

June 2014

SCIENCE FICTION, FANTASY, AND HORROR

# Fantasy Scroll mag

ISSUE  
02



Mike Resnick • Kate O'Connor • Ferrett Steinmetz • Michelle Ann King

**Fantasy Scroll Magazine**  
**Speculative Fiction - Issue #2 – June 2014**

**Featuring works by Andrew Kozma, Brandon Barrows, Brittany Foster, Ferrett Steinmetz, J.W. Alden, J. Kenneth Sargeant, Joyce Reynolds-Ward, Kate O'Connor, Michelle Ann King, Mike Resnick, Patrick G. Jameson, Rebecca A. Demarest, Savannah Hendricks, Tony Peak**

This collection is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, organizations, places, events, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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**Cover Art:** Sabbas Apterus

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# Fantasy Scroll Magazine Issue #2

**June, 2014**

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*EDITORIAL, JUNE 2014*

**IULIAN IONESCU**

**5**

## **FICTION**

---

*WINTER SOLSTICE*

**MIKE RESNICK**

**7**

*DA CAPO AL FINE*

**PATRICK G. JAMESON**

**17**

*THE REANIMATORS*

**J. KENNETH SARGEANT**

**21**

*A CONCERT OF FLOWERS*

**KATE O'CONNOR**

**31**

*THESE ARE THE THINGS OUR HANDS HAVE MADE*

**ANDREW KOZMA**

**40**

*A TRADE OF TEARS*

**TONY PEAK**

**42**

*FOUR SCENES FROM WIECZNIAK'S WHISK-U-AWAY, AND ONE NOT*

**FERRETT STEINMETZ**

**51**

*THE UNWORTHY*

**J.W. ALDEN**

**58**

*VERDURE*

**BRANDON BARROWS**

**60**

*MILLION HEARTS IN THE VALLEY OF DEATH*

**SAVANNAH HENDRICKS**

**65**

*THE FINE ART OF FORTUNE-TELLING*

**MICHELLE ANN KING**

**67**

*MARSHMALLOW WALLS*

**BRITTANY FOSTER**

**76**

*GRIMM'S HOME FOR GERIATRICS*

**REBECCA DEMAREST**

**78**

*JC THE SKI BUM*

**JOYCE REYNOLDS-WARD**

**80**

## **NON-FICTION**

---

<i>INTERVIEW WITH AWARD WINNING AUTHOR MIKE RESNICK</i>	<b>87</b>
<i>INTERVIEW WITH AUTHOR TIM PRATT</i>	<b>92</b>
<i>INTERVIEW WITH THE EDITORS OF STRANGE HORIZONS</i>	<b>98</b>
<i>ARTIST SPOTLIGHT: SABBAS APTERUS</i>	<b>104</b>
<i>BOOK REVIEW: WARBREAKER (BRANDON SANDERSON)</i> <b>TYSON MAUERMANN</b>	<b>107</b>
<i>MOVIE REVIEW: GODZILLA (2014) (GARETH EDWARDS)</i> <b>MARK LEEPER</b>	<b>109</b>

# Editorial, June 2014

Iulian Ionescu

**W**elcome to Issue #2 of Fantasy Scroll Magazine.

Issue #1 has come and gone. Since then we've had a lot of good feedback about it. We also got some constructive criticism from our readers, for which we thank you. One particular thing that people asked for is the ability to purchase subscriptions on a discounted basis. We heard you and we did our best to accommodate — we are now working with Magzter and Weightless Books to provide you simple, easy to get subscriptions at a discounted price. Check us out on those sites and you can have all the stories we issue in one year for a fraction of the price.

Now, let's focus on the issue at hand. While we plan on having 12 stories in each quarterly issue, we just had to bump it up to 14 stories in Issue #2. We have included the two stories we featured as teasers during our Kickstarter campaign — "Da Capo al Fine," by Patrick G. Jameson, and "A Trade of Tears," by Tony Peak. I love both stories and I wanted to give them the benefit of being a part of a full issue and of our e-books.

Now, let's move to the rest of the issue.

We are leading with Mike Resnick's "Winter Solstice." There's little we need to say about Mike Resnick, the front runner in awards for short fiction, author of multiple novels, and editor extraordinaire. If you want to know more, read the interview in this issue's non-fiction section. "Winter Solstice" was a Hugo Nominee in 1992 and it tackles a difficult, earthly problem, set in a fantastic setting.

Following we have "Reanimators" by J. Kenneth Sargeant and, hold on to your horses and watch people roll their eyes — it's a zombie story. Before you judge, read it; it's different, fresh, and highly entertaining.

Next is a reprint from Kate O'Connor, "Concert of Flowers," followed by an apocalyptic story with an unusual premise by Andrew Kozma, "These Are the Things Our Hands Have Made."

Then we have Ferret Steinmentz with "Four Scenes From Wicznak's Whisk-U-Away, And One Not," and J.W. Alden with "The Unworthy."

We didn't forget about very short pieces in this issue either. We know a lot of people love them. In this category, we feature

"Million Hearts in the Valley of Death," by Savannah Hendricks, "Marshmallow Walls," by Brittany Foster, and "Grimm's Home for Geriatrics," by Rebecca Demarest.

Brandon Barrows entertains us in his war story "Verdure," and Michelle Ann King talks about "The Fine Art of Fortune-Telling," two stories that will keep you on the edge of your seat.

Last but not least, we are closing the fiction section with "JC The Ski Bum," a fun, humorous piece by Joyce Reynolds-Ward.

In the non-fiction section we have interviews with Mike Resnick and Tim Pratt, as well as the editorial team of Strange Horizons.

Sabbas Apterus, the artist who designed this issue's cover, gets his own artist spotlight. We then conclude this issue with a book review for Brandon Sanderson's "Warbreaker" and a movie review for "Godzilla (2014)," by Mark Leeper.

I hope you enjoy reading this issue as much as we enjoyed creating it. If you like what you read, please purchase the issue or subscriptions, spread the word, and give us reviews.

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# Winter Solstice

Mike Resnick

**I**t is not easy to live backwards in time, even when you are Merlin the Magnificent. You would think it would be otherwise, that you would remember all the wonders of the future, but those memories grow dim and fade more quickly than you might suppose. I know that Galahad will win his duel tomorrow, but already the name of his son has left me. In fact, does he even have a son? Will he live long enough to pass on his noble blood? I think perhaps he may, I think that I have held his grandchild upon my knee, but I am not sure. It is all slipping away from me.

Once I knew all the secrets of the universe. With no more than a thought I could bring Time to a stop, reverse it in its course, twist it around my finger like a piece of string. By force of will alone I could pass among the stars and the galaxies. I could create life out of nothingness, and turn living, breathing worlds into dust.

Time passed — though not the way it passes for you — and I could no longer do these things. But I could isolate a DNA molecule and perform microsurgery on it, and I could produce the equations that allowed us to traverse the wormholes in space, and I could plot the orbit of an electron.

Still more time slipped away, and although these gifts deserted me, I could create penicillin out of bread mold, and comprehend both the General and Special Theories of Relativity, and I could fly between the continents.

