for a surface mission. Were you angry when your appeals were denied?”

Kara brushed strands of her hair out of her eyes and behind her ear. “Valor One was crucial to those follow up missions. We laid the groundwork for all subsequent landings.”

“No one doubts that. But you didn’t answer the question. Were you angry about not being picked up to return to Mars?”

She thought a moment before responding. The seconds dragged out in the muffled winter silence within her house and outside. “I came to accept the panel’s decision regarding my return to Mars.”

“You could have been one of the first humans to set foot on the planet.”

“Yes,” she said in a quiet voice. “I could have.”



“If you can complete these final orbits without cracking, we might succeed on this mission.” Salat was across from her in the mess, breakfast being the only time they now communicated by anything but intercom.

Another component of her revenge, its sharp, metal corners biting through her coveralls into her flesh, sat in her pocket. She took to carrying them, like totems, before depositing them inside her hidden vault. Salat’s bane, as she’d come to think of the near-completed device waiting in her hidden place. Awaiting the moment when it would hurl Salat to his end, leaving nothing, not even his career or reputation intact.

“Worry about the one time you’re actually needed to monitor the flight plan,” Kara said. “I’m just a civilian, remember?”

“I don’t know what you’ve been doing in the cargo bay. But don’t you foul up the lander deployment.”

She didn’t answer. She didn’t need to. After this day, as Mars passed beneath them, neither Salat nor any other human, would trouble her ever again.



Derrys placed the item on the table without a word. Kara sat still, hiding behind the mug raised to her mouth.

“Do you recognize this?” he asked.

“No.”

“It’s a transformer of sorts. Allowing power supplies of differing voltages to interact without frying whatever is connected. Do you know where I found it?”

“A hardware store?”

Derrys smiled. She was still unsure what he was after. Even with the component accusing her from across thirty years, she couldn’t read his smile.

“I found it in *Lightwell’s* cargo bay. Tucked away in a service panel with several other items. Seems someone was trying to assemble something from spare parts.”

“As if the museum would let some . . . *writer* poke around the exhibit.”

“Trust me,” he said. “They were happy someone had even taken an interest in their exhibit.”

“What is it you want?”

“To find out what happened during Valor One. What almost happened.”

“We went to Mars,” she said. “Completed our orbits. Deployed the habs and the lander to the surface. Then returned home safely, proving it could be done. What else is there to know?”

“I think you wanted to be the first person on Mars.” His recorder’s red LED was accusatory.

“Who wouldn’t?” She shrugged.

“I think you were going to ride the lander down.”

“Salt Mars with my ashes?” Her laugh was more desperate than dismissive. “I would have burned to a cinder. I was never suicidal.”

“Not if you cracked the lander,” he said.

“Impossible. It was sealed to reduce contamination.”

“The habitats weren’t. It wouldn’t have taken much to pry one of the containers open. They’re large enough for a person. And shielded to allow the inflatable structures to survive the descent unscathed.”

“There were alarms,” she whispered.

“Low priority on the hab modules. Easily bypassed.”

“Please.” Her hands trembled. “Why are you doing this?”

“What were you planning?” he said.

She closed her eyes. “Nothing. We deployed the habitats with success. Subsequent missions utilized them upon arrival. Hab-One remains a museum. Right where it landed.”

Derrys stood and walked to the window in the adjoining living room. The wind had fallen, the snow descending lazily in its absence.

“No one at the *Lightwell* museum bothered with those items,” he said, still looking outside.

“Everyone I asked assumed they were just stored in the empty bay after the lander was deployed.” He looked at her. “Do you know what they would have been if assembled?”

“Of course.”

“The habs were just empty shells. Husks for the later missions when they’d be supplied with oxygen to be made livable.” He returned to the table and tapped the component. “With this, and the others, you could have altered the lander’s cooling systems. Creating an O₂ exhaust just rich enough to replenish a spacesuit. At least for a while.” Derrys clicked off his recorder. “Would have made for quite the revenge,” he said. “After pulling off something like that right under Salat’s nose, I doubt he would have been given another spot on the next Valor Mission.”

“People like him don’t grow out of their bullying,” she said. “They just grow into it.”

“Salat has no idea,” Derrys said. “You could have ruined him. Instead, you allowed him his first place on Mars.”

“I guess I did.”

“The first human on Mars,” Derrys said. “Would have been quite the honor.”

“I would have survived for days.” She stared at him, determined not to look away. “Possibly a week.”

He cocked his head. “To do what, exactly? Study the surface? Observe the effects on a human? There wasn’t much you could have added to the body of knowledge prior to the subsequent landings.”

She smiled. “Nothing so grand. I would have read. Sifted the dirt with my fingers. Slept while the Martian soil filtered my dreams.”

He watched her without speaking, the falling snow outside a blessing in its silence.

“Will this go in the book?” she said.

“Are you kidding? This is *it*. These chances don’t come along to someone in my field very often.”

“The chance I had with Mars will never come again to anyone.”

“There are very few firsts these days,” he said. “Yours would have been unassailable.” He shook his head. “You were going down there to die.”

She shrugged. “The first to sleep. The first to dream. The first to wake. The first to witness Mars pristine. And the last. I imagine I would have lived more in that week than most humans have in a long time.”

“So why didn’t you?”

Kara’s shoulders slumped. “I guess stealing Mars for myself would have been no more noble than when Salat took it from me.”



Kara stepped from the steaming shower and streaked her hand across the fogged mirror. She'd taken her time in hopes of missing Derrys for his final visit. Somehow she doubted he would be deterred so easily. He arrived an hour later.

"I suppose the news crews will be here shortly," she said. They sat in her living room, her on the sofa, he on the matching chair across the low coffee table. Sunlight streaked in shafts through the thick gray clouds outside.

"Sorry to disappoint. Only me today." Derrys removed a hardback book from his bag and placed it on the table. "Yours was the last part I needed. I'd had the rest edited for months before I stumbled on that hatch and its contents in *Lightwell's* cargo bay. While there still needs to be a final check with my editor, I 3Ded this off last night. I figured I'd run it by you before I submit it."

Kara picked it up. *In the Red: The Story of the First Manned Mission to Mars* was written in raised, crimson gloss on the top. A photo of the Martian North Pole covered the lower half of the cover.

"This isn't the story everyone already knows," Derrys said, and smiled. Kara saw now that nothing hid behind that smile. "This tells a different story. A story of a woman who almost changed history."

She saw now there was more to the cover. In the star field above the Martian Pole, hidden in some 3D printed trickery, when the light touched the book at a certain angle, was a face. Her face.

"You haven't told anyone?" she asked.

"I figured I'd let you read it first."

"They'll all know I was crazy. That I cracked just like Salat claimed I did."

He waved his hand. "Maybe. But they'll also remember Valor One. That mission that was forgotten after the landing and settlements and gardens, will once again receive the place in history it deserves." He looked out her window. "Maybe the hero doesn't depart for space. Maybe she comes back as one." He looked at Kara and smiled. "Or they'll just think you're crazy."

He stood. "You've got a week. I'm only so noble. We're about to be famous, you know. No more scrounging reviews at a dollar a pop." There was a wickedness to his smile now that was not without kindness. "Can't wait for my first interview." He picked up his bag and headed for the door.

“I assume you’ve heard of the theory about alternate realities,” she said while looking out of the window.

“I did have to learn a *little* about science to be a science writer.”

“I like to think about her up there. Some other Kara West. Perhaps, when the other missions arrived, they found her beside a journal full of notes. A smile on her face. The first recorded dreams of Mars written in her own words. I like to think they buried her with respect. Maybe even built her a little monument.”

“Hey, that’s good stuff. Stop holding out on me. Though in subsequent editions . . .”

She put the book down. “What if I don’t want this story told?”

He cocked his head and shrugged. “You gave up your big shot. I don’t think I’m going to do the same.”

She nodded. “I guess I’ll talk to you in a week.”



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Clint Spivey teaches English as a Foreign Language in Tokyo. His research focus is on fluency development in an EFL setting. His work has appeared in *The Lorelei Signal*, *Bastion*, *Electric Spec*, *Perihelion*, and the *Pop Seagull Anthology: Love, Time, Space, Magic*.

Protecting Nessie

Hank Quense

Agatha opened the door to the Grubby Shoat. She paused, and, while her eyes adjusted to the gloom, a gust of wind blew a squall of rain through the door. Despite the fog of candle and fire smoke, she saw the elderly barkeeper turn pale. “Be at ease, old man. We seek more virile prey.”

She waddled to the bar, a rough-hewn plank set on empty barrels. The water dripping from her hooded cloak left a wet trail on the moldy rushes covering the dirt floor. The mildew stench from the rushes mingled with the odor of fetid ale to produce a miasmic bouquet.

Agatha spotted five village men sitting on a bench. Exactly what she hoped to find—a flock of potential bed partners. The men sucked in their breath when they saw her, but she refused to let their reaction dampen her excitement.

When her sisters, Bertha and Carla, entered the tavern, a collective groan came from the table. One of the men jerked his knee, kicking the rickety table in front of the bench and scattering their leather ale cups.

Agatha opened her cloak. Underneath, she wore a dark kirtle a few sizes too small for her ample thighs and stomach.

The men sobbed.

Bertha smiled at the table. “Some of you lads will have an unforgettable experience tonight.” She and Carla opened their cloaks. Both were dressed similarly to their sister.

Agatha ignored the panicky response to Bertha’s announcement. Men always looked like doomed cattle when the sisters were on the hunt. She didn’t understand the reaction, but assumed it was quite natural.

“Good eve, Sisters Wyrd.” Having regained his composure, the elderly man behind the plank nodded to them. “What can I serve you?”

“A round of mead with raw eggs on top,” Agatha replied.

“‘Tis a celebration.” Carla, a svelte two hundred pounds and the thinnest of the three, grinned at the old man.

“Aye, a great day.” Bertha leaned on the plank, bending it into a deep arc.

The barkeeper watched the plank with a look of alarm.

“We avenged an insult to our Granny,” Bertha added.

“You witches talk in riddles. I do not ken your meaning.”

“When Granny learned that Malcolm had killed MacBeth and was now king,” Agatha said, “her coronation gift was an offer to become his Royal Sorceress.”

“And the fool rebuffed her,” Carla said. In the fashion of the younger witches, she had let her nasal hairs grow long enough to braid. “An insult to all witches and even Hecate, our goddess.”

“Men are simple in the brain, methinks.” Agatha shook her head at the unfathomable ways of men. “Granny is not as pert as we three, but she’s no beldam and would have graced the royal court. The king now regrets his refusal.”

“Aye, you should have seen the look on Malcolm’s face.” Bertha gave the barkeeper a gapped-tooth grin. The man shuddered. Once a week, Bertha used an herbal cream that made warts grow. She had a fat, cucumber-colored one on the tip of a beak-like nose and a smaller, amber one on her left cheek. She called them beauty spots.

“Dark of mien, he was,” Carla said.

“What did you do?” the barkeeper asked as he placed the drinks on the plank.

“We placed a powerful curse on Malcolm and his spawn.” Carla held a hand over her mouth as she cackled.

Agatha grinned and clapped Bertha on the shoulder, splattering water from her soggy cloak.

“Is the curse secret?”

“Nay. One of Malcolm’s descendants will be the first married man to leave a toilet seat standing,” Bertha said, and giggled.

“What’s a toilet seat?” The old man gave them a questioning look.

“’Tis a mystery and beyond the ken of all here.” Agatha hugged herself in joy. “And so, my pretties and I want to celebrate and have a bit of fun.” She hefted her mug, took a sip, and savored the sweetness of the mead for a moment before swallowing.

“What’s next?” Carla asked. “This lot doesn’t appear very interested in us.” She jerked a thumb over her shoulder in the direction of the men.

“I’ll offer them a choice and then they’ll show some interest.” Bertha winked at her younger sister.

“Prithee, what choice?” Carla asked.

“Watch.” Bertha turned to the table and swiveled her hips.

The men, woodcutters and swine herders, were young but looked middle-aged, worn down from work, poor food, and disease. They shifted in their seats and glanced at one another. Two had trouble breathing.

“What will it be, lads?” Bertha batted her eyes. “Pleasure . . . or pain?”

“Pain.”

“Me, too.”

“I can use a bit of pain.”

“Pain, if you don’t mind.”

“What are the choices again?”

Bertha scowled and tossed her head. A small twig fell out of her brown locks.

Agatha suspected their plans for the night had gone awry, as usual.

The barkeeper shook his head. “It takes a rare talent to be an unsuccessful slut.”

“How would you like to spend the rest of your days as a toad?” Bertha glared at the man.

“What news, old man?” Agatha changed subjects before Bertha did something rash like casting a spell. She wasn’t the sharpest spell-caster in the family and could easily set the place on fire by mistake.

“A monster has appeared by the village in the loch, and the fisherfolk refuse to go out on the water.”

One of the men at the table approached the sisters. He trembled as he said, “What does this portend, oh Sisters Drearie?”

“Drearie, is it?” Bertha boxed the man’s ears. “It means Nessie has finally molted and now wants to play.”

The man retreated.

“Nessie is Hecate’s pet monster,” Carla said to the innkeeper. “Hecate gave it into my care on my fifth birthday. It was a wee tadpole and she charged me to raise it and protect it. I loosed it in the loch last year.”

“The Laird of the Loch has vowed to kill the monster,” the barkeeper said.

“Kill Nessie?” Carla scowled at the man. “How dare he threaten a defenseless pet.”

Agatha gasped. If something happened to Nessie, Hecate would hold the sisters responsible because of her charge to Carla. She would be in no mood to listen to explanations or excuses, and her retribution would be harsh. This Laird of the Loch had to be stopped before he imperiled their safety. “We must hasten to the loch to see what is amiss.”

“Bah!” Bertha exclaimed. “Every time we try to lose our virginity, something comes up.”

“Hah!” Carla scoffed. “Our maidenheads are intact because nothing ever comes up.”

Bertha heard merriment, wheeled on the peasants. “See if you think being cockroaches is funny.” She extended her hand.

The men dove under the table just as their leather cups turned into flower vases.

“Oh, bugger this.” Bertha placed both hands on her hips and stamped her foot.

“Attend me!” Agatha said. “Let us fetch our brooms and fly to the village and see what is amiss.”

“Aroint thee.” Carla sneered. “I hate flying at night. I always get lost.”

“If you had memorized the star charts you wouldn’t get lost.” Agatha wagged a finger under Carla’s nose. “And we must go to the loch before something happens to Nessie.”

“And how do we see the stars on a rainy night?” Carla’s voice dripped with sarcasm.

“We shall use landmarks tonight. Follow close behind me.”

“But, Nessie is Hecate’s pet,” Bertha whined. “Why do we have to fly to its aid?”

“Hecate placed it under Carla’s protection. The Goddess will hold us accountable and will cause us grief. To the loch we must go.”

“The fisherfolk at the loch are lusty lads,” one of the men said.

“Aye,” another said, “randy they are.”

“Insatiable, I hear,” said a third.

As she left, Agatha heard the men guffaw and slap each other on the back.



In the morning, the sun gradually burned off the mist that hung over the loch. Four boats sat drawn up on the rocky shore and a squadron of blackbirds circled and fought over a pile of stinking fish guts. A narrow dirt track ran east to west, carved through a forest of pine and elm trees.

Agatha and Bertha stood on the shore and awaited Carla’s return. She had disappeared into a fog bank, riding on Nessie’s back.

Two fisherfolk approached along the path that led to a small cluster of wattle-and-daub huts. “Is it safe, then?” one asked.

“Safe as can be.” Bertha simpered and sauntered closer to the burly, fair-haired younger man. He stepped back a pace.

“Nessie isn’t a monster, you see,” Agatha said. “It’s a pet.”

Both men looked dubious.

“Even now, our sister rides Nessie to the shore,” Agatha said.

The men’s jaws dropped open.

Carla, wearing a kirtle without a covering robe, climbed out of the water. Her dripping garment molded itself to her body. Rolls of flab, like lumps of wet sand, shimmied and shifted as

she walked. Her nasal braids, undone by the water, were plastered to her face like a misplaced mustache.

The first of the fisherfolk averted his eyes.

The second gagged.

“I warned Nessie to be wary of strangers,” Carla said, approaching a boulder. “Methinks I’ll take off my kirtle and let it dry on yonder rock.”

The men fled toward the huts.

“So much for the lusty lads of the loch.” Bertha shook her head.

“Fore!” The voice boomed from up the road. “Christ’s blood! A slice!”

A small white ball landed at Agatha’s feet. “What foul dropping from a noisome fowl is this?”

Bertha rolled her eyes.

“Fore!” A second ball, accompanied by still more cursing, landed close to the first one.

Agatha nudged the balls toward the water just as a richly dressed, beefy man emerged from the woods carrying a hooked stick. A claymore rode on his left hip, and fat legs extended beneath a kilt that defied gravity by staying on the man’s huge belly.

“Who dares to play with my balls?” The man stood with his hands on his hips.

Agatha sucked in her breath. “I dare,” she cooed. “If you like.” She gave the stranger a lascivious grin.

The man ignored her, retrieved the balls, and dropped them into a leather pouch hanging from his belt. He straightened up and did a double take, staring past Agatha. “Is that a naked crone I espy?” He shuddered. “Squire! To me!”

A young man ran up to the stranger. “Laird?”

“Take your cloak and cover that hag. She offends my eyes and puts me off my feed.”

The squire blanched. The laird pushed him in the back. The lad walked toward Carla. Slowly.

“And might you be the Laird of the Loch?” Agatha asked.

“I am Laird MacMulligan. And who might you be? All three of you look passing similar. Sisters, I’ll propose.”

Agatha heard a slap and a cry from the squire.

“Sir!” The lad ran to the laird, squeezing the bridge of his nose. “She struck me.”

“For what reason?” MacMulligan raised a bushy eyebrow.

“She told me to put my cloak on the ground and to lie on it with her. I refused and she slapped me.”

“Tis easy to be virtuous in the face of overwhelming ugliness,” MacMulligan said. “Stern challenges await thee, boy.”

A man in armor approached MacMulligan. “All is ready, Laird.”

“Very good, Captain.” MacMulligan nodded. “Load the men into the fishing boats and drive that monster to yonder shore so I may slay it. I’ll have its head o’er my mantle.” He drew his claymore and waved it about.

The captain hastened toward the shore, shouting orders.

Agatha sensed Hecate’s hand squeezing the back of her neck.

All three sisters hissed at the laird.

“Do not kill Nessie,” Carla yelled from behind the rock. “She’s a pet.”

“I must. For ‘tis the onerous duty of noblemen everywhere to protect the common folk from such dangers, lest they flee the village and thus deprive me of my just taxes.” He stroked his chin. “What be your names?”

“The Sisters Wyrld, we are,” Agatha snarled.

“Hark.” The laird drew back and made the sign to ward off evil. “The same that cursed my kingly father and his issue.”

“And if your father is the king, then you must be Malcolm’s spawn.”

“Aye, I’m Malcolm’s son, and now I shall slay your pet monster to gain a double boon. I’ll avenge my clan while I protect the tax money.”

“If you’re the son of Malcolm, have you seen a toilet standing around, then?” Bertha asked.

“Your riddles make my head spin, foul sister.”

Agatha bit her lip. Bertha and Carla hadn’t the wit to come up with a strategy to save the beast. It always came down to her doing all the planning while her sisters stood around and preened. Hecate’s wrath would fall heaviest on her because she was the oldest.

Splashes and squeals of alarm came from the loch. A few minutes later, the captain, dripping and squishing like a sponge, reported to MacMulligan. “‘Tis no use, Laird. The beastie is clever and swamped the boats. Except for the shallow water, our lives would have been forfeit. Look, Sire, how my breastplate does wondrously rust out e’en as we speak.”

“Go then and shine your armor.” MacMulligan patted the man on the shoulder. “For on the morrow, we shall launch even more boats and so bring the serpent to the shore where I may slay the creature for my greater glory. Its head shall hang o’er my mantle.”

“You do so at your peril,” Agatha said, relieved that Nessie had given her time to come up with a plan.

“Pshaw.” MacMulligan took a ball from his pouch and dropped it at his feet. “Fore!” He swatted it with his stick. “By the fates! A hook!” The laird watched the ball’s flight then roared, “Squire!”

The young man with a twist of linen stuck up one nostril kneeled to receive his orders.
“Find the ball in yonder laurel bushes and kick it onto the road so I may enjoy a favorable lie.”
“I do so enjoy a favorable lie.” Bertha batted her eyes and ran her hands down her hips.
The squire ran off and MacMulligan followed, making a wide detour around Bertha.



Once the laird was out of sight, Carla meandered up to her sisters. “How can we protect Nessie from that murdering laird?”

“I don’t know.” Agatha bit her lip.

“With more boats, the laird might succeed on the morrow,” Bertha said.

“He should leave Nessie alone.” Carla scowled at her sisters.

“We’ll have to convince him of that, won’t we?” Agatha said, and ran a hand through her hair. They were all balanced on the cusp of Hecate’s anger and retribution.

“Why do we have to do the work?” Bertha patted her nose wart. “It distracts us from finding men.”

“Are you blind?” Agatha crossed her arms. “Hecate will blame us if harm comes to Nessie and she will punish us. Mayhap, Hecate will even exile us to the land of the English.”

“Nonsense.” Carla waved her hand. “The goddess likes me. She would never send me to live with the bloody English.”

“She likes you as long as you protect Nessie.”

“Why should I get blamed?” Bertha blinked a few times. Her face displayed consternation. “I had naught to do with Nessie.”

“Aye.” Agatha nodded her head. “And if you do naught to save the beastie from the laird, Hecate will be sore wroth with you.”

“Carla’s right. It’s not fair.”

Agatha sighed. Once again, she stood alone and unaided by her thick-witted sisters. “Mayhap, we should meet with the laird’s squire,” she said.

“‘Tis a waste of time.” Carla shook her head. “If the lad won’t lie with me, the comeliest of us all, what chance do you have?”

Agatha ignored Carla’s comment. She had an idea. “We need to know more about why the laird hits the wee ball,” she said. “Then, we can form a plan.”



That night, Agatha paced around the fire while she clutched her cloak tightly to ward off the cold. The light from a quarter moon made a silver shaft on the surface of the loch.

A breeze stirred the leaves, whipped the flames, and chilled her bones.

Bertha and Carla assumed their big sister would develop a plan based on information obtained from the squire and now slept soundly. Indeed, their snoring panicked all the wild creatures within fifty yards.

Agatha's plan was fraught with danger, based as it was on the squire's scraps of information. The laird had a single passion and that was whacking the white balls. He never traveled anywhere without driving a ball before him, and he desired to be the foremost player in the land. Was this obsession enough to protect Nessie? She leaned against a tree and stared at the night sky. Would she see tomorrow night's sky?

If she gauged the laird's temperament wrong, Hecate's bloodlust would be aroused.



In the half-light of dawn, Agatha and her sisters waited for the laird. The features of an angry Hecate were visible in a dark cloud hanging over the loch. Agatha positioned the three of them among the trees near the road because, if the goddess became angry, they could be dodging ice balls the size of their fists. Hands clenched, Agatha leaned against a tree.

"This better work," Bertha said. "I don't want Hecate mad at me, a mere innocent."

"My thoughts also." Carla leaned against a tree. "Hecate is most inconsiderate to include me."

Agatha wanted to spit at their selfish chatter. "Hush," she said. "I hear the tramp of many feet."

"Fore!" A ball arced through the air, smacked into a tree, and rebounded into the loch. "Saints alive! I've lost another ball."

Laird MacMulligan led his soldiers to the shore of the loch and spotted the women. "Good morrow, sinister sisters." He glared at them. "Today, I avenge my clan for your grievous curse. Captain?"

"Here, Laird."

"Put out in the boats and fetch me the foul beastie."

"I shall not fail you, Laird, e'en though my breastplate fills with rust."

“Speak not so fast, oh spawn of Malcolm.” Agatha wagged a finger at MacMulligan.

“To injure Nessie is to court disaster.” Bertha crossed her arms.

“A tragedy never before seen.” Carla nodded for emphasis.

“Vex me not, foul sisters, lest you suffer grievous wounds from iron implements.”

MacMulligan grasped the hilt of his claymore.

“Do you think to overawe us with mere weapons?” Agatha held out her hands with the fingers apart. On her left hand, tiny lightning bolts jumped from finger to finger. On her right, flames burned at the end of each finger.

MacMulligan started.

“Touch Nessie and you’ll rue the act,” Carla said.

“How so?” The laird glanced from sister to sister while he licked his upper lip.

“Nevermore to hit a true drive.” Agatha chortled at the expression on the laird’s face.

“Nevermore? Truly?”

“And,” Agatha snickered, “your putts will ever fall away from their goal.”

“Quicksand, rabbit warrens, mole holes, thorn thickets,” Bertha said. “Thus is the fate of your white pellets.”

MacMulligan cleared his throat. “A dire destiny for merely doing my duty to protect my taxes. And the fisherfolk, of course.”

“Rather you should protect Nessie and gain our blessings,” Agatha said.

“Say on.”

“Ne’er to lose in match play is what we dangle before your unsporting eyes,” Agatha said.

“Ne’er?” The laird looked at the sisters through widened eyes.

Agatha saw that the laird was half convinced. “Ne’er,” she said. “And, to be the foremost duffer in the land.”

“To gain this boon, what is the cost?”

“Protect Nessie and the advantage is yours.” Carla smiled.

“Protect the beastie and lose my taxes, you say. A devil’s bargain.”

“Nay,” Agatha said. “Nessie will increase your wealth.”

“What?” MacMulligan waggled his eyebrows. “How?”

“Travelers will come from afar to marvel at the sight of Nessie.” Agatha felt a surge of relief as the laird gawked in surprise.

“Bringing gold withal to your greedy hands,” Bertha added.