But all that has gone, and I remember it as one remembers a dream, on those occasions I can remember it at all. There was — there someday will be, there may come to you — a disease of the aged, in which you lose portions of your mind, pieces of your past, thoughts you've thought and feelings you've felt, until all that's left is the primal *id*, screaming silently for warmth and nourishment. You see parts of yourself vanishing, you try to pull them back from oblivion, you fail, and all the while you realize what is happening to you until even that perception, that realization, is lost. I will weep for you in another millennia, but now your lost faces fade from my memory, your desperation recedes from the stage of my mind, and soon I will remember nothing of you. Everything is drifting away on the wind, eluding my frantic efforts to clutch it and bring it back to me.

I am writing this down so that someday someone — possibly even *you* — will read it and will know that I was a good and moral man, that I did my best under circumstances that a more compassionate God might not have forced upon me, that even as events and places slipped away from me, I did not shirk my duties, I served my people as best I could.

They come to me, my people, and they say, It hurts, Merlin. They say, Cast a spell and make the pain go away. They say, My baby burns with fever, and my milk has dried up. Do something, Merlin, they say; you are the greatest wizard in the kingdom, the greatest wizard who has ever lived. Surely you can do something.

Even Arthur seeks me out. The war goes badly, he confides to me; the heathen fight against baptism, the knights have fallen to battling amongst themselves, he distrusts his queen. He reminds me that I am his personal wizard, that I am his most trusted friend, that it was I who taught him the secret of Excalibur (but that was many years ago, and of course I know nothing of it yet). I look at him thoughtfully, and though I know an Arthur who is bent with age and beaten down by the caprices of Fate, an Arthur who has lost his Guinevere and his Round Table and all his dreams of Camelot, I can summon no compassion, no sympathy for this young man who is speaking to me. He is a stranger, as he will be yesterday, as he will be last week.

An old woman comes to see me in the early afternoon. Her arm is torn and miscolored, the stench of it makes my eyes water, the flies are thick around her.

I cannot stand the pain any longer, Merlin, she weeps. It is like childbirth, but it does not go away. You are my only hope, Merlin. Cast your mystic spell, charge me what you will, but make the pain cease.

I look at her arm, where the badger has ripped it with his claws, and I want to turn my head away and retch. I finally force myself to examine it. I have a sense that I need something, I am not sure what, something to attach to the front of my face, or if not my whole face then at least across my nose and mouth, but I cannot recall what it is.

The arm is swollen to almost twice its normal size, and although the wound is halfway between her elbow and her shoulder, she shrieks in agony when I gently manipulate her fingers. I want to give her something for her pain. Vague visions come to mind, images of something long and slender and needlelike flash briefly before my eyes. There must be something I can do, I think, something I can give her, some miracle that I employed when I was younger and the world was older, but I can no longer remember what it is.

I must do more than mask her pain, this much I still know, for infection has set in. The smell becomes stronger as I probe and she screams. *Gang*, I think suddenly: the word for her condition begins with *gang* — but there is another syllable and I cannot recall it, and even if I could recall it I can no longer cure it.

But she must have some surcease from her agony, she believes in my powers and she is suffering and my heart goes out to her. I mumble a chant, half-whispering and half-singing. She thinks I am calling up my ethereal servants from the Netherworld, that I am bringing my magic to bear on the problem, and because she needs to believe in something, in *anything*, because she is suffering such agony, I do not tell her that what I am really saying is God, just this one time, let me remember. Once, years, eons from now, I could have cured her; give me

back the knowledge just for an hour, even for a minute. I did not ask to live backward in Time, but it is my curse and I have willingly borne it — but don't let this poor old woman die because of it. Let me cure her, and then You can ransack my mind and take back my memories.

But God does not answer, and the woman keeps screaming, and finally I gently plaster mud on the wound to keep the flies away. There should be medicine too, it comes in bottles — (bottles? Is that the right word?) — but I don't know how to make it, I don't even remember its color or shape or texture, and I give the woman a root, and mutter a spell over it, and tell her to sleep with it between her breasts and to believe in its healing powers and soon the pain will subside.

She believes me — there is no earthly reason why she should, but I can see in her eyes that she does — and then she kisses my hands and presses the root to her bosom and wanders off, and somehow, for some reason, she *does* seem to be in less discomfort, though the stench of the wound lingers long after she has gone.

Then it is Lancelot's turn. Next week or next month he will slay the Black Knight, but first I must bless his sword. He talks of things we said to each other yesterday, things of which I have no recollection, and I think of things we will say to each other tomorrow.

I stare into his dark brown eyes, for I alone know his secret, and I wonder if I should tell Arthur. I know they will fight a war over it, but I do not remember if I am the catalyst or if Guenivere herself confesses her infidelities, and I can no longer recall the outcome. I concentrate and try to see the future, but all I see is a city of towering steel and glass structures, and I cannot see Arthur or Lancelot anywhere, and then the image vanishes, and I still do not know whether I am to go to Arthur with my secret knowledge or keep my silence.

I realize that it has all happened, that the Round Table and the knights and even Arthur will soon be dust no matter what I say or do, but they are living forward in Time and this is of momentous import to them, even though I have watched it all pass and vanish before my eyes.

Lancelot is speaking now, wondering about the strength of his faith, the purity of his virtue, filled with self-doubt. He is not afraid to die at the hands of the Black Knight, but he is afraid to face his God if the reason for his death lies within himself. I continue to stare at him, this man who daily feels the bond of our friendship growing stronger while I daily find that I know him less and less, and finally I lay a hand on his shoulder and assure him that he will be victorious, that I have had a vision of the Black Knight lying dead upon the field of battle as Lancelot raises his bloody sword in victorious triumph.

Are you sure, Merlin, he asks doubtfully.

I tell him that I am sure. I could tell him more, tell him that I have seen the future, that I am losing it as quickly as I am learning the past, but he has problems of his own — and so, I realize, have I, for as I know less and less I must pave the way for that youthful Merlin who

will remember nothing at all. It is *he* that I must consider — I speak of him in the third person, for I know nothing of him, and he can barely remember me, nor will he know Arthur or Lancelot or even the dark and twisted Modred — for as each of my days passes and Time continues to unwind, he will be less able to cope, less able to define even the problems he will face, let alone the solutions. I must give him a weapon with which to defend himself, a weapon that he can use and manipulate no matter how little he remembers of me, and the weapon I choose is superstition. Where once I worked miracles that were codified in books and natural law, now as their secrets vanish one by one, I must replace them with miracles that bedazzle the eye and terrify the heart, for only by securing the past can I guarantee the future, and I have already lived the future. I hope I was a good man, I would like to think I was, but I do not know. I examine my mind, I try to probe for weaknesses as I probe my patients' bodies, searching for sources of infection, but I am only the sum of my experience, and my experience has vanished and I will have to settle for hoping that I disgraced neither myself nor my God.

After Lancelot leaves I get to my feet and walk around the castle, my mind filled with strange images, fleeting pictures that seem to make sense until I concentrate on them and then I find them incomprehensible. There are enormous armies clashing, armies larger than the entire populace of Arthur's kingdom, and I know that I have seen them, I have actually stood on the battlefield, perhaps I even fought for one side or the other, but I do not recognize the colors they are wearing, and they use weaponry that seems like magic, *true* magic, to me.