“Gold. And match play wins. Can you deliver or do you just make comely speech?”

“These gifts are yours, unless you harm Nessie,” Agatha said. “And Nessie will nay harm the fisherfolk.”

“Captain!” MacMulligan shouted toward the shore. “Unman the boats.” To the sisters he said, “I must leave, for I have great work to do. I must be about organizing a championship match.” He stroked his chin. “I’ll call it the Greater Alba Open . . . or maybe the Alba Greater Match.”

Agatha watched the laird and his soldiers leave. She turned to her sisters and said, “We’ve given the villagers a portion of joy this morn. Let us see if the village men are grateful enough to harvest our maidenheads.”

Carla and Bertha cackled as all three waddled off toward the village.



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Hank Quense writes humorous and satiric sci-fi and fantasy stories. He also writes about fiction writing and self-publishing. He and his wife, Pat, usually vacation in another galaxy or parallel universe. They also time travel occasionally when Hank is searching for new story ideas. Hank has 14 books currently published and 50 short stories along with a few dozen articles.

Dancing an Elegy, His Own

Julie Novakova

The couple dances on the stage in silence. The lights dim gently, shrouding them with shadow. Suddenly they stop, a living statue of affliction. The audience holds its breath. The moment seems to go on forever. They wish it would never end.

But the dancers break it, shatter it to pieces. They *move*.

The viewers can't see their faces, but they *know*. One of the men is dying; the other mourns him.

Tears run down the faces of the audience. Quiet music fills the room, tinkling against their poor, overexcited nerves. They stare at the stage helplessly.

But the tone changes, and a tiny speck of hope appears as the lying performer extends his arms to his mourning partner with the first uplifting tones. They both fling themselves into the air and dance frantically, as if they are not touching the stage beneath their feet at all.

The music culminates. The dancers freeze.

The audience holds its breath.

Complete silence falls.

Afterwards, the clapping seems without end. Finally, shaken, exhausted, and overwhelmed, the people start to leave the auditorium.

They tell their friends and families that the experience was perfect but do not venture to say more. They can't find the right words. They know it was real and important and, in a way, more full of life than their actual lives; but they'd never quite wrap it in sentences.

They will all remember. Some will go back when they close their eyes, reliving the surreal moments. Some will find themselves obsessed with visiting the theater again. And again. And again.

For some of them, it might even change their whole lives.



Jakob collapses on the bed. He is breathing heavily, streams of sweat running down his forehead. He closes his eyes, but he can't sleep despite his exhaustion. The mediators are still working.

“You were fantastic,” Dominic whispers and brushes his face gently. Jakob knows Dominic is tired too, both physically and emotionally, but Dominic always copes better than him. After all, the show is all he has ever lived for.

Van Leeuwen appears backstage, grinning. “Congratulations! You completely blew the Moranians’ minds!”

“Not that hard,” murmurs Jakob.

Van Leeuwen sneers and produces two pills from his left pocket. “There. You’ll feel back to normal sooner than you realize.”

Jakob takes the pill from his boss and swallows it. His exhaustion begins to drift away, leaving him with the pleasant weariness and satisfaction of a job well done. He can finally fall asleep.

“Sleep tight,” says Dominic and kisses him on the forehead, but Jakob is dreaming already.

A familiar scene is unfolding in his mind, a memory from a couple of months ago.

In the evening, after an especially demanding performance, he and Dominic are resting on a terrace high above a strange, shining city beneath three beautifully illuminated moons. The sight is captivating. Jakob doesn’t realize the director has stepped outside the flat until he speaks.

“I finally obtained permission to perform on Morana,” says Van Leeuwen casually. “We’re scheduled there two months from now.”

Jakob’s heart skips a beat.

“Aren’t you happy? I thought you wanted to go there,” Van Leeuwen continues. “It took quite a few greased pockets to get us past all the restrictions.”

“Of course.” Jakob collects himself. “I’m very grateful to you.”

“Good. You should be,” Van Leeuwen says. Jakob can hear the unspoken: *You’d better be.*

Dominic presses Jakob’s hand. “I’m glad for you.”

“I just . . . I didn’t expect it right now.”

“Don’t worry.” Dominic smiles. “We’ll show them how proper theater is done. They’ll love us. And you’ll finally see her again, after all these years.”



The morning after their first performance on Morana, Jakob wakes before Dominic. He slips quietly from their room and heads to the river. A small motor boat is waiting. Jakob buys a ticket and sits on the upper deck, alone. From time to time, he glances at the stairs leading there; the sting of fear never quite goes away.

The rising sun barely penetrates the cold fog lingering above the river. He can hear voices from the nearby market, smell the cooking food, and imagine the people arguing over the prices. He can imagine himself walking there, as if it were yesterday.

They bounce off the shore finally, leaving the tall sleek towers of the city behind as they continue upstream. The upper deck is still empty except for him.

Jakob lets out a sigh of relief, lies down on the bench, and watches the sky of bright green branches flow above him. Everything is tranquil. He wishes it could stay this way—his voyage on the river continuing forever, no more of Van Leeuwen, dancing, memories, anything.

You were always dreaming such impossible dreams, weren't you?

An hour later, the boat docks in Minka.

The town hasn't changed much in fifteen years. It's still quiet, simple, suffocating, even more so than when he left it. Since then, he has visited other worlds, seen life elsewhere. When he called the system of Morana restricting all those years ago, he had no idea what restriction meant.

He can see them differently now, all these strangely normal people—no augments, no trendy modifications, not even something as innocent as bioluminescent tattoos. When he was growing up, calling for a change was just a pose. Nowadays he can understand why it's necessary. But he still can't *do* anything.

Except, maybe, saving at least one of them.

In his plain clothes, Jakob moves through Minka without attracting unwanted attention. Finally, he arrives at a small single-story house. His throat feels dry. After fifteen years of forced exile, he has returned home. He'd thought he was prepared for the sight of it, but he was wrong.

He forces himself to walk to the door and ring the bell.

The seconds tick by. Jakob concludes she isn't home, and turns reluctantly to leave, but the door opens.

"What can I—" The woman stares in astonishment. "Oh my god, Jakob . . . Is it really you?"

"Yes, it's me, Olga," he manages to say. He blinks to force the sudden tears away.

She collects herself first. "Come in! They can't see you here!"

They are silent for a while. Olga busies herself with making tea. He watches her back while she stands in the kitchen. Her movements are somewhat jerky.

No wonder, he thinks, she hadn't expected to see him again in her lifetime, and here he is, ringing the doorbell without any previous announcement, an exiled criminal, the man who had protested and almost brought his younger sister down with him.

"How are the parents?"

He has to ask.

She freezes. “Well,” she says finally, “I don’t see them much. They’re both living in the city. In separate flats. But I’m not allowed to leave Minka—as you know.”

So they never pardoned her, even after all these years, even though she was just seventeen when they started the campaign. It shouldn’t come to him as a surprise.

Olga brings the steaming cups to the table and sits across from him. Jakob tries to make small talk, to find out what has changed—as if he doesn’t know that nothing ever changes on Morana if the government can do anything about it.

“Stop talking about my life here; I’m sick of it. Tell . . . tell me about yourself. How did you even get here?” asks Olga.

“I’m with Van Leeuwen’s Traveling Theater of Life. It’s a small enterprise focused on connecting with the audience emotionally.”

“What does that mean?”

“The audience receives mood mediators—as do we. We just get a higher dose with slightly different contents. It enables us to give a completely different performance each time. Some people follow us wherever we go and are willing to pay thousands so they don’t miss one. When we’re on the stage, we’re not actually acting . . . we dance a story that *comes* to us. It’s hard to describe. It’s like we’re *living* it—in a world where everything is expressed with motion. Van Leeuwen can play with the lights and music to emphasize our dance. People in the audience think they can feel our experiences, go through a piece of life along with us. Well, it’s popular on some worlds. It was hard to get it here on Morana.”

Olga laughs bitterly. “Yes, I can see that. I’m surprised they even allowed you to come.”

“Van Leeuwen can get his way if he wants to.”

“And does he know . . .”

“Yes. Don’t worry, he won’t tell anyone. He’d only get himself into trouble for bringing me back here.”

“Even if he doesn’t talk, you shouldn’t have come back. You’re risking everything. What if Father finds out? He’ll denounce you the moment he sees you.”

Jakob forces himself to smile reassuringly. “He won’t find out. Even if I wasn’t married to Dominic and hadn’t changed my name, I’ve got new papers. Van Leeuwen arranged it. The system didn’t recognize me after we landed. It’s safe.”

He sees her smile briefly when he mentions his marriage. It warms him.

“But still . . . what if he comes to the theater and sees you?”

“Him? At the theater?” Jakob shakes his head. “He’d never attend.”

Eventually he manages to calm Olga. He doesn't even have to lie. His father is too scared of the regime to visit the theater. What if the venue—despite the permission to perform—breached the law?

“You said you were married. Congratulations.” She allows herself a little smile again.

“Thank you. We met in the theater. We always perform together. In this type of art, you form an attachment to the person you act with, but I'd be lying if I said it was just that. Dominic helped me. I was a wreck after I was exiled and had to leave without even saying goodbye properly . . .”

She nods bitterly.

“Olga, I'll take you away from here as I promised long ago, away from this wretched world. You'll finally be free.”

His sister smiles sadly. “I hope so.”

“We have a final performance tomorrow evening and after it, we're leaving Morana for other worlds. I'll come for you. Van Leeuwen will take you aboard under the condition that you'll work for him too, but I'll make sure you won't. I can't allow it.”

“You look quite worn out. But is it that bad?”

“It's . . .” Jakob struggles for words. “Each time, it's like someone robs you of a tiny part of yourself. You change. The performances start blending into your real life. I've seen retired artists from other similar enterprises. They're like empty shells. They have gradually forgotten who they were.”

They're like puppets, he thinks, but he doesn't say it aloud. Olga seems concerned enough now; he doesn't want her to worry about him.



Later that day, he's back in the city, walking through a park with Dominic. They talk quietly under the blossoming magnolias.

“Van Leeuwen will never allow you to quit,” says Dominic. “You have a debt to pay. And it's never going to go away, you know that. With every favor, it'll just increase.”

“We'll run away then, all three of us together. Van Leeuwen's reach extends far but even he cannot try to find us on every possible world. We could change our identities, start anew. There's no other solution.”

Dominic stops. For a moment, he averts his gaze to a small pond before looking at Jakob again. He says: “You’re really serious, aren’t you?”

“Yes.”

“And nothing can change your mind?”

“Not a thing.”

Dominic smiles. “All right. That’s what I needed to hear.”



“Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to Van Leeuwen’s Traveling Theater of Life! Prepare to be absorbed by the performance, to be astonished, shocked, saddened, cheered up! Experience a brand new element of life, unlike *anything* you can imagine!”

Van Leeuwen is handing out the pills, with an unwavering, broad, professional smile. The cocktail adjusts itself to the physiology of each member of the audience. It sharpens their senses, enhances their emotional experiences, suppresses their analytical thinking, and increases empathy. The contents, released gradually, induce increased susceptibility to specific emotions in a given order. Sometimes he decides to engulf them in deep sadness first and then bring them through various feelings to startling joy, sometimes he chooses a more elaborate mix. Not always does the audience leave his theater happy, but they always leave satisfied.

The room is crowded, every seat taken. Jakob watches the audience nervously from behind the curtain. It may well be his last performance. But soon, any nervousness will go away. He’s starting to feel the effects already.

Dominic taps him on the shoulder. “It’s time for the second dose.”

Jakob nods. There go any doubts and unwanted feelings . . .

They are already gone when he hears Van Leeuwen loudly announcing: “Dear ladies and gentlemen, I present to you, Jakob and Dominic Baudin!”

In the slowly dimming lights, they dance onto the stage.

The audience inadvertently holds its breath.

Like every time before. Always different, always the same. We cannot escape it.

Dominic looks astonishing as he moves elegantly with all the apparent ease of an artist.

A brief thought flickers through Jakob’s mind, the notion that he has never seen anyone or anything more beautiful. A sweet desire to be closer to him, to learn all he can about him, fills Jakob’s heart.

Though they don’t realize it, every person in the audience is smiling.

Even the dancers are. Jakob catches sight of Dominic's warm smile. *Never anything more beautiful.*

Suddenly he staggers. The audience flinches. The mood changes rapidly.

Something is happening. The joy and curiosity are pouring away from him. Jakob grasps at them, desperately trying to catch the remnants. The audience watches his struggle breathlessly, their gazes fixed firmly upon him.

He feels like he's drowning. He stretches his arms toward Dominic who is his only chance of rescue.

But Dominic pulls away, his face distorted with sudden disgust, his movements angry. Jakob's surprise, as he slowly loses the battle, is soon replaced with rage.

And then he's free, the terrible feeling gone, and he's dancing towards Dominic. The audience has never seen any ire more real than what they're seeing now, and most of them probably never will again. They watch his quick, passionate motion with exasperation.

If Jakob was himself at the moment, he wouldn't succumb to any of it. But he isn't. That's the point of the life theater. He *becomes* the kind of person the precisely mixed cocktail of mediators awakes within him. He's barely aware of the music growing louder, like thunder, or of stopping unexpectedly as he and Dominic come to stand opposite each other for a second.

The performance changes into a vivid portrayal of despair and rage. It's hardly a dance anymore; it becomes a fight. The dancers barely touch each other, but each movement seems like a fatal blow.

It is exquisite.

Van Leeuwen watches them with satisfaction from behind the velvet curtain.



The excited clapping goes past Jakob like a dream. He staggers from the stage, his heart racing, blood pounding in his ears.

The show is still getting the better of him. He barely realizes who he is, but he remembers that he has to go now. He has to fetch Olga and take her off this wretched, god forsaken planet.

With that thought in mind, Jakob rushes to the door outside.

The pounding in his head increases. Darkness dims his vision, swallowing him whole.



When Jakob wakes up, it takes him a few minutes to remember what happened. He must have fainted from the exhaustion. But why didn't anyone wake him up or move him to the bed? Maybe they had things to sort out before the flight and hadn't found him yet, he concludes.

He crawls to a table, drinks a glass of water, swallows a couple of stimulant pills, and hurries outside. He's been out for almost forty minutes, which means he has to catch a later boat than he planned. But he still has enough time to bring Olga back.

The journey to Minka elapses in a haze. He comes to awareness just as he stands in front of Olga's door. He chimes the bell.

Nothing. He rings it a second time. Still no response.

With a shaking hand, he tries the door. It isn't locked.

"Olga?" he calls.

Silence.

Jakob freezes as he enters the living room. "Oh, sister," he whispers in horrified disbelief.

She's lying face up in the center of the room. Her gray eyes are dim and still, the tone of her skin far paler than ever before. A pool of thick, dark blood has formed under her body.

Then he sees Dominic crouched on a chair in the corner of the room. He looks up.

"W—what happened?" Jakob breathes, hardly believing the sight in front of him.

Dominic rises and gives him a pleading look. He starts talking slowly and quietly. "You... you were already planning our escape from Van Leeuwen to start a quiet inconspicuous life somewhere. But you never asked me if it was what I wanted. I'm sorry, Jakob, but I can't leave. The theater is my life. Each time I go on stage, I can truly live. I do something valuable to other people. I show them the meaning of beauty, life that's *more real* than the real one. What would I become without that?" He produces a sad, wry smile. "But if I told you, you'd just leave me. I've heard you speak of Olga enough to know that you'd pick her. I can't lose you. I *do* love you—and I also can't perform without you."

Jakob stares at him wordlessly, shaking.

Dominic's gaze travels to Olga. He swallows hard.

"I tried to persuade her to stay here or at least to join the theater permanently, but she wouldn't listen, said that you had to leave the show. I got mad. Forgive me. But I had no other choice."

It's too much. Jakob's vision blurs. The pounding in his ears sounds like drums. His throat tightens. Before he knows it, he moves.

He may have killed Dominic, if not for Van Leeuwen plunging into the room and burying a needle into his neck.

Jakob collapses, but Dominic catches him before he touches the ground. He lays Jakob down gently.

“Shh,” Dominic whispers when he sees the panic in Jakob’s eyes. “Everything is going to be all right. You’ll just go to sleep for a while. I called the boss for help as soon as it happened.”

Van Leeuwen smiles briefly.

“When you come to again, we’ll be orbiting a different world and preparing for a new performance. You’ll feel no pain of loss, Van Leeuwen is going to take care of that. Don’t worry, he’s an expert. You’ll be fine and you’ll forgive me. When you wake up, you’ll *understand*.”



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Julie Novakova was born in Prague, Czech Republic. She works as a writer, journalist and evolutionary biologist. She started publishing in English in 2013 (*The Brass City*; *The Symphony of Ice and Dust*). Before that, she had published three novels and about twenty short stories in Czech. She also works as a reviewer, columnist and interviewer mainly for the Czech SF magazine XB-1.

Lost Souls

E. E. King

My mistress told me three things. She said that butterflies were the souls of lost children, that silkworm larva were women, transformed by an evil magician to weave silk for the emperor. She said that millions of mummified Egyptian cats had been sent to Great Britain, where they were ground into powder and used to fertilize farms in England and Scotland.

She said if I could guess which one of these things was true she would set me free.

I had been sold to her when I was eight. My small, agile fingers were good at sewing buttons and unfastening hooks. But I was not as diligent as the older slaves, so perhaps that is why she gave me a chance to win my freedom.

I guessed that the souls of lost children turned into butterflies. It seemed the most likely. Butterflies were so lovely and delicate, so fleeting and ephemeral. The notion of mummified cats being used as manure in England's green and pleasant land seemed farfetched. And I already knew how silk was made.

The caterpillars, the silkworms, are fed on fresh mulberry leaves for thirty-five days. Then, they begin spinning a cocoon. Inside, their body will liquefy and change. Transforming, metamorphosing into moths. Wild silk moths have large wings marked with strange symbols. They look like flying messengers with hieroglyphic notes. Captive silk moths have small, dull wings. So small they have lost the ability to fly.

Most captive moths are killed while still in their cocoons, boiled alive in water so hot the silk begins to unravel. The corpses of the worms, the pupa, are roasted and served as delicacies. I saw a picture of one. It was brown and segmented. It looked crunchy.

Silk weavers unwind the covering from the dead bodies into strands a mile long. Single filaments are too fine and fragile for commercial use, so the weavers spin three strands together to form a single thread. The weavers are always women or girls because, like me, their fingers are small and dexterous.

I knew this because every night after chores were done and we were sent to bed, I crept upstairs to the library and fled into the land of books. But I knew nothing of mummies or cats and it seemed strange that animals thought to be gods should be used as fertilizer.

But my mistress said I was wrong and sent me to work in the fields.

I was planting mulberry trees, burrowing in the dirt. Something jagged sliced my hand. A drop of blood, round as an insect's egg, appeared through the dirt on my finger. I dug out the

jagged thing. It was a broken femur. Later, I found an ear, dry and leathery, and a tooth sharp and smooth as ivory. I wondered if it were too late to tell my mistress I knew the truth.

That night in the library I read about the mummy cats. They had been bred in Egypt long, long ago, raised en masse and killed when they were big enough to look impressive wrapped in bandages. Their heads had been smashed by hammers. Their necks wrung by strong hands. Their bound bodies sold to those currying favors from Isis or Osiris. There was a picture of one. It looked like a giant cocoon.

The cats were found in the late 1800s, hundreds and thousands of them, buried in tunnels as offerings. Treasure hunters flocked to these caverns of death hoping to find the gold and jewels of ancient Pharaohs, but they found only the dried, bandaged carcasses.

A local contractor bought them by the pound. Men were hired to peel cat after cat of its wrappings and to strip off their brittle fur. They piled the bones in black heaps a meter high. There was a photo. The remnants looked like haystacks on the sandy plain.

Some were sold to local farmers. The bigger lots were bought by an Alexandrian merchant and sent by steamers to Liverpool. The bindings and bodies of the cats were ground up and scattered onto fields like manure. The article did not mention what happened to their souls.

Nor did the piece on the women who unwound cocoons from the bodies of dead silkworms talk of souls, neither the women's nor the silkworms'.

I remained a slave. I toiled by day in the fields and read by night in the library.

It went thus until I was twelve or thereabouts. I never knew my exact age. Slaves have no need for birthdays. Numbers are only useful for calculating the thread needed to sew a dress or weave a shroud.

I had not eaten much. So on my way to the library I snuck into the kitchen.

The mistress had entertained a merchant that day. A trader who had traveled all the way to China and brought back silk and jade and ivory. He had left her some Asian delicacies as a courtesy. They were piled on the counter, brown and segmented, the shape and size of a giant's tears. I ate one. It was brown and crunched, but inside it was gooey.

That night I felt ill. My stomach churned. I barely managed to crawl out of my bed and flee into the darkest corner of the library. My insides heaved. I gagged, but instead of bile rising to my mouth, fine filaments of thread began to pour out of my eyes.

I turned and twisted, wrapping myself inside myself. Losing the world in darkness.

It wasn't until I emerged ten days later, dripping pigment from my wings, that I knew my mistress had been wrong.



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E. E. King is a performer, writer, biologist and painter. Ray Bradbury calls her stories “marvelously inventive, wildly funny and deeply thought provoking. I cannot recommend them highly enough.” Her books are: *Dirk Quigby’s Guide to the Afterlife*, *Real Conversations with Imaginary Friends*, and *Another Happy Ending*. She has painted murals in LA and Spain, worked with children in Bosnia, crocodiles in Mexico, frogs in Puerto Rico, egrets in Bali, mushrooms in Montana, archaeologists in Spain and butterflies in South Central Los Angeles, lectured on cruise ships in the South Pacific. In her spare time she gardens and raises egrets, kittens or whatever small creatures happen her way.

The Answer

Lynette Mejía

He knew he was getting close when he began to find the bones. They were difficult to identify initially, scattered haphazardly among the rocks and assorted detritus that littered the floor of the cave. He spotted the first one almost by accident—a dirty, gray thing which looked as if it had once been chewed thoroughly by a dog. Charles knelt down and picked it up, turning it over delicately in his hands. The light from his headlamp cast a pool of illumination in the inky darkness, a spotlight that narrowed as he examined his find. It was old, but unmistakably human. Femur, probably, though hard to tell for sure in such a condition. He frowned, dropping it back onto the floor, and stood, looking around more carefully. In the narrow arc of light he saw more randomly strewn pieces of what had once been a man. The skull, missing a large section of parietal bone, he found tucked in a narrow cranny in the wall to the right. What remained looked like a cracked walnut shell. It was in that moment that Charles's heart began to beat faster, a ball of fear forming in his chest. This was the place.

The bones could have been gnawed by wild dogs, of course, or perhaps even a Pleistocene cave bear. His scientific mind repeated that over and over, a mantra of rationality. His heart, however, told him otherwise. Something else was waiting for him ahead in the darkness. Something else entirely.

The fear continued to grow, but fought with a mounting feeling of triumph. He had been right, after all.

Up until now, he'd half expected to find nothing but a blank wall of impenetrable rock at the end of his search. He'd already imagined the return trip, the looks of pity and half-veiled mockery in the eyes of the men who'd accompanied him as he stepped, blinking and ashamed, into the sunlight.

No one in academia knew he was here, of course. He'd surrendered his job and any chance for tenure at a respected university years ago. Now the authorities were looking for him, in connection with the theft of certain documents obtained from research libraries at first, unscrupulous antiquities dealers later. Every dime he possessed, and some he did not, had been invested—risked—in the absolute certainty that he had correctly connected the ancient dots, and that certainty was only obtained by giving up any possibility of failure. He reached into his jacket

pocket, fingering the small glass vial containing two potassium cyanide pills. It was his only insurance.

In the village he'd hired a guide and a couple of young porters to carry his gear and set up the tents. The money he'd paid them was enough to buy their silence, but they all knew what he was looking for. It was their stories and the stories of their ancestors which had brought him here, after all. They knew what was rumored to live within this mountain. He was far from the first man to make his way up the muddy village road, bearing gold and pleading to be led to the entrance of the cave.

In the local tavern, which was little more than a shack set back from the sloppy, unpaved street, they were eager to tell tales of his predecessors, men who'd passed through this village before entering the mountain and never returning. They smiled through half-rotten teeth, assuring him of his doom while pocketing his coin. Charles couldn't tell whether they pitied him or thought him a joke, though he suspected the latter.

It took them three days to hike the distance from the village to the cave. The land on the eastern edge of the Anatolian plateau was rugged and arid, consisting mostly of rising foothills born from the flow of ancient volcanoes. The black, obsidian soil was strewn with jagged chunks of basalt which quickly tore through his boots.

During the day, the heat was almost unbearable. Swarms of black flies enveloped them, slipping into nostrils and ears, lapping at the corners of eyes. One of the guides took pity and gave Charles a long, soft scarf to wrap around his head. By the second day, his feet were swollen, cracked, and felt as if they were encased in lead. He wondered if it were all a trick—if the locals had taken his money and brought him out here to die.

When they made camp on the third night, however, it was beside the entrance to the cave. Charles, though exhausted, found he could not sleep. Wrapping a blanket around his shoulders, he sat down beside the fire across from the chief guide, a thin, wiry man with dark, weathered skin and deep-set eyes. While Charles sat, the man looked at him, studying his face without expression.

"Lovely night, yes?" Charles said, in an awkward attempt to end the silence. He looked up, gesturing to the glittering sky overhead.

The man, whose name was Yaavik, did not follow his gaze. Instead, Yaavik continued to stare, unblinking.

"You seek the Phix," he said, after some time.

"Yes," Charles answered.

"She does not appreciate company," he said.

“You’ve seen her?”

“The last person in my village to lay eyes on the Phix was my great-grandfather.”

“And this was?”