I remember huge spacefaring ships, ships that sail the starways with neither canvas nor masts, and for a moment I think that this must surely be a dream, and then I seem to find myself standing at a small window, gazing out at the stars as we rush by them, and I see the rocky surfaces and swirling colors of distant worlds, and then I am back in the castle, and I feel a tremendous sense of poignancy and loss, as if I know that even the dream will never visit me again.

I decide to concentrate, to force myself to remember, but no images come to me, and I begin to feel like a foolish old man. Why am I doing this, I wonder. It was a dream and not a memory, for everyone knows that the stars are nothing but lights that God uses to illuminate the night sky, and they are tacked onto a cloak of black velvet, and the moment I realize this, I can no longer even recall what the starfaring ships looked like, and I know that soon I will not even remember that I once dreamed of them.

I continued to wander the castle, touching familiar objects to reassure myself: this pillar was here yesterday, it will be here tomorrow, it is eternal, it will be here forever. I find comfort in the constancy of physical things, things that are not as ephemeral as my memories, things that cannot be ripped from the Earth as easily as my past has been ripped from me. I stop before the church and read a small plaque. It is written in French, and it says that *This Church was something by Arthur, King of the Britains*. The fourth word makes no sense to

me, and this distresses me, because I have always been able to read the plaque before, and then I remember that tomorrow morning I will ask Sir Hector whether the word means *built* or *constructed*, and he will reply that it means dedicated, and I will know that for the rest of my life.

But now I feel a sense of panic, because I am not only losing images and memories, I am actually losing words, and I wonder if the day will come when people will speak to me and I will understand nothing of what they are saying and will merely stare at them in mute confusion, my eyes as large and gentle and devoid of intelligence as a cow's. I know that all I have lost so far is a single French word, but it distresses me, because in the future I will speak French fluently, as well as German, and Italian, and . . . and I know there is another language, I will be able to speak it and read it and write it, but suddenly it eludes me, and I realize that another ability, another memory, yet another integral piece of myself has fallen into the abyss, never to be retrieved.

I turn away from the plaque, and I go back to my quarters, looking neither right nor left for fear of seeing some building, some artifact that has no place in my memory, something that reeks of permanence and yet is unknown to me, and I find a scullery maid waiting for me. She is young and very pretty, and I will know her name tomorrow, will roll it around on my mouth and marvel at the melody it makes even coming forth from my old lips, but I look at her and the fact dawns upon me that I cannot recall who she is. I hope I have not slept with her — I have a feeling that as I grow younger I will commit more than my share of indiscretions — only because I do not wish to hurt her feelings, and there is no logical way to explain to her than I cannot remember her, that the ecstasies of last night and last week and last year are still unknown to me.

But she is not here as a lover, she has come as a supplicant, she had a child, a son, who is standing in the shadows behind my door, and now she summons him forth and he hobbles over to me. I look down at him, and I see that he is a clubfoot: his ankle is misshapen, his foot is turned inward, and he is very obviously ashamed of his deformity.

Can you help him, asks the scullery maid; can you make him run like other little boys? I will give you everything I have, anything you ask, if you can make him like the other children.

I look at the boy, and then at his mother, and then once more at the boy. He is so very young, he has seen nothing of the world, and I wish that I could do something to help him, but I no longer know what to do. There was a time when I knew, there will come a time when no child must limp through his life in pain and humiliation, I know this is so, I know that someday I will be able to cure far worse maladies than a clubfoot, at least I think I know this, but all that I know for sure is that the boy was born a cripple and will live a cripple and will die a cripple, and there is nothing I can do about it.

You are crying, Merlin, says the scullery maid. Does the sight of my child so offend you?

No, I say, it does not offend me.

Then why do you cry, she asks.

I cry because there is nothing else I can do but cry, I reply. I cry for the life your son will never know, and for the life that I have forgotten.

I do not understand, she says.

Nor do I, I answer.

Does this mean you will not help my son, she asks.

I do not know what it means. I see her face growing older and thinner and more bitter, so I know that she will visit me again and again, but I cannot see her son at all, and I do not know if I will help him, or if I do, exactly *how* I will help him. I close my eyes and concentrate, and try to remember the future. *Is there a cure? Do men still limp on the Moon? Do old men still weep because they cannot help?* I try, but it has slipped away again.

I must think about this problem, I say at last. Come back tomorrow, and perhaps I will have a solution.

You mean a spell, she asks eagerly.

Yes, a spell, I say.

She calls the child to her, and together they leave, and I realize that she will come back alone tonight, for I am sure, at least I am almost sure, that I will know her name tomorrow. It will be Marian, or Miranda, something beginning with an M, or possibly Elizabeth. But I think, I am really almost certain, that she will return, for her face is more real to me now than it was when she stood before me. Or is it that she has not stood before me yet? It gets more and more difficult to separate the events from the memories, and the memories from the dreams.

I concentrate on her face, this Marian or Miranda, and it is another face I see, a lovely face with pale blue eyes and high cheekbones, a strong jaw and long auburn hair. It meant something to me once, this face, I feel a sense of warmth and caring and loss when I see it, but I don't know why. I have an instinctive feeling that this face meant, will mean, more to me than any other, that it will bring me both happiness and sorrow beyond any that I've ever known. There is a name that goes with it, it is not Marion or Miriam (or is it?), I grasp futilely for it, and the more frantically I grasp the more rapidly it recedes.

Did I love her, the owner of this face? Will we bring joy and comfort to one another, will we produce sturdy, healthy children to comfort us in our old age? I don't know, because my old age has been spent, and hers is yet to come, and I have forgotten what she does not yet know.

I concentrate on the image of her face. How will we meet? What draws me to you? There must be a hundred little mannerisms, foibles as often as virtues, that will endear you to

me. Why can I not remember a single one of them? How will you live, and how will you die? Will I be there to comfort you, and once you're lost, who will be there to comfort me? Is it better than I can no longer recall the answers to these questions?

I feel if I concentrate hard enough, things will come back to me. No face was ever so important to me, not even Arthur's, and so I block out all other thoughts and close my eyes and conjure up her face (yes, *conjure*; I am Merlin, am I not?) — but now I am not so certain that it *is* her face. Was the jaw thus or so? Were her eyes really that pale, her hair that auburn? I am filled with doubt, and I imagine her with eyes that were a deeper blue, hair that was lighter and shorter, a more delicate nose — and I realize that I have never seen this face before, that I was deluded by my self-doubts, that my memory has not failed me completely, and I attempt to paint her portrait on the canvas of my mind once again, but I cannot, the proportions are wrong, the colors are askew, and even so I cling to this approximation, for once I have lost it I have lost her forever. I concentrate on the eyes, making them larger, bluer, paler, and finally I am pleased with them, but now they are in a face that I no longer know, her true face as elusive now as her name and her life.

I sit back on my chair and I sigh. I do not know how long I have been sitting here, trying to remember a face — a woman's face, I think, but I am no longer sure — when I hear a cough, and I look up and Arthur is standing before me.

We must talk, my old friend and mentor, he says, drawing up his own chair and seating himself on it.

Must we, I ask.

He nods his head firmly. The Round Table is coming apart, he says, his voice concerned. The kingdom is in disarray.

You must assert yourself and put it in order, I say, wondering what he is talking about.

It's not that easy, he says.

It never is, I say.

I need Lancelot, says Arthur. He is the best of them, and after you he is my closest friend and advisor. He thinks I don't know what he is doing, but I know, though I pretend not to.

What do you propose to do about it, I ask.

He turns to me, his eyes tortured. I don't know, he says. I love them both, I don't want to bring harm to them, but the important thing is not me or Lancelot or the queen, but the Round Table. I built it to last for all eternity, and it must survive.

Nothing lasts for eternity, I say.

Ideals do, he replies with conviction. There is Good and there is Evil, and those who believe in the Good must stand up and be counted.

Isn't that what you have done, I ask.

Yes, says Arthur, but until now the choice was an easy one. Now I do not know which road to take. If I stop feigning ignorance, then I must kill Lancelot and burn the queen at the stake, and this will surely destroy the Round Table. He pauses and looks at me. Tell me the truth, Merlin, he says, would Lancelot be a better king than I? I must know, for if it will save the Round Table, I will step aside and he can have it all — the throne, the queen, Camelot. But I must be sure.

Who can say what the future holds, I reply.

You can, he says. At least, when I was a young man, you told me that you could.

Did I, I ask curiously. I must have been mistaken. The future is as unknowable as the past.

But everyone knows the past, he says. It is the future that men fear.

Men fear the unknown, wherever it may lie, I say.

I think that only cowards fear the unknown, says Arthur. When I was a young man and I was building the Table, I could not wait for the future to arrive. I used to awaken an hour before sunrise and lay there in my bed, trembling with excitement, eager to see what new triumphs each day would bring me. Suddenly he sighs and seems to age before my eyes. But I am not that man anymore, he continues after a thoughtful silence, and now I fear the future. I fear for Guenivere, and for Lancelot, and for the Round Table.

That is not what you fear, I say.

What do you mean, he asks.

You fear what all men fear, I say.

I do not understand you, says Arthur.

Yes, you do, I reply. And now you fear even to admit to your fears.

He takes a deep breath and stares unblinking into my eyes, for he is truly a brave and honorable man. All right, he says at last. I fear for *me*.

That is only natural, I say.

He shakes his head. It does not *feel* natural, Merlin, he says.

Oh, I say.

I have failed, Merlin, he continues. Everything is dissolving around me — the Round Table and the reasons for it. I have lived the best life I could, but evidently I did not live it well enough. Now all that is left to me is my death — he pauses uncomfortably — and I fear that I will die no better than I have lived.

My heart goes out to him, this young man that I do not know but will know someday, and I lay a reassuring hand on his shoulder.

I am a king, he continues, and if a king does nothing else, he must die well and nobly.

You will die well, my lord, I say.

Will I, he asks uncertainly. Will I die in battle, fighting for what I believe when all others have left my side — or will I die a feeble old man, drooling, incontinent, no longer even aware of my surroundings?

I decide to try once more to look into the future, to put his mind at ease. I close my eyes and I peer ahead, and I see not a mindless babbling old man, but a mindless mewling baby, and that baby is myself.

Arthur tries to look ahead to the future he fears, and I, traveling in the opposite direction, look ahead to the future *I* fear, and I realize that there is no difference, that this is the humiliating state in which man both enters and leaves the world, and that he had better learn to cherish the time in between, for it is all that he has.

I tell Arthur again that he shall die the death he wants, and finally he leaves, and I am alone with my thoughts. I hope I can face my fate with the same courage that Arthur will face his, but I doubt that I can, for Arthur can only guess at his while I can see mine with frightening clarity. I try to remember how Arthur's life actually does end, but it is gone, dissipated in the mists of Time, and I realize that there are very few pieces of myself left to lose before I become that crying, mindless baby, a creature of nothing but appetites and fears. It is not the end that disturbs me, but the knowledge of the end, the terrible awareness of it happening to me while I watch helpless, almost an observer at the disintegration of whatever it is that has made me Merlin.

A young man walks by my door and waves to me. I cannot recall ever seeing him before.

Sir Pellinore stops to thank me. For what? I don't remember.

It is almost dark. I am expecting someone, I think it is a woman, I can almost picture her face. I think I should tidy up the bedroom before she arrives, and I suddenly realize that I don't remember where the bedroom is. I must write this down while I still possess the gift of literacy.

Everything is slipping away, drifting on the wind.

Please, somebody, help me.

I'm frightened.



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Mike Resnick is, according to Locus, the trade paper of the science fiction field, the all-time leading award winner, living or dead, for short fiction. Mike is the winner of 5 Hugo Awards, from a record 36 nominations. He has also won the Nebula, and other major awards in the United States, France, Spain, Poland, Catalonia, Croatia, and Japan, and has been short-listed for major awards in England, Italy and Australia.

# Da Capo al Fine

Patrick G. Jameson

Jack put resin to bow, an absence in his eyes.

The violin's neck was warm beneath his callused fingers. He had placed it upon the radiator to push back the midwinter frost, the musician within him fighting to preserve his instrument even as all else lay in ruins. Jack maintained it as he did his own body, by force of habit rather than any true effort of will, and in the past few days even the regular grind of sustenance and sleep had fallen away in the pursuit of his goal.

The object of his fervor sat before him upon a broken stool; a battered messenger bag that held a surcease to sorrow, an end to pain. From its leather folds he withdrew a stack of vellum pages, bound with twine and covered in neat, fluid notation. Settling them atop the music stand, Jack looked hungrily on the rows of notes marching hypnotically from left to right.

*The Song to End the World.*

He had stumbled upon them by accident, or fate, or through some divine act of will by an otherwise disinterested creator. The how was unimportant, it was the why that mattered now. Why it had come to him, why he held the pages, and Jack was convinced he knew the answer.

The notation was of an old style, early 1600's at the latest, and difficult to read. Partial notes and scattered damage to the pages would require significant effort and skill to restore. The positioning shifts of the melody alone would have been difficult for a master, but the rapid sequencing in the central section was nearly impossible for all but the most gifted of players. Jack believed that he alone in all this wretched life possessed both the ability and the will to perform this task, and it burned in him to do so.

When he'd first found the pages, Jack had thought little of it, aside from briefly considering how much they might be sold for. In some idle searching online he had translated its name from the original Italian, *La Canto che Finisce il Terra*, and snorted aloud at the composer's arrogance. Later, numb with boredom and dulled by drink, he had touched bow to string in an effort to delay the black depression that settled upon him every evening.

A stanza later he fell to his knees, filled with the certainty that this was all it claimed to be. He awoke the next morning held by a stony purpose such as he had not felt in years, and set to repairing what was lost from the cracking pages. As he pieced together note and rhythm he saw beneath them the bones of a song far older than the renaissance, more ancient

than the lyre or lute that were the progenitors of the instrument he now held. What genius had discovered this pattern interwoven with the fabric of the creation Jack did not know, the signature smeared by age to a black mark of ink.

It had taken three months of labor, testing and trying and practicing until he was again in the form he had fallen so far from. Three months until he was capable of bringing the full glory of this masterpiece into existence. For this all-consuming mission he had sold what remained of their home, his home, to keep himself alive as the snows of winter fell.