The old man picked up a gnarled, twisted branch from the pile of firewood they’d brought in, and slowly stirred the coals before tossing it into the flames. Sparks rose up in a glittering column, drifting silently in the cold air. “Over a century ago,” he said. “I believe the year was 1888.”

Charles rummaged around in his rucksack and pulled out a small notepad and the stub of a pencil.

“And did your great-grandfather . . .”

“Survive?”

Charles cleared his throat. “Well, yes.”

“Of course he survived. How do you suppose that I know the tale?”

“I’m sorry,” Charles said. “Of course. Of course he did.”

The old man smiled; a broad, almost savage grin that pulled his chapped lips tight to reveal two rows of broken, blackened teeth. The sight rendered Charles slightly sick. He quickly looked down to his pad, pretending to take more notes.

“Why do you seek her?” Yaavik asked. “For the gold?”

“No,” Charles said, a little too quickly. “That’s only a myth.” He was tired of this story.

“My great-grandfather claimed that he saw what the Phix guarded,” Yaavik said. “He said that the chamber behind her was piled floor to ceiling with more riches than a man could imagine.”

“And how is it,” Charles asked, “that your great-grandfather saw these things, and yet was able to survive and return to tell the tale?”

The old man snorted, spitting a large wad of chewing tobacco into the fire, where it sizzled and popped before settling into a charred mass. “My great-grandfather was a terrible gambler,” he said. “He would bet on anything, anything at all—the weather, how many times the cock would crow at dawn, the number of steps between his front door and the next village. He was the laughing stock of the town—the clown, the buffoon.” Yaavik looked up. “One day he made a bet with a man who did not laugh.”

“What happened?”

“He demanded that my great-grandfather pay the debt owed, or die.”

“So he decided to try and challenge the Sphinx,” Charles finished.

Yaavik snorted loudly, wiping his nose with the back of one dirty sleeve. “Phix,” he said.

“In modern stories she is referred to as the Sphinx,” Charles explained.

“Phix,” the old man said again.

Charles sighed. “Phix.” He wrote something down in his pad. “I am interested in her for other reasons.”

Yaavik ignored him. “My great-grandfather was not a learned man. He was not foolish enough to try and answer her riddles,” he continued. “Instead, his plan was to try and steal the money, perhaps even just a single gold coin, or, if this was not possible, to discover a way in which she could be killed, or subdued.”

He stopped then, and was quiet for a long time. A log fell on the fire, sending a shower of sparks flickering up and into the blackness above. In time, Charles began to wonder if the old man had fallen asleep.

“And?” he asked quietly.

Yaavik looked up. His eyes were bright, and shining in the darkness.

“And, nothing,” he said. “My great-grandfather emerged from the cave blind, empty sockets bleeding where he had torn out his own eyes. The wounds became infected, and he died less than two weeks later.”



Charles pulled a flashlight from his knapsack and flicked it on. In the distance he could see more bones, flashes of white against the dark floor of the cave. As he walked they became more numerous, until eventually the way was reduced to a narrow path between piles of broken skulls, vertebrae, and other assorted splinters. Phalanges littered the floor like marbles. Now and again he bent down to pick up a piece and examined it. They were all human, each and every one, and the reality they presented took hold of the nugget of fear he carried, shaped and molded it into something black and heavy in his chest. No amount of scholarship could have prepared him for this raw truth—that hundreds, perhaps thousands had come this way before him. And failed. For a moment he stood paralyzed, unable to go forward. The cave around him was silent, but it was a silence that carried the weight of expectation, as if the cold, clammy air itself waited to see if he'd be brave enough to take another step.

It was the courage of desperation that finally drew him on, as he remembered that the police were probably searching his small, threadbare apartment at this very moment. There was nothing behind him, of that he was sure, but there *was* something ahead. After a time he took a deep, shuddering breath, and continued down the path.

Before long he noticed that the utter darkness of the passage was lessening. Slowly, he began to make out the shape of the walls outside the beam of his flashlight. It was a golden light, warm, as if from a fire, but there were no flickering shadows to indicate a flame. Instead, the very cave walls seemed to glow. Before long he was able to put away his flashlight completely and turn off his headlamp.

It was in that precise moment that he began to hear the music.

It was faint at first, so much so that he initially doubted the evidence of his senses. It sounded like whistling, perhaps, but not quite. He thought it could have been the wind, until he remembered that the subterranean air was unmoving and stale. As he walked on, it became louder, clearly music now, and sounded like singing, though the sounds were unlike anything that could have been produced by human vocal chords.

High-pitched and ethereal, the melody was a question, a call that wrapped him in uncertainty and wonder. His ears strained to make sense of the sounds, but it was impossible. The desire to hear it clearly, to make out its meaning, drew him like a magnet. It felt as if every step closer would be just enough, rendering the melody intelligible, revealing itself to him like a flower in bloom. He felt his rational mind slipping away. This was something he had not expected, but it was simply too fascinating, too beautiful, to engender fear.

Somewhere inside his mind a memory flashed briefly, just long enough to deliver to him the story of the sirens who'd lured Odysseus's men to their deaths. As a classics professor he'd assigned *The Odyssey* to his students every semester, and in that other life he'd known nearly the whole thing by heart. His strength waning, he pulled off his rucksack and began digging through it desperately, tripping on a pile of skulls and falling to his knees. The contents of his bag spilled out, scattering among the bones and rocks. His hands shaking, Charles struggled in the dim light to gather his supplies and shove them back into the pack, though he suddenly realized that he didn't know why he was doing it, why he was fiddling with these useless things when the song was telling him to get up, to continue on, to walk until his feet were bloody stumps and then to crawl if he must. By chance, however, his eye caught a flash of white protruding from one of the pockets, and, pulling out the item, came to his senses just long enough to push the foam plugs into his ears. The music instantly ceased, and, as he sat, he felt his mind return as if from behind a thick ocean fog. His hands, however, were still shaking. He knew exactly how close he'd just come to death.

When he felt well enough he repacked his bag and stood. The light was brighter just ahead, so he continued on, stepping carefully, checking the earplugs periodically lest they come loose. Eventually, he came to something like a corner, an outcropping of rock that partially closed off

the passageway. An enormous mound of bones, piled up like the deadfall after a flash flood, blocked the narrow opening save for a small gap at the top, and it took over an hour of clearing to make a hole large enough that he could squeeze himself and his gear through.

On the other side, the light was much brighter, bright enough that it took several seconds for his eyes to adjust after the dimness from which he'd emerged. He blinked, squinting, as the enormous room came into focus.

And there she was.

She was smaller than he'd expected, larger than a house cat but more diminutive than the lion whose form she mimicked. She sat, unmoving, on an enormous stone dais roughly five feet high, putting her nearly at his eye level. She was so perfectly still that she could have easily been mistaken for stone, though as Charles stared he noticed nictitating membranes periodically sweeping across her eyes. Her skin, black and shiny as polished marble, reflected the warm light. Small, perfect wings of silky black feathers interspersed with tiny tongues of flame swept up in graceful curves from her back. Her face, simultaneously beautiful and terrible, stared at him impassively. She was, in a word, exquisite. Without noticing he'd done so, Charles found himself on his knees.

He realized that the plugs were still in his ears. Tentatively, he pulled one out, testing for sound, but the music had stopped. Slowly, reverently, he removed them both and slid them into his pocket. Then he cast down his eyes.

"Mother of Mysteries," he said in a low voice.

For a long while there was nothing, but Charles did not dare look up. His ears could discern a shuffling, however, and the light scrape of claws on stone.

"Mortal," she said. Her voice was a thousand whispers that filled the room with sound and Charles's heart with an awful dread.

"Have you brought me libations?" A large, golden chalice appeared at his feet. Perhaps it had been there all along and he hadn't noticed.

"Yes, Sister of Secrets." From his pack he pulled a bottle of Lemnian wine, the closest he could come to something she might be familiar with. Before setting out he'd uncorked and carefully resealed the bottle, making it easy now to gently pull out the stopper and slowly pour the liquid into the vessel. No sooner had he done so than the chalice vanished.

Moments of silence passed. Then, "This is of very poor quality."

"Forgive me, Daughter of Wisdom." He knew better than to argue or attempt to explain.

"It is not in my power to forgive," she said, "though I may show you the door."

“A priest,” Charles said, his voice nearly a whisper. He shut his eyes tightly, waiting for the death blow. Instead, there was silence for several moments.

Then her voice. “Correct,” she said. It was several minutes before she spoke again.

“You have come here for the treasure?”

“No, Keeper of Questions.”

“Then what?”

“I would like knowledge.”

“Of?”

In her presence the answer sounded ridiculous.

“Everything.”

From the direction of her dais came sounds, growls and the beginnings of a roar that frightened him enough to put his hands tight against his ears. It muffled the sound, somewhat, but when it was over his ears were still ringing. The ground shook beneath his feet and he peeked through cracked eyelids, though he was careful not to look up at the monster on the pedestal. From this limited viewpoint, he saw only that stone dust and small rocks were raining down from the ceiling, and Charles wondered once again if the interview was over and he was about to die. In time, however, the shaking ceased and the roar in his ears subsided until he felt safe enough to remove his hands, which were cramped from being locked so tightly against the sides of his head. When all was quiet, she spoke again.

“There are far greater treasures, to one who would pass the test.” Silence. Then, “Head and tail with no body, I hide every deformity.”

Charles paused for a moment. “Gold coins,” he said. He swallowed to keep from losing his breakfast.

“Open your eyes, mortal.”

Slowly, he did as he was told. At first he was blinded by the dazzling light flickering and reflecting around the room. When his eyes finally adjusted, his breath caught in his throat, and he stared, amazed. Behind the Sphinx, the room had become a vast cavern filled with treasure. Gold and precious metals lay stacked in bricks or piled high in mounds nearly reaching the ceiling. Jewels, some as big as a man’s fist, lay in haphazard piles like heaps of coal. Even though he knew that being tempted with riches was simply the first part of the test, Charles’s mouth dropped open in awe. To fill his pockets or even just his knapsack would mean more wealth than he could spend in a lifetime.

With tremendous effort, however, he remained focused. To stop now would mean failure, and failure was not an option. The Sphinx didn't give away her treasure, most assuredly not to someone who had only answered a couple of easy riddles.

"Mother of Mysteries," he said, struggling with the instinct to cast his eyes downward once again. "You are too generous. I do not seek wealth, however."

"Immortality, then," she said. "It has a song. It has a sting. Ah, too, it has a wing."

"Fame," said Charles, keeping his voice low, and reverent. "Emily Dickinson."

The Sphinx inclined her head slightly. Immediately his head was filled with images of himself, lauded by his colleagues, vindicated and celebrated in the press, interviewed for television and asked to dine with presidents. For a man who had spent his life circling the fringes of success, underappreciated and unrecognized for his efforts, it was far more tempting than the gold had been. It took every bit of effort Charles had to shake the vision from his eyes and face the Sphinx once again.

"Again, you are too generous, Lady of Secrets," he said, "but I seek not fame nor immortality."

The Sphinx pawed at the dust under her feet, her great claws cutting deep grooves into the stone. Baring her teeth at him in what could have been either a smile or a grimace, she finally settled down upon the platform, looking like nothing so much as an aloof housecat. "Mortal," she said. "You know not what you ask. Many have come before you, and all but one have sought the treasures of man."

"You mean Oedipus," said Charles.

The Sphinx ignored him. "For in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die."

"The Tree of Knowledge," Charles said. "Genesis, King James." He noted to himself that the riddles were becoming easier, and wondered why. Nervous streams of sweat trickled down his back and dripped into his eyes, though he dared not wipe it away. "I understand the risk," he said, his voice barely audible. "But throughout my life, the search for knowledge has been my only . . . refuge. If I remain as I am, there are questions to which I will never know the answers. And that, Daughter of Wisdom, is far worse for me than mere death."

The Sphinx stared at him without blinking for several moments before slowly, almost imperceptibly, nodding her head.

"Two brothers approach," she said, her eyes locking into his own. "One the other's reflection, though he be taller, paler, more solemn." Charles felt his eyes becoming heavy, his brain descending into fog and uncertainty. "They take me in their arms, one to soothe, one to bless."

Charles's legs, heavy and leaden, gave way, and he sank to the floor. His mouth was dry, and his tongue felt heavy, useless. He began to forget again, to slide into oblivion, and though he struggled, he ached to lie down and rest. At the last moment before he lost consciousness, he whispered the answer, so quietly that it was barely the breath of speech. "Sleep, and Death."

As from a long distance he felt his consciousness snap back, a rubber band stretched then released. He coughed, choking on dust, gagging as he struggled to pull air into his lungs. His head, though clear, pounded a deafening rhythm in his ears. Blinking, dizzy, and disoriented, he sat up, struggling to choke back the vomit that rose in his throat.

When he could see clearly again, he looked up, his eyes widening as he beheld the figure on the stone dais. No longer a creature, she had transformed into a young woman, naked and exquisitely beautiful. Charles stared, taking in the long, thick waves of midnight hair that flowed over dark, coppery skin. As he watched, she stood and, lightly as a cat, jumped down, landing before him. Without a word she leaned in, kissing him, pulling him into her with hands that felt like claws against his back. His heart pounded, threatening to tumble from his chest.