So now he sat within the bare gray walls of a slum husk in the poorest part of town. He had found the former resident departed at the end of a needle, having rigged the radiator to give some spare heat and then shuffled free the mortal coil by his own hand, drawn away into the darkness by whatever drugged pleasure had been his life's vice. Jack had removed the man, a distant part of his mind feeling pity for the wretch — one more reason to make certain that the source of such misery was finally, and permanently, removed.

To this purpose he took up his bow, and read again the small note he had translated below the unknown composer's name.

*To bring forth the end, one must start at the beginning*

And so he began to play.

As before, when the first long, slow notes flowed forth from within his violin, the light began to drain from the room. The sun's watery winter rays grew weaker every moment, leaving Jack in a lonely dimness that seemed to have neither distance nor time. He could not read the notes before him, but it did not matter. This passage he knew by heart, as it echoed the yawning hollow he carried within his chest.

With almost immeasurable grace the tempo began to increase, throwing out swirling bright notes to burn like errant embers against the lightless melody. Jack drew breath in deep, preparing for the rise he knew to be coming, tears slipping from beneath closed eyes. As he burst into the swelling harmony he was pulled again to that moment so long ago, when his son first woke to him and smiled. The melody alighted upon days of pure life and light, the softly formed vibrato a child's quick blue eyes as he laughed aloud at a world still new. Fresh air streamed through the window cracks, bringing with it the impossible scent of dandelion and fresh cut grass.

The memory sunk bitter claws into his soul, tearing old wounds anew, and Jack surged on into the coming fall. As he forced such thoughts from his mind, the music slowed once more, dropped down in octave, and brought to mind a freshly cooling world. The wild heat of youth abandoned for a more stable and dependable base. Unbidden, it called forth in Jack's mind his own adolescence, playing the slow progression of a young man locked away from the sun and forced to try and create beauty. Within that darkness he had found a love for his art, but a violent love that carried with it an edge too sharp to hold, the edge that would drive him long past reason in pursuit of utter perfection.

Still slower dipped the song, all but coming to a halt as the steady rhythm of new formed seas washed in and out against unnamed shores. The tune held in it a potential to stay in stasis, a steady erosion of sound, pulsing forth for eternity. Yet Jack opened his eyes now to see the page before him and brought forth the first flutter of life. It was nearly unnoticeable at first, a gentle addition to the whole, yet distinctly different and on a time scale entirely removed from the stately dance of continents. As the newcomer grew into longer pulls of the bow, Jack heard the soft murmur of a living heart, and the starting notes of love.

He had seen her first in the subway station, a passing pause in the crowd opening to create a perfect window. Jack had seen her face and been struck by a rare moment, in which every fiber of his being cried out to meet her, to hear her speak his name, and then was crushed as she disappeared between doors sliding closed. A day that had been fine turned sour in that moment, and he left lovelorn for a woman who never saw his face. When she had gotten in the same elevator later that afternoon he very nearly died, and departed with a phone number he'd fervently prayed was not fake.

Their romance flashed before him as the notes climbed to the higher scales' unclaimed territory, rising from a thriving sea. She had been a whirlwind that he merely followed, feeling blessed for every kiss and smile that touched upon him, never daring to believe she'd stay. Jack tumbled through the music, barely keeping pace as it rose in ferocity, sending wild spirals of song out into the room now bathed in vibrant color. Then suddenly, brutally, inevitably, it ceased.

A single note survived, wavering on without clear direction or purpose. A man who Jack no longer knew stood before two graves, long past when the stars emerged to shine their dispassionate, lifeless light. As notes of hungry cold dripped from his violin, Jack was devoured from within by guilt, still as potent and deadly a year later. He had not been there. He had been away, performing for a young orchestra, consenting to step down from his ivory tower because they'd offered him a lengthy, ego-stroking solo. Jack had been drinking champagne in bed when he had arrived, the man who took his family away. He'd been safe and warm when their eyes went dark. Now his heart stayed locked in bitter ice as the music began to rise, reclaiming some of its lost fierce quality, and he welcomed what came next.

The disparate notes coalesced into a central theme, a repeating pattern of glorying highs and grotesque lows. These grew in number and strength, dragging down the song into a dirge of broken souls. Jack reveled in the despair, matching it with his own, and could see it begin to work its change. In the corner of his vision the stool began to fall apart, its component atoms disentangling to fall away as barely visible dust. All around him entropy was given free reign, exponentially increasing as fine particles swirled upon the breeze.

Jack almost missed a note as the wall beside him collapsed inwards, but never stumbled as his violin poured forth all the atrocities of man. Soon the sky was visible between latticed steel, and, though the winter wind cut down upon him, Jack felt none of its

sharpened bite, his eyes blazing with the madness of grief. Already the building crumbled as he saw before him bloody fields and poisoned skies, camps of death and clouds of decimation. He would do it, he would end all of the suffering that had occurred or ever would, he would put an end to pain and leave this world as the serene nothing from which it was formed.

As blood-red rust rained down upon him the roaring wind tore the page away to reveal another. Without a thought Jack leapt into its melody, but did not recognize its tune. It struck him odd, he could not have missed a page. Night after night he had poured over every stanza, every note, there was none of it he did not know as intimately as a lover. Yet here it was before him, and from his strings soared forth its song.

It was an antithesis to his self-righteous fury, a soothing balm to the pain within. It was hope in the darkness, generosity in need, tender care to the sick and the frightened. In those gentle sounds Jack saw his wife's bright eyes, heard his son's sleeping breath, and they were with him still. These parts of his world that had been torn away were returned by memory, held by thought, and if he had cried before, Jack could hardly see for weeping now. The layered hate around his heart fell away before the onslaught of a love both pure and sweet, casting him to his knees as he reached the page's end.

In a ring of desolation where once a building stood, a man knelt in the gathered dust. An errant breeze stirred the page before him, and hummed along strings gone silent. The December chill made mist of his breath and froze his tears upon the ground. He'd played *The Song To End The World*.

But left the final note unspoken.



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Patrick G. Jameson is a writer working out of Minneapolis, Minnesota. He wrote his first Mary Sue story at the age of twelve, with things having improved at least moderately from there. His heroes include Malcolm Reynolds and anyone who shares their beer.

# The Reanimators

J. Kenneth Sargeant

The three dead guys in my squad kept making too much noise. They shuffled their feet, dragging tattered boots through the underbrush, and every loud rustle, every crunch from their clumsy steps made the rest of us cringe. The living had dark stains growing down the armpits and backs of our shirts despite the cool air. There was a lot of armed resistance in these mountains — people who hated the war, sheltered re-sols, and would consider it a great moral victory to wipe out a Reanimator Squad. I'd briefed everyone before the insertion, but you never knew how much dead men really understood. They didn't blink or nod or grunt. They just stared with eyes as black and empty as the graves we stole them from.

I held up my fist and brought the column to a halt.

Johnson, my second-in-command, moved up the column and crouched down at my side with his rifle ready. "What's wrong, Captain?"

"Not sure, yet," I told him. I nodded toward the trail ahead of us. We were taking a back route to our target, following an old logging road that wound its way higher into the mountains. In front of us the road curved past a rock formation, a field of boulders that had dribbled down from the mountain over the past millennium. I wasn't getting a happy feeling. "Take Travell and scout around those rocks."