Her skin smelled of cinnamon and frankincense; of jasmine and myrrh; of life and death. As they embraced, Charles inhaled the scent, taking her into him, filling himself. His questions, once endless, fluttered and were lost.

When the kiss ended, she leaned back, looking into his eyes. Her face was sad.

"Are you certain of your desire?" she asked.

"Yes," he answered. He looked down.

"The best riddles have no answers," she said.

"Indeed."

She flickered, and in a heartbeat had regained her previous form, returning to the stone pillar above him. Her eyes flashed fire.

"Ask," she said.

"Thank you, Mother of Mysteries."

"Ask!" she demanded. Her voice boomed, echoing off the stone walls.

Charles took a deep, shuddering breath. "There are two sisters," he began. The atmosphere around him started to shimmer, a desert mirage. Humming sounds, the breath of a thousand wings, filled the air. "They each give birth, one to the other." He watched her fall, writhing and struggling upon the stone, in obvious pain. He was afraid, and ashamed, but he continued nonetheless. He had come too far.

"What are they?" he asked softly.

Suddenly he felt it, alive, inside him. It grew, and Charles screamed. His skin began to split and crack, fissures billowing light like smoke.

There, the answer, he thought.

Then nothing.



Sitting under an outcropping of rock, the men felt the mountain beneath them tremble. Yaavik looked up and around, giving a satisfied nod to his companions. Without a word he began to pack his gear. The rest, watching, did the same. One of them scattered the ashes of the previous night's fire, obliterating any sign of their presence. When they were done they left, following a different path back through the hills and down to the village.

Moments after the sound of their footsteps died away, a young woman emerged from the cave's mouth, blinking and squinting in the harsh afternoon light. Pausing, she adjusted the straps on her pack, which were far too long for her slender shoulders. A leather belt, cinched tightly at her thin waist, held down the white shirt and khaki pants which hung on her frame. Her feet were bare, and already cut by rocks.

Far behind her, faint sounds echoed off the cave walls, noises that could have been wind whistling through rock, or, perhaps, something else, cut by distance and depth.

Breathing deeply of the high desert air, she smiled into the sky, and walked on.



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Lynette Mejia writes science fiction, fantasy, and horror prose and poetry from the middle of a deep, dark forest in the wilds of southern Louisiana. Her work has been nominated for the Rhysling Award and the Million Writers Award. You can find her online at www.lynettemejia.com.

Graphic Story: Shamrock #5 - Monkey Business

Shamrock, part 5 Monkey Business

Josh Brown Alberto Hernandez
Story Art













Interview with Award-Winning Author Matthew Kressel

Matthew Kressel is a multiple Nebula Award-nominated writer and World Fantasy Award-nominated editor. His novel, *King of Shards*, was published on October 13, 2015 from Arche Press, an imprint of Resurrection House. His short stories have or will appear in publications such as *Lightspeed*, *Nightmare*, *Clarke'sworld*, *io9.com*, *Beneath Ceaseless Skies*, *Interzone*, *Electric Velocipede*, *Apex Magazine*, and the anthologies *Naked City*, *After*, *The People of the Book*, and *The Mammoth Book of Steampunk*, as well as other markets. Matthew co-hosts the Fantastic Fiction reading series at the famous KGB Bar with legendary speculative-fiction editor Ellen Datlow. The monthly series highlights both luminaries and up-and-coming authors in speculative fiction. You can learn more about Michael on his website, <http://www.matthewkressel.net/>, or on Twitter @mattkressel.

Q&A

Julian: Matthew, thank you so much for agreeing to this interview. I'd like to start with a quick overview of your life before writing: how and where did you grow up, who and what influenced your life? Take us through Matt's journey...

Matthew: Thanks for having me! Wow, that's a broad question, so I'll try to keep it brief. I grew up on the south shore of Long Island in a Conservative Jewish home, but lived a pretty secular life for the most part. We celebrated the major holidays and said the prayers, but there wasn't too much discussion of God or anything. Most of my friends weren't Jewish, so I recognized at an early age that the exclusivity that most religions preach is harmful to human relationships in the long term. This led me to learn about other religions and faiths, reading as many holy books of all traditions as I could, then I delved into some New Age stuff, when I finally realized I didn't believe any of it. I was reading all this as one reads fiction, for the enjoyment of it, for the new ideas. But was it true? After a long period of self-reflection, I realized I didn't believe any of it was real. So this led me to my current place of agnosticism/atheism. If there is a God, it seems to me that he doesn't care much for the suffering of humans. It's hard to believe in a compassionate, loving God when you look at, for example, child cancer, or the Holocaust, or the 2004 Christmas Tsunami.

And so when my father, who is in most respects a logical person, who is an attorney and a lover of science, once told me he believed in the Lamed Vav, the myth that there are supposedly thirty-six righteous people who sustain the world, I was intrigued. How did this otherwise logical, rational human being believe in this myth? I dove back into the mythology of Judaism and discovered a treasure of stories and folktales, beliefs and superstitions, dating all the way back to

Babylonian times. A lot of this found its way into *King of Shards*. I'm interested in how mythology shapes our view of the world.

I can trace your oldest published works to the beginning of the 2000s. How did you get involved with writing and what were the biggest struggles and hurdles along the way?

I'd dabbled in writing for years before a friend suggested I take a class at the New School in Manhattan. It was supposed to be taught by Terry Bisson, but he had just moved to California, and so the late Alice K. Turner, former editor of *Playboy* fiction, stepped in to take his place. The class was called "Writing Science Fiction, Fantasy, and Horror," and was my first introduction to the concept of a workshop. I churned out dozens of crappy stories over the next few years, and went through a couple of writing groups before I found *Altered Fluid*. They're a hyper-talented bunch of writers, and good human beings too, and most of what I learned about writing I gleaned from someone in *Altered Fluid* at one time or another.

I try not to complain too much about the writing life, because I know how lucky and privileged I am to be able to spend part of my time writing, when so many people suffer and struggle just to live in this world. With that being said, I think what I've most struggled with is patience. It's easy to look at others and compare yourself to them. You see someone who is more successful or has more publications, more books, more accolades, and you go, "Shit, why haven't I got there yet?" What I've learned to do is to thank that voice for its opinion, let it go away, and then get back to work. Because that's really all you can do if you want to succeed: write and write more.

Your first novel was published in 2015, and we'll talk about it in a bit. But first—short stories. You focused a lot on short stories and for a good reason—you're really good writing them, and have quite a few awards to show for it. Were short stories just a means to get to novels or do you continue to write them?

I love writing short stories, and I continue to write them. In some ways, they are the ideal form for me. This may be because I've written so many. Novels are these giant beasts that you must tame, and this means taking enormous chunks of time away from other things like your job and your wife and your social life to complete them. But I also love the space to play in the novel form. In a short story, you often don't have the word count to explore ideas as fully as you might want to.

Let's play the fave game, which some people love and some hate: what is your favorite story from your works and what are some favorite authors and stories by other authors?

My favorite story of my own work is probably "Cameron Rhyder's Legs." It's complex and confusing—and it's meant to be. It's a time travel story, with so many recurring loops that the point-of-view characters aren't even sure how many times they've looped back and met

themselves inhabiting other bodies. It's meant as a comment on our never-ending cycles of war, where one side blames the other for something, retaliates as punishment, and the other side retaliates for the retaliation, etc., ad infinitum. I thought, what if we add time travel to the mix? What if the two sides keep attacking each other in the same battle, in the same moment in time, and the battlefield isn't some country or territory, but a rock concert. There's a moral in the tale that you have to read to the end to get, but I think it's powerful.

My readers, however, seem to think either "The Sounds of Old Earth" or "The Meeker and the All-Seeing Eye" are my strongest works. Some are also pretty partial to "The History Within Us."

Some of my favorite living writers are Jeffrey Ford, Kelly Link, Sam J. Miller, Mercurio D. Rivera, Paul Tremblay, Laird Barron, Kit Reed, Richard Bowes, N.K. Jemisin, and Genevieve Valentine.

One of my favorite stories of the past few years (and very timely) is Jeff Ford's "Blood Drive," about a school where all people, including children, are required to carry a gun. It's both hilarious and terrifying, and I think really explores the idiocy of the NRA's argument that we'd all be safer if we carried guns.

"Mysterium Tremendum" by Laird Barron fully encapsulates the combination of character-driven stories with the weird, otherworldly, supernatural stuff I love. It's about two gay couples who find a strange almanac in an old gift shop and follow its mysterious map into frightening realms. The slow build on this one is fantastic.

Over the past decade or so, Mercurio D. Rivera has been writing stories about an alien race called the Wergens who can't help but fall in love with humans on first sight. Each tale tackles a different aspect of love: brotherly love, romantic love, parental love, toxic love, and dissects it in all its forms. In particular, check out his stories, "Longing for Langalana" and "Tethered." They're all brilliant commentaries on our own narcissism, how what often passes for "love" in our culture is really just one person using and abusing the other for their own advantage. I know Rivera is working on his final story in the sequence, and I'm really looking forward to reading the collection when it's complete.

What were some of the tools that helped you with your writing? Were there writing & critique groups, workshops, mentors?

There is one hard and fast rule for writers: place ass in chair, write, rinse, repeat. Writing as often and as much as you can is important. But if you're just churning out a million shitty words, that's just typing. You need some kind of constructive feedback. "Is this any good? How can I make this better?" For this, writer's groups have been invaluable to me. I've been lucky to have been part of Altered Fluid, a Manhattan-based critique group, since 2003, and as I said they've been instrumental in my growth as a writer.

I've also taken several writing classes at the New School, like the one with Alice K. Turner. And I took two grammar classes with Joe Salvatore. For a few weeks after each class, I was unable to write a sentence, because I had suddenly become conscious of every nuance of structure, when before I was writing from instinct. Slowly, eventually, I was able to turn off that critical factor and write again, and I believe my sentences are vastly improved for having gone through that mental dissolution.

As for mentors, I never had an “official” one, but around 2006 I became friendly with Ellen Datlow, and she has always offered her excellent advice when needed. But Ellen's an editor, not a writer, so there's a limit to the writerly knowledge she can impart. For that there's Rick Bowes, who writes these amazing semi-autobiographical stories that are full of subtle supernaturalism and so much gritty real-world stuff that you feel they're more than half-true. If I've ever needed advice, not just about writing itself, but the business of it, the career of it, Rick is the person to ask. He's never given me poor advice in the many years I've known him. On top of this, he's hilarious.

Let's talk *King of Shards*: how did this idea come to you and what drove you to the Lamed Vav myth? Did you have to do a lot of research for it?

It came from the day my father said he believe in the myth of the Lamed Vav. At the time, I had never heard of the myth, and so as I read more about it, I became more intrigued. There's this awful thing that happened to Judaism in the 20th century. Obviously, the Holocaust is a big part of that, but what was also lost, what is seldom spoken about, is the loss of a language. Yiddish, the language of the Jewish people in Europe for a thousand years, has been pretty much erased in a generation. You'll still hear it spoken among the ultra-orthodox communities around the world. But secular, every-day Yiddish is gone, except for a few small, close-knit communities. There are many reasons for this: immigrants to the U.S. who wanted their children to Americanize, the push for Hebrew as the national language of Israel in the early 20th century, the Nazis, etc..

Language is intimately tied up with culture, so as this kid growing up in secular Long Island, with no knowledge of Yiddish except as this Germanic language my grandparents spoke so the kids wouldn't understand, I was cut off from a millennium of culture. In Yiddish there are all these little superstitious phrases, like when you mention someone's age you always add, “Until 120 years!” Or if you mention someone's good fortune, you always add “No Evil Eye!” You call your beautiful children “ugly” so heaven won't see you boasting and send you a judging angel. When I started to look into all these myths and superstitions, my eyes opened, and I realized the tradition I had been raised in held all these amazing secrets and stories. These days I study Yiddish as a way to connect with my culture without having to be tied to religious observance. Also, because it's fun.

I did a ton of research for *King of Shards*, but it never felt like work, because I enjoyed every new discovery. I realized I had been sitting on a great treasure all along.

I love character-driven stories; how fun was writing the characters in *King of Shards*? Give us a few hints about your character creation process. Which ones were the hardest to write and which came out easily?

It was incredibly fun! It's always hard for me to describe how I create characters because I think a lot of what happens occurs subconsciously, and when I try to describe the process, it sounds cheesy or cliché. But here goes: I start with an image in my head of a motivation. What does my character want? What does she look like? What is her class and job? Why can't she get what she wants? What stands in her way? I try as much as possible to put myself in the character's head, to feel what she feels, think what she thinks. I force them to interact with other characters, to have others challenge them and call into question their motivations or prevent them from getting what they want. It's where a character is separated from her desires that stories happen.