Johnson glared at me. "Send the damned re-sols, Rick. Why do we keep resurrecting the things if we're still taking all the risks?"

I grabbed Johnson's shirt and pulled him in close. He stank of four days of sweat and fear and proximity to dead things. "I need someone scouting ahead who can actually think. Yours is the closest I've got here to an actual functioning fucking brain, so get moving!"

Johnson pulled away, angry, but he obeyed orders. He shoved Private Travell out in front of him and crept down the trail, rifle barrel sweeping back and forth.

I didn't really blame him. We all had the same question. Just what in the hell were the re-sols for? What good were they other than getting good soldiers very dead? They couldn't fight worth shit. The only reason I had them along was that someone with too many stars on their chest thought it hypocritical for a Reanimator Squad to go on a mission without a few reanimated soldiers along for the ride. All I could do was say yessir and shove some of the rotting meat onto the chopper with us. Johnson follows my orders, I follow the General's orders, and the re-sols ignore us all. Makes me wonder sometimes who the real zombies are.

My unease paid off. Johnson and Travell tripped the ambush. Travell was killed right off, a machine gun burst catching him square in the chest and blowing right through his body armor. The rebels had to move out of cover to engage us or it might have been much worse.

As it was, the fight was over in less than a minute. For some reason they stopped firing halfway through the battle. I thought I saw one of them put his hands up, but by the time I thought about telling my men to cease fire, it was over. We don't have much use for live prisoners, anyway.

In addition to Travell, another one of my squad was blown in half and a re-sol lost its leg. I watched the stupid zombie bastard hop around on one foot, carrying its dismembered leg flung over its shoulder. Its rifle was nowhere to be found.

Great. Just fucking great.

"Six resistance dead," Johnson reported. "Three are reanimatable."

"Travell?"

Johnson made a sick face. "He's one of our own, sir. Can't we let him be?"

I'd always liked Travell. The thought of having to stick a needle in his ear and watch him shuffle along, gray and vacant-eyed made me a little sick too. "We have our orders."

"Fucking orders," Johnson scowled and snapped a crisp salute. "Yes sir, Private Travell is reanimatable, sir. He'll make a good rifle-toting reanimated zombie fuck, sir!"

I sighed and broke open a fresh case of syringes.



Our mission had two parts. We were supposed to be marching toward an old battlefield, looking for intact corpses. Research said there might be a few thousand buried there, a gold mine of dead bodies. The primary objective, as always for a Reanimator Squad, was to create reanimated soldiers, or re-sols. The brass called it 'recruiting'. Not enough living men to fuel the war machine? Well, fuck it, lets get us some dead ones. They're almost just as good.

Except, of course, they weren't. I eyeballed the one-legged re-sol. It was trying to put its leg back on like it was pulling up a sock and didn't seem to understand why the leg kept falling back off. It was messy, and the stupid bastard still hadn't found its rifle. Our medic hadn't taken a look yet. If it couldn't be repaired we were down one re-sol. I could make plenty more, but I'd be a lot happier if I didn't have to use a shovel to get them.

Our secondary objective was to ferret out some of the resistance in these mountains. Lots of hippie, anti-war, "free-the-zombies" dickheads lived out here. If that were all they were, there probably wouldn't *be* a secondary objective, but more and more of their protests involved car bombs and mountain ambushes to prove the war was really our fault.

Any resistance we were able to reanimate was a bonus.

"Leg won't reattach," my medic told me. "Flesh too decayed. It needs a good week to repair itself."

"Shit."

Of course we didn't have a week.

"I can do it if you want," the medic said.

"No. I'll do it." I walked over to the re-sol. It was leaning against a tree, still fucking with its leg. I pulled my pistol and thumbed the safety. The slug took it right between the eyes and sprayed putrid brain matter all over the tree. Gray chunks, laced with a million nanomachines hidden to the naked eye, dripped down the bark.

Six months ago, it had been a living creature, one of my most trusted men. He had kids. I think. It was hard to keep them all straight anymore. The other re-sols all stopped what they were doing to stare at me. I wanted to yell at them to fuck off and go back to work, but I didn't want the other men to see a couple of stupid re-sols getting under my skin. They're trained to react to gunshots is all.

That's all.

Still crept the fuck out of me.

"Let's get moving," I told everyone. "Let's find these graves so we can go home."

Travell, or the mass of flesh and bone that used to be Travell, picked up its rifle and fell in line. It never took its eyes off the re-sol I'd just shot.

"How much do you think they feel, Captain?" Johnson asked me.

That was the endless debate among those lucky few rich enough to have avoided that draft, smart enough not to have enlisted, or wounded enough to escape the reactivations. How much did the re-sols feel? I looked at the spray of brain matter against the tree.

How much do any of us feel these fucking days?



We found the graveyard two days later, on the slope of a hill just outside the ruins of an old ski resort town. It was one of the early battles in the war against our 'capitalist empire', perhaps meant as a symbol, something about destroying leisure and decadence or some such shit. No one really remembers anymore. All anyone except the rebels cared about these days was that the front line was far away, and that the government and Reanimator Squads like mine churned out more and more re-sols to make sure it stayed away.

The graves themselves were nothing more than mounds of earth heaped over the dead, mass pits that had been dug with heavy machinery, the most efficient and impersonal way to deal with lots of dead people. I'd learned to spot a mass grave at a glance over the past couple of years.

We broke out the shovels and started digging. There were a lot of things that sucked about being on a Reanimator Squad, but digging up bodies deep in the backcountry had to be the worst of the lot. It was hot, muddy, and smelly work with nothing but a shovel and the strength of your back. The re-sols weren't much help here either, managing one good shovelful every hour or so.

The Travell re-sol stood there and pecked at the ground.

"Get your ass moving, you stupid hunk of meat," Johnson said, jabbing Travell with the handle of his shovel. Johnson sighed and pulled out a cigarette. When he flicked the lighter, Travell took several steps back, the most it had moved all morning. They were programmed to stay away from open flames. They didn't have enough juice in them, the nanomachines kept them just lubed enough to walk, and they tended to burn like dusty, rot-scented candle wicks.

"I don't know why they insist on sending them out with us," the medic said. "They aren't made for digging."

"They aren't made for much of anything," Johnson said. "As far as I can tell, they only have one real job. To remind me I need to see it coming."

"See what coming?"

"*It*. Death. I need to stay sharp enough, stay alive just long enough to put a round through my brainpan," he tapped his head with fingers shaped like the barrel of a pistol. "I don't want to come back as one of them. I'm not spending eternity digging holes in the fucking ground."

My shovel struck something. I reached down and pulled up an arm. It looked like a blackened stick, with the tatters of a sleeve still attached like flannel colored leaves. I tossed it aside.

"Got something," another soldier called out. "Couple of legs, looks like. Anyone need a spare?"

"Looks like you shot our re-sol too soon, Captain," Johnson snorted.

Finding good bodies was harder than it would seem. The war didn't leave many of them intact. For the next hour we dug up pieces. We created a trash pit for the unwanted bits and started a pile. We kept a heavy supply of phosphorous grenades on hand, good for torching large piles of body parts that can't be used for anything other than breeding diseases, and we popped a few into the pit before we left.



Around noon the next day we finally stumbled across the motherlode — hundreds of corpses piled on top of each other, all reanimatable. We'd reanimate twenty or thirty of them ourselves, enough labor to help us clear a landing area for the choppers, then call in for reinforcements. With a little luck, the army could have a couple extra battalions within the week. It was a big find and the men were excited. Sometimes we got a few days of leave if we hit it big.

We laid out the best corpses and I pulled out the reanimator kits. This part bothered me for some reason. I don't mind so much making them dead, but I always get a little queasy just before bringing them back. It's not that I'm convinced there is some special place for people after they die, but every time I get ready to reanimate I have to wonder... what if there was? What if these people were sitting in some paradise, sipping fruity drinks and staring at perky angel tits, and we're yanking them away just to be our zombie soldiers? That sort of shot the whole idea of being good in life so you could be rewarded later all to shit.

"What do you think happens after you die, Johnson?"

"You get a needle jammed in your fucking ear and it starts all over again," Johnson said, glaring at me.

The needle crunched as it penetrated the eardrum and drove into the brain. I pushed the plunger and injected a pale protein that contained millions of nanomachines. The busy little machines would go to work repairing and reprogramming. Johnson and I went down the line. It took about an hour for the first effects to be noticed. A little twitch here and there. It would be a couple more hours before they were on their feet.

While we waited, I wandered around the hill, looking for other sites I could direct the diggers toward. There were at least two others that looked promising. Travell followed me, keeping guard like a dutiful soldier. I'd made it just out of sight of the main dig and was marking a site with a yellow dig flag when a rebel burst out of the trees and ran at me, his rifle aimed dead center. My own rifle was still lying back next to my shovel.

"Shoot him," I yelled at Travell, trying to draw my pistol. "Shoot him! Shoot him!"

I watched the rebel run toward me, waiting to see the bright muzzle flash that would be the last sensation I ever had... until I'd feel a needle crunch into my ear. But the rebel surprised me. He stopped a few feet away and lowered his rifle. "My God. You really alive?"

*What the fuck?*

"Uh, Captain Richard Fitzpatrick, Third Battalion Reanimators," I told him, trying not to sound unmanned. My knees were shaking. "You almost got yourself shot there, buddy."

"Didn't mean to frighten you. We just didn't think there was anyone else alive out here," he gave a nervous glance at Travell and moved closer. "We thought the re-sols had finally..." A loud roar drowned out his last word as his brains splattered all over my face. Travell just stared over the smoking barrel of his rifle, unblinking.

Better late than never, I guess. Fucking re-sols.

The rebel, or whatever the hell he'd been, seemed to be alone, but I went back to the men and put them on high alert. As soon as the new re-sols were moving around we'd get to clearing a landing zone. I wanted this place under heavy guard by this time tomorrow. I was definitely not getting a happy feeling here.

I picked up my rifle, went into my tent, and took a few deep breaths.

I was surprised to find I was still shaking. I'd been shot at many times, but for some reason I couldn't get the image of a needle out of my mind. Would I remember anything? When the squad reanimated me, would I remember that I was once their Captain, or would I just shuffle along until the new Captain splattered my brains all over a tree somewhere? Maybe Johnson had it right after all. A round through my brainpan and a one-way trip to the afterlife.

"Captain!" of the men called. His voice cracked. "I think you'd better see this."

I swore. Can't a man get a moment, here? I popped my head out of the tent. "What the hell has gotten into you?"

The man pointed, his finger trembling.

Re-sols. An army of them.

One of them, he must have died somewhere in his fifties because a little gray hair still clung to his head, stood only a few paces away, aiming a rifle right at my head. I could only stand there, stunned, as Travell shuffled over to me and pulled my own rifle from my hands. They led us back to the main dig and within minutes, the entire squad was captured without a shot fired.

Travell handed me a shovel. The gray-haired re-sol pointed to the graves and mimed digging motions.

They wanted us to dig up the rest of the bodies.

Fuck me.



They kept us in our tents when we weren't digging, which wasn't very often. We'd been digging for five days, and hundreds of corpses were stacked alongside the ditches. There were only four of us left from my squad and a dozen other men, once mountain rebels. The rest of my men had died of exhaustion or starvation. Finally the re-sols had tossed us into the tents to regain our strength. They'd left us a few meal packs, but all the rest of our equipment was gone, dumped by the re-sols into the trash pit.

"Welcome to the mountains, Captain," an emaciated rebel with curly black hair said to me. The man extended a hand heavily calloused from digging. "Rudolph Halloway."

"Captain Fitzpatrick. How long have you been here like this?"

"Almost from the beginning," Halloway said. "A few months."

"What happened?"

He shrugged, his eyes almost as gray and hollow as the re-sols. "We thought we were helping the re-sols, sheltering them here in the mountains, protecting them from guys like you. I don't know what changed. A few months ago we found them trying to dig up dead bodies and reanimate them."

"Jesus," Johnson said. "I didn't know they could do that."

"We didn't either, but it worked," Halloway said. "They started increasing their numbers. We tried to stop them, but they turned hostile. There were about a thousand of us living in these mountains once. I guess there's only a hundred or so left."

"Serves you right, you son of a bitch," Johnson told him. "For fighting against your own country."

"Remember that loyalty when you get a needle punched into your head," Halloway replied. "The only difference between you Reanimator Squads and these re-sols is they don't bother waiting until you're all the way dead."

"They stick you when you're *alive*?!" Johnson turned white.

Halloway just nodded his head in the direction of one of his men, lying on the floor, curled into a ball. He hadn't eaten yet. His buddy crouched near him and held food up to his lips, trying to get him to eat, trying to hide him from the re-sols. It didn't work. Several re-sols edged near, watching. It went on for about an hour before the re-sols dragged him out of the tents, his heels leaving trenches in the dirt.

"Poor bastard. I knew he wasn't going to last the day," Halloway said. "They usually don't remember to feed us, and when you get too tired or hungry, when you slow down in any way, then you get stuck." He gave us an accusing look. "You should have let them stay dead. They deserved that much at least."

Johnson was still staring at the heel marks in the dirt.

There were actually two distinct types of nanomachine suspended in the protein we used. One was designed to repair damaged tissue, but they would be inert when introduced to healthy tissue. The other was designed to form a new neural network in the brain that acted as a command station for the re-sol. It was assumed the brain was no longer functioning when it went to work. What would it do to a live brain?

We heard the man begging from our place inside the tent, then the begging turned to screams.

It was a long time before the screaming stopped.



The re-sols gave us the night to rest, then we were back at work on the graves at daybreak. My squad was exhausted, but I could only imagine what Holloway and the others had been through. We'd only been working a few hours when another one of his men dropped. This time we watched first hand as the gray-haired re-sol produced a syringe and stuck it in its own arm, drawing out some pale liquid.

The fallen man screamed as the needle punctured his eardrum and the thin spike drove millions of little machines into his brain.

"Programmed to replicate," our medic said. "Of course."

"What?"

"It's how a re-sol repairs damage to itself. The nanomachines are programmed to replicate. It must be what's driving the re-sols. Somewhere along the way they just forgot to *stop*."

Programmed to replicate. Jesus.