Daniel Fisher, the Lamed Vavnik, was the hardest to write. He's literally a saint, keeping the world alive by his good deeds. While that makes for a great human being, it doesn't make for a good genre fiction character. So, like above, I had to challenge him. Ashmedai, the demon king, continually challenges Daniel's assumptions and motivations until Daniel breaks his own moral code and becomes something else. Part of the challenge was getting Daniel to that point and making his motivations realistic.

The easiest to write was Ashmedai. He's the demon king, cast out of hell, which is called Sheol in *King of Shards*, and stripped of his power. He's been spurned not only by his wife, Mashit, who usurped the throne, but by God herself (the demons in *King of Shards* refer to God in the feminine), who has smashed his world and left him and his brethren adrift without a home. So he's full of righteous indignation, searching for a way out of suffering. But he's a demon, and so his methods are not what we would deem moral or righteous.

Rana was also heck of a lot of fun to write. She's at heart an artist, and her explosive creativity has, at times, mirrored my own.

What should people expect from the series going forward? Where is it going next?

I'll try to avoid spoilery details! In the second book, *Queen of Static*, I travel away from only Judaic myths into the myths of other faiths, and I explore how each tradition might interpret the same idea. So we see, for example, how a Buddhist monk might see a Lamed Vavnik as a bodhisattva, an essentially selfless being. In *King of Shards* I suggest that not all the Lamed Vav are Jewish, and in *Queen of Static* I run with that idea.

In Queen of Static there's a lot more focus on Earth and Sheol and the changes taking place there since the events of SHARDS. It's about how the media manipulate us, about how destructive narcissism is. After King of Shards ended, there were still many loose threads, so Queen of Static continues a few months after Shards leaves off. I think readers will be pleasantly surprised where I've taken the story.

You've also edited a magazine for a few years. How fun (or not fun) is it being an editor? What did you like about it most and would you do it again?

Editing Sybil's Garage was great! I highly recommend, for all aspiring writers, to read slush at least one point in your life. When you have fifty stories to read before the end of the week, very quickly you're able to see when an editor stops reading. Seeing stories from the other side of the transom gives you a different perspective on your own work, how you must hold the editor's attention. Of course every editor has her tastes, but it's a good experience to have.

For me, the best part was building something from scratch. I tried to make each issue of Sybil's Garage a work of art, and I think that's apparent in the design, but also in the selection of stories we published. It was a lot of work, and it took me away from my own writing, which is why I ultimately had to stop. But I would definitely edit again if I found the time. I've been wanting to edit an anthology for ages.

Here's one question many writers dread, but I ask it anyway: what is your advice for young writers today?

My advice is this: shut up and write. I used to read all this writing advice, buy all these books, and read as much as I could online. Once I was in a bookstore, reading yet another writing advice book, and it said, "Why are you reading this now? Why aren't you writing?" And it hit me then that all of these things are just distractions our subconscious uses to keep us from actually writing. Sure, you might glean this or that from a book or article. But at the end of the day, the only thing that's going to help you improve your writing is to write more. Make sure to see my comment above about constructive feedback.

Also, the sooner you can develop a thick skin, the better off you will be. The writing life is full of rejection and heartbreak. You can spend five years working on your epic novel only to have it sit in a drawer because no one wants to buy it. You can have your favorite story rejected twenty times by all your favorite markets. You can have your beloved author or review site pan your work. Etc., etc. You have to learn not to care about this too much. It's really hard, because we're social creatures and primed to seek approval from others. I still struggle with this. But at the end of the day you have to just acknowledge the hurt and put your *derrière* back in the *chairière* and do the old clackety-clack.

Lastly, where can we find you? Do you stop by conventions or other specific events? Is there anything else you'd like to plug?

My horror story, "Demon in Aisle 6" is just out in Nightmare Magazine. You can read it here: <http://www.nightmare-magazine.com/fiction/demon-in-aisle-6/>

I'm on the usual social networking sites, Facebook, G+, Twitter. I occasionally blog with writing updates and angry rants about this or that on my blog at www.matthewkressel.net.

I'll be attending Arisia in Boston in January, and I will be attending Readercon in Boston in June, and the World Fantasy Convention in Columbus in November.

I also co-host the Fantastic Fiction at KGB with Ellen Datlow, so if you're ever in New York City, you can stop by there and say hi. Our schedule is always here: www.kgbfantasticfiction.org.

Matthew, thank you for this interview and good luck with your future writing!

This was fun, Iulian! Thank you so much for having me!



Interview with Author and Editor Maurice Broaddus

Maurice Broaddus is a fantasy and horror author best known for his short fiction and his Knights of Breton Court novel trilogy. He has published dozens of stories in magazines and book anthologies, including in *Asimov's Science Fiction*, *Black Static*, and *Weird Tales*. Maurice is also the editor of the acclaimed *Dark Faith* anthology, nominated for multiple awards. He was originally born in London, England, but has lived in America most of his life. He holds a Bachelor's of Science degree from Purdue University in Biology (with an undeclared major in English) and comes from a family that includes several practicing obeah (think: Jamaican Voodoo) people.

You can learn more about Maurice on his website, <http://mauricebroaddus.com/>, or on Twitter @MauriceBroaddus.

Q&A

Julian: Maurice, thank you so for chatting with us today. Please tell us a few words about non-writer Maurice Broaddus. How was your life growing up? Have you had any particular influences in your life? What jobs did you have you had before becoming a full-time writer? Since writing, have you ever considered any other careers?

Maurice: I was born in London, England. My mother is Jamaican and my dad is African American. I can't begin to tell you how many discussions around the dinner table began with "The problem with you people is . . .". I never knew which side of the "you" I was supposed to be on. This was compounded by the fact that other than my home, I was raised in a mostly white environment: special school program and the strict fundamentalist church my parents sent me to, which formed the bulk of my social life. I was over being the "token" in any given social situation pretty early on. That being said, it left me with a sense of always being the outsider in any given circumstance. Even if I were among my own people. This set up a lot of the themes that you commonly see in my stories: The Other/The Outsider, issues of faith, issues of race, etc.

I have a B.S. in Biology and was an environmental toxicologist for twenty years before doing the writing thing full time. I ran a homeless ministry for a few years and when my wife tires of the irregularity of freelance checks, I have taken on a 9-5 gig just for the sake of stability. But writing is what I do (since the 9-5 gigs seem to fire me when I'm on extreme deadline and do nothing but write, on the job and off).

You started strong in mid-90s with an Honorable Mention in Asimov's Undergraduate award for *Kali's Danse Macabre*. How did you get involved with writing? What was (if any) your big epiphany?

I am one of those cliché writers who have to say that “I’ve always written.” When we first arrived in the U.S., I was placed in second grade. But I was obviously bored in the class and they didn’t want to skip me another grade. So the teacher LITERALLY placed me in the corner of the room, put a stack of blank paper on my desk, and told me to just create stuff. In fifth grade I won an essay question (I believe it was on the importance of environmentalism).

During my junior year of high school, my teacher (Mr. Combs!) really encouraged me to take my writing seriously. He started giving me books to read (Edgar Allan Poe, Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*, etc.) to continue to push me.

In college I gave up writing. My mother wanted me to pursue something “practical” and we compromised on a Biology degree. So for two whole years, I gave up writing. This led to two epiphanies: 1) I realized I was miserable when I wasn’t writing, so I began pursuing an undeclared English degree, taking as many creative writing classes as I could; 2) I was randomly assigned an independent studies professor who, as it turned out, did his thesis on Stephen King and Clive Barker. He’s the one who insisted I enter for the Asimov award.

You write mostly horror and fantasy, especially dark fantasy. What draws you to these genres and have you written or considered writing in other genres as well?

Honestly, I think my fourth grade Sunday School teacher had a lot to do with it. He was teaching on Noah’s Ark and the flood one day. I put a bunch of floating bodies on the flannel-graph next to the boat because I figured a world-wide flood meant lots of bodies. He and I immediately bonded. We had a mutual love of comic books and he introduced me to Dr. Who and later Stephen King.

I have written a variety of genres. I’ve done science fiction, crime, and most recently, a lot of steampunk. Basically I will write either what gets me a check or wherever the writing challenge may lie.

What are some of the best works (stories or novels) you’ve ever read?

The Gift by Patrick O’Leary, *Confederacy of Dunces* by John Kennedy Toole, and *Beloved* (heck, anything) by Toni Morrison.

You are the co-editor of the Dark Faith anthologies. How did you get involved in this project and how cool is it to work on an anthology?

For ten years, I hosted an annual convention called Mo*Con. Each year I invited a few horror, science fiction, and fantasy writers in, and held the convention in a church. We discussed topics related to genre and faith. You tell people you're having a convention in a church, all they hear is "church" and, again, there are preconceptions to what goes on there. But with the great line up of writers that we had regularly attending Mo*Con, we talked with Jason Sizemore, of Apex Books, about doing a Mo*Con anthology. That project evolved into Dark Faith. I guess you could say that I've always been fascinated with hearing people's stories about faith, no matter where that story takes them.

I think every writer should take a turn behind the slush pile to see what an editor faces every day. From the lack of professionalism, the inability to follow guidelines, to the ideas/stories they see all the time. That was my first major take away lesson. The second was that after we put together the original Dark Faith, we had a better idea of what kind of stories we were looking for. Our writers did also, which was reflected in the (much better) slush pile.

I'm not going to lie: any time you get to work with close friends like I got to with Jerry, it's a win-win-win. It means a lot of hanging out playing Magic: the Gathering, gossiping, drinking Riesling all without our wives complaining because we're "working." If we didn't have Dark Faith: Invocations as an excuse to do it all again, we'd have had to invent a new project to work on.

What are your thoughts about the future of the anthology? Will there be more in this series? Are you considering editing other anthologies?

We keep debating whether to do a third in the Dark Faith series. Jerry and I did get the band back together and did the urban fantasy meets crime Streets of Shadows anthology for *Alliteration Ink*.

Let's talk a little bit about *The Knights of Breton Court*. How did the idea shape up? Can you give our readers a quick introduction into the story's world?

The Knights of Breton Court had its origins in a local ministry called Outreach Inc. They work with homeless teenagers. We were working on various art/writing projects and I was trying to get the kids to imagine themselves in different contexts. What struck me was how they couldn't imagine their lives past next week. So I started imagining some of them caught up in a larger story. What started out as a lark, eventually became a full blown novel. Basically, the book is a re-telling of the legend of King Arthur except set in modern day Indianapolis, told through the eyes of homeless teenagers. I call it "The Wire" meets "Excalibur".

Here's the other thing—I love crime fiction. George Pelecanos. Elmore Leonard. David Simon (who, technically, writes non-fiction). With the setting of my take on the Arthurian legends

revolving around the lives of homeless teens and gang members in Indianapolis, the series has the pacing of a crime novel rather than a fantasy novel.

When all is said and done, acknowledging my love of horror, the scariest part of the series was the lives of the kids. In the series, magic becomes a metaphor for homelessness: it's all around us if we choose to see it.

Which character in the series was the most fun to write and which was the hardest?

Green, who was the Green Knight and an elemental in the first book of the series, *King Maker*, was my favorite character to write. He was responsible for what I called the page 100 test: if a person read his scene on page 100 and could keep going, they were going to be fine with the rest of the book. Otherwise, they would decide that maybe the book wasn't for them (by way of throwing it across the room or, in another case, calling me up to demand that Green die).

Merle was the runaway favorite of the series. There's something about a crazy old wizard in a constant argument with a squirrel that people loved.

The hardest character to write was Lott in the third book, *King's War*. He was going through a lot: wrestling with his betrayal of King via his fling with Lady G; the team broke apart; the mission on the verge of collapse and he blamed himself. It was emotionally tough for me to write.

For people who might not be aware of your work, which stories do you consider your best? Give everyone a place to start discovering your world.

My best stories might be *Cerulean Memories* (from the *Book of the Dead* anthology), *Family Business* (*Weird Tales*), or *A House is not a Home* (*Legends of the Mountain State 2*). When folks want to jump into what I do, I typically steer them towards the novelette *Steppin' Razor* (*Asimov's SF*) or the novella *I Can Transform You* (*Apex Books*).

What do you do when you're not writing? Is there anything crazy about your life that you'd like to share?

I am trying to minimize the crazy going on in my life. I'm getting older, plus I'm trying to raise two bi-racial teenage boys. So it's the quiet life of being a black geek: binge watching (A LOT of) television between games of *Magic: the Gathering* and *Clash of Clans*.

What is next for you? Are there any upcoming works we can expect? Is there anything else you'd like to add?

I have a novel coming out in 2016 (*Black Son Rising*, co-written with Steve Shrewsbury) and a short story collection coming out from *Rosarium Publishing*. I'm working on three more novel collaborations, two novels of my own, and putting together another collection, if that tells you what my writing schedule is like these days.

Maurice, I really appreciate you taking the time for this interview!



Artist Spotlight: Joshua Hutchinson

Joshua Hutchinson is a concept artist and illustrator who works in the digital medium to create mesmerizing environments and landscapes. He strives to infuse his work with vibrant colors and a compelling narrative, hoping to capture the viewers' imagination and send them to another world. Joshua has done a variety of works including CD album covers, board game art, mobile game artwork, and promotional artwork for independent games. His goal is to work in the film and video game industries and contribute to products and services which entertain the masses.

Q&A

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?

Josh: I grew up in the town of Chesterfield in the UK. My family and I believe I got my creativity from my Dad, who is currently working as an architect and used to do a lot of watercolor paintings of the surrounding landscape. It may sound odd, but what really set me on the path of art was seeing my sister draw a banana for her art homework when I was about nine years old. I looked at it and thought, "That looks so real! I want to be able to do that!" From there, I had studied art at as many levels as formal education allowed me, which was up until the age of eighteen, but that was strictly traditional media only. At sixteen I picked up my first graphics tablet (which I still use to this day) and started learning digital art by myself, side-by-side with traditional media in school.

What are your favorite design tools and how did you get to learn them?

I use Photoshop for 90% of my work, but sometimes I do more design-based and more structural work in Zbrush and Sketchup. I have learnt them by myself thanks to the many free tutorials available online.

Are there any other artists out there that you admire and whose work has helped shape your work?

Theo Prins, Jeff Simpson, Jae Cheol Park and the work of Studio Ghibli are a massive inspiration to me, and I have recently been experimenting with similar styles in my work trying to define a style for myself.

Where do you find inspiration?

The artists I mentioned are one source of inspiration, but I also get inspiration from subjects not related to art. The vastness and beauty of space and the deep sea are awe-inspiring to me and

although they don't appear very much in my work, they inspire me to create. Sometimes I also get inspiration from literature and single words, and try to illustrate a scene from a book or a feeling that a certain word gave me.

How would you break down your workflow in steps?

I don't have one set workflow as I am still developing my own style, but for the majority of my work—particularly more organic landscapes with foliage and mountains—I start with greyscale thumbnails to establish a good composition and values. After I choose one to take further, I make a few copies of it, and quickly experiment with different color palettes. After I choose one of them, I enlarge the image and start to refine the shapes, the colors, and move on to detailing the piece.

Your work is very fantasy-driven. What drives you to that subject?

I've always loved fantasy more than any other genre. Sci-fi is also very cool to paint, but it doesn't give me a sort of warmth and spiritual feeling like fantasy does. I'm sure many other artists are the same in that it's almost like a form of escapism. I get the same feeling when I read a fantasy novel, or think about the deep sea, or other planets in space.

If there was one piece of advice you could give other beginning artists, what would that be?

I don't have anything innovative and profound to say in terms of advice. All I can say is the usual “don't give up, have fun with your work, don't take it too seriously, and also don't overwork yourself.”

We selected one of your pieces for the cover of our magazine. Tell us a few words about how that piece came to be.

That piece was actually from a topic on the Facebook group page “Daily Spitpaint”, which offers different topics daily and challenges users to do a 30 minute painting of one of them. The topic I chose was “Soul Ascending.” As I have said before, I am a sucker for anything involving spirituality. I had an incredibly positive response to my quick painting, so I decided to refine it and take it to a finished state, which you can see on the cover.

Where can we find you on the web?

My official website is <http://www.joshuahutchinson.co.uk>. There, you can sign up to my mailing list to receive up-to-date info on any projects I'm involved with and new pieces of work.



Book Review: The SEA is Ours (ed. by Jaymee Goh and Joyce Chng)

Julie Novakova

The SEA Is Ours

edited by Jaymee Goh and Joyce Chng

Rosarium Publishing (November 30, 2015)

The new anthology *The SEA is Ours* by Rosarium Publishing presents steampunk, alternate “technofantasy” history and retrofuturistic stories taking place in SEA—Southeast Asia. The editor duo of Jaymee Goh and Joyce Chng strove to bring the readers a more diverse and unusual view of steampunk, one built on the rich history of SEA, meeting grounds of many cultures and languages and some of the most unique landscapes of the world. It includes twelve short stories, largely by authors coming from the region or closely familiar with it.

For me, the absolute peak of the anthology was *The Unmaking of The Cuadro Amoroso* by Kate Osias. Imagine music, mathematics and psychology, various intersections of science and art—becoming ever more relevant in our own world with the onset of new data imaging methods and virtual reality—all inside a strong and vividly told story of principles, love, and revenge. One of the characters, a genius pianist named Hustino, seeks “elaborate melodic solutions to the mathematical theories embodied in the Cancion del Universo.” It evokes the efforts of late middle age/early modern astronomers and mathematicians to understand the harmonics of the movement of celestial bodies. Music had actually been considered a vital subject of study in connection to understanding the universe in early science.

The opening is foreboding and dark. Three of the Cuadro Amoroso are dead, mere wisps of memory in the mind of the remaining one, a dancer about to give her final performance. A pianist, a gastronomist, a machinist, and a dancer. Each of them is depicted vividly in the small space of the story, and even more so the development of their relationship, influenced by Hustino’s success and its consequences. It’s one of the ambitious stories that would likely fail completely if told by someone without a great sensitivity for style. Osias evidently possesses it, and the result is remarkable.

Beside this highlight of the anthology, there were other very good pieces as well. Marilag Angway’s *Chasing Volcanoes* is an adventure story of two strong-willed women, an airship captain and a landless princess, and the dangers presented by natural forces and politics alike. It’s full of imagination, fast-paced, and witty. I enjoyed it very much.

On *The Consequence of Sound* by Timothy Dimacali opens the anthology and brings forth a beautifully written story of a girl whose dream is to become a navigator of one of the floating ships and soar the sky like the majestic sky whales. But she ends up faced with a very difficult decision as she tries to pursue her goal. The biologist in me, though, wondered about the population densities of the sky whales and whether they would have lasted, given the events of the story. But it's not a fault of the story; you'll always find a reader in whom it's harder to elicit the suspension of disbelief.

In *Life Under Glass*, Nghi Vo portrayed two sisters working on the collection of species for a Universal Exposition in Saigon. It's a fine example of an engaging and well-written story centered on the inner world of the protagonist, Thi, who discovers a strange new species. Thumbs up: She also thought about population densities!

The Last Aswang by Alessa Hinlo was an imaginative and dramatic story of gods, cultural clashes, betrayal and promise. Paolo Chikiamco's *Between Severed Souls* deals with similar topics in an even more dramatic way. Both stories are certainly among the more notable pieces of the anthology.

The Chamber of Souls by ZM Quynh was an interesting piece full of imagination, however, it felt more like a fragment of a larger work than a story able to stand on its own. It contains original ideas and several strong scenes but fails to wrap up the storyline or answer any of the questions coming to a reader's mind.

In *Working Woman*, Olivia Ho presented a fast-paced, unusual, and enjoyable variation on the archetypal Frankenstein monster story. It was among the best pieces of the anthology. *Spider Here* by Robert Liow centers around children betting over part mechanical, part biological fighting spiders. The idea of a world where real neural tissue is used to make machines more adaptable was interesting but not explored very deeply, and the story arrived to a halt before it could develop.

Ordained by L. L. Hill shows the psychological conflict of two brothers, one a monk and the other a doctor, over what's important in life, but it seemed more like a moral point than an actual story.

By far the weakest piece for me was *Petrified* by Ivanna Mendels. The info dumps in the beginning and several later scenes, unbelievable and all too sketchy behavior of the characters, and clichéd resolution made me wonder what the story was doing in the anthology. With some changes, it could potentially become a worthy contribution, but this seemed too much like some first draft.

The Insects and Women Sing Together by Pear Nuallak follows Petrified and wraps up the anthology. Luckily, it's a much stronger piece, showing the respective struggles of a mother and her daughter to follow their own paths instead of binding traditions.

Although the quality of the stories fluctuated a little throughout the anthology and I had a problem with several of the pieces seeming like a vignette or a fragment of some larger work rather than a self-contained story, I can honestly recommend reading *The SEA Is Ours*. One of the stories is truly great, others are very good, and those you will remember. They alone are worth picking up the book. Another good reason to read the anthology is the richly depicted world of alternate SEAs.

I hope that more projects like this one will see the light of day. This is not the first speculative fiction anthology focused on a specific part of the world sometimes unjustly overlooked in the “mainstream” part of SF, and other ones are in preparation, for example *The Fae Visions of The Mediterranean*. It seems like a good trend to me, one that can bring readers more original, enjoyable fiction. In any case, the quality of the stories should be put in the first place, and *The SEA Is Ours* did just that.



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Movie Review: The Martian (Ridley Scott)

Mark Leeper

CAPSULE: Andy Weir's popular science blog turned best-selling novel comes to the screen with Matt Damon in the lead. Ridley Scott (ALIEN, GLADIATOR) directs the tense story of an astronaut accidentally left behind on Mars whose incredible science knowledge keeps him alive. The screenplay is by Drew Goddard (WORLD WAR Z, CLOVERFIELD). The science was vetted by experts and Weir proves you do not have to bend the laws of science to tell a good science fiction story. This is the most gripping film of the year so far. Rating: +3 (-4 to +4) or 9/10

I remember when the just-released film ROBINSON CRUSOE ON MARS was playing in Springfield, Massachusetts. One of the things that sold me on spending my allowance to see it was that it promised that this was the first of a new breed of science fiction films that would be sticking very close to the real science. In those days my science acumen was less than what it is today. But that was all right because the filmmakers had less science knowledge than I had. During the film, I could tell that the science of getting oxygen by baking rocks was a little funky, but I set aside my objections. That was until they introduced Friday as a fugitive from an interstellar alien slaver ship. Then the film begged me to suspend disbelief. And, of course, the absurdity went along with Friday to the final frame of the story.

Suspension of disbelief is just what Andy Weir wanted to make unnecessary when in his Internet blog he told an informative story of how a man marooned on Mars might actually survive. He chose the perfect medium because one resource that the Internet had in abundance is people who would happily correct other people. And amazingly, a handful of the correctors actually knew what they were talking about. Weir chipped away at the absurdity until he got his story to actually not be too absurd. It probably was not clear that that would be at all possible. The plan was not originally to make a publishable novel, but there are more intelligent people out there than Weir reckoned on and lots of people were actually interested in whether a near-future Robinson Crusoe might actually survive on Mars. The text that Weir had been giving away free turned into a best-selling novel and a hot property that he sold to the movies.

Following Andy Weir's novel, astronaut Mark Watney is on a mission to Mars that has the bad timing to be in the path of a violent windstorm. The crew has good evidence that Watney did not survive the storm and Watney has no way to contact them. Watney finds himself left behind on the hostile planet. The good news is that another Mars mission is planned. Watney can just

return to Earth with that crew. The bad news is that that mission will not arrive for four years. All he needs to do is stay alive long enough to be rescued. At the beginning we see the events only from Watney's eyes. Later we get to see more of what is happening on Earth and in space. We never do learn much of who Watney is. We have to judge him just by his actions on Mars. And the planet and the predicament do test his mettle. About the first thing we learn about the real man is that he swears a lot. Then again as the only person on an entire planet he gets the prize for human being currently most in private when he does it. There is nobody to hear him and be offended.

Some comment should be made about our Martian's implausible luck. We expect incredible luck from a James Bond. But *THE MARTIAN* takes place in a more realistic world. One stroke of luck: It is not at all surprising that a mission to Mars might have a botanist. People who would be sent to Mars would have wide ranges of knowledge. But Watney survives only because he *is* the botanist on the mission. He also is extraordinarily lucky to survive the storm and multiple explosions that could easily have been fatal. There is nobody but Watney himself to perform first aid on himself. He also seems to have been lucky to avoid the expected radiation problems which are not even mentioned in the film.

What keeps the audience entertained may be as much the man as his situation. What is really useful of his traits is that he talks to himself. That normally irritating habit is extremely useful to tell the audience what he is thinking. He may be making a log, but when he talks to himself he is more conveniently narrating the story for his audience. That is one opportune characteristic. Even with a convenient arsenal of talents he still goes from one dangerous scrape to another, injuring himself, but never quite fatally. By the end of the film he obviously has deteriorated a lot in the course of the film, but he keeps coming back and his luck keeps holding. And through it all perhaps his most valuable skill is his sense of humor that never loses its edge for himself or for the viewer.

Screenwriter Drew Goddard tampers a bit with the novel. In part this seems to be so there is a big gripping set piece at each end of the film. What is missing from the film is Watney's clever engineering and improvisation to fix the problems that were queued up to hit him one at a time rather than all ganging up at once, which might have been more realistic. In the book there are more problems that require thinking, engineering, and mathematics. Solving those problems might not be cinematic, so the film glosses over them.

Director Ridley Scott has given the film a powerhouse cast including Matt Damon and Jessica Chastain. (Weren't they just together in another big science fiction space film, *INTERSTELLAR*?) There is also Kate Mara, Kristen Wiig, Jeff Daniels, Chiwetel Ejiofor, and the forever-*Sharpe* Sean Bean.

It will be interesting to see if this film will win public opinion for or against the possibility of sending people to Mars. I rate THE MARTIAN a +3 on the -4 to +4 scale or 9/10.



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