Over the next few days, the men fell one by one. I watched Holloway get weaker and weaker until he too was stuck. Soon it was just Johnson and I and a couple of rebels left. None of us would last a week and I was pretty sure Johnson only had a day or two left. I watched him shuffle along as we took armloads of body parts and dumped them into the trash pit. Poor bastard.

He must have seen it in my eyes. He stared at me for a moment, then started backing away, crying. "I don't want to be reanimated, Captain. Oh god."

He stumbled over something in the trash pit and landed deep in the gore. He pulled himself to his feet and glanced around, afraid the re-sols would drag him off for tripping. Then he noticed something in the pit and stopped. My eyes followed his.

It was one of our squad's gear bags.

Johnson gave a tug on the flap, and I could see some food, several grenades, and the butt of a pistol. Johnson looked up to see where the re-sols were, then glanced back down at the pistol. I knew what he was thinking. One through the brainpan.

"Johnson," I said.

Nothing.

"Johnson!"

He turned toward me. "I can shoot you first, Captain. They won't get either of us. I promise."

"The grenades."

Johnson nodded, but he wasn't really listening. He already had the pistol in his hand and was working the safety.

"Johnson," I said carefully. "The grenades. Re-sols *burn*."

He blinked.

"We can get out of here."

I pushed the pistol down out of my face and reached for the gear bag. Some of the re-sols were noticing that we weren't working. We had to go now or we'd lose our chance.

I popped the tab on a couple of the grenades. I lobbed one right in the middle of the tents, and the other right in the middle of the re-sols. The searing white light blinded us for a second, then it was chaos.

Johnson started firing the pistol as the fire blazed along the tents, caught up the corpses not yet reanimated, and started licking its way up the trees. A few re-sols stumbled out of the burning tents, lurching around blindly as flames engulfed them. The other re-sols shrank back.

I grabbed Johnson and dragged him into the woods. I yelled for the rebels to follow us, but they only stood and watched us run, watched as the re-sols lumbered in pursuit. A few stray shots thunked into the trees near us, then the re-sols were out of eyesight.

We could still run faster than them. We had that at least.



"Where's the rest of your squad?" the gunner shouted in my ear.

We'd run from the re-sols for two days, afraid to sleep, afraid to stop, until we managed to get to our primary extraction site. I shoved Johnson into the chopper ahead of me. He stiffened and resisted, but I pushed him in anyway. When I jumped into the seat next to him, I saw why.

A re-sol was sitting across from us.

"Where's the rest of your squad?" the gunner repeated.

The re-sol shifted slightly in its seat, adjusting its rifle.

It was just a coincidence, I told myself. It couldn't know.

Johnson licked his lips. "Dead. Bomb hit us. Nothing left to reanimate."

"That right?" The gunner looked at me. "Rebels?"

I glanced at the re-sol but it was staring, expressionless, out into the treetops. I nodded.

The gunner shrugged. "Tough luck."

The pilot turned to say something to the gunner. The gunner nodded and leaned back toward us. "Just heard over the radio. Another Reanimator Squad was lost over to the east. I guess they found a massive grave, a couple hundred thousands or so, then we lost communication. Command wants us to fly out and take a look."

A couple hundred thousand. Programmed to replicate.

Fuck me.

"The war could really change with that many re-sols," the gunner shouted.

Halloway was right. We should have let them stay dead.

I clutched the gear bag and looked at Johnson. We still had a couple of phosphorous grenades left.

Johnson leaned out the helicopter to puke.



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J. Kenneth Sargeant resides in Ohio, but calls the mountains of Washington State home. When he is not writing, he teaches self-defense tactics and preparedness skills to all ages. Writing and martial arts have been passions of his since he was a child, and he has worked hard to be able to spend his days following his dreams. His short stories have also appeared in *Paradox* and *Strange Horizons*.

# A Concert of Flowers

Kate O'Connor

The packed concert hall was far from silent. People whispered to their neighbors, fancy clothing rustled, jewelry chimed. In the wings, William Reis waited, the sound of his rapidly thumping heart filling his ears.

A sharp tug on his collar dragged his eyes down. Emily's pale hands, beautiful still though her skin was wrinkled and growing translucent, straightened his lapels. The charcoal gray suit belonged to her second son. It was tight across the middle and a little long in the leg but he had forgotten that he would need concert attire until the last minute.

"I'll be in the front row. Don't puke." She wrinkled her nose at him and shoved him gently towards the stage. He clutched the ring in his pocket, making sure it was still there. He thought about asking her then but she was gone before he could unstick his lips. Stomach fluttering, he walked out to his place at center stage instead.

William watched the house lights go down through the slim inch between the rich red velvet hem of the curtain and the satiny, dark-tinted stage floor. His head spun and he transferred the slender remote between hands, wiping first one sweating palm than the other on his baggy slacks.

With a ponderous creak, the heavy curtain rose and he was momentarily blinded by the spotlights. They hadn't seemed so bright during the lighting test. He blinked stupidly for a long minute before the uncomfortable rustling of the audience broke through his surging panic. He frantically keyed the initial button on the sweat slick remote.

There was a soft hiss as the clear casing of the first stasis jar fell open. The slim-leafed plant anchored in its deep pot trembled as air rushed in. Its single bud exploded into bloom even before the casing had touched the table and a note, high, clear, perfectly pure rang through the dark. It brought tears to William's eyes. Almost as good as hearing it for the first time.



The equipment on his back was heavy and getting heavier by the hour. He pushed up the sleeves of his shirt again, pulling the sweaty garment away from his chest and flapping it a few times. Surveying was a solitary job. One day this field or one like it would be the site of

the new spaceport. Ships would come and shops would spring up, followed by restaurants, businesses, and apartments. One day it would be a bustling city.

Now it was just one more muddy meadow to slog through on one more far-flung colonial world. The climate was pleasantly temperate but there was an odd purplish cast to most of the vegetation. A few scrubby trees were growing to the south, barely more than bushes twisting up through the waist high mauve spotted grass. Lumpy amber clouds were building in the distance, threatening to force their way over the low, rounded mountain range.

William stopped on a slight rise, shrugging off the shoulder straps and easing his equipment down. He fumbled through setting it up, hurrying a bit as he tried to keep half an eye on the weather. Tulandra was his second assignment and his first solo job.

The leg of the theodolite tripod slipped just as William finished calibrating it. Cursing loudly, he kicked at a patch of sturdy, indigo-green plants. Their thick stalks rebounded easily and one of the baseball sized buds burst open, stunning William to silence as a clean note rang through the open field. He had never heard anything like it. Cautious and disbelieving, he nudged another bud with the mud caked toe of his boot. The plant trembled and the blossom opened, unfurling crimson petals as it added its note to the no longer desolate air.



Easing away from center stage, William pushed a couple of buttons. Two tones rang out together, wavering delicately as they adjusted to each other and found balance. As he keyed the next sequence, the sound swelled. William watched as a series of jars in front of him collapsed and the plants within burst into salmon and ruby and violet bloom.

The singing flowers of Tulandra had two notes each. One when their petals opened for the first time, the hollow pistils sucking air all the way to the plant's roots and vibrating the tiny filaments inside the stem. The second came when the stem's integrity was compromised and the stored air rushed out. Each leaf had microscopic protuberances that caught the frequencies emitted by the other flowers. The invisible vibrations would cause the plant to tighten or relax the internal filaments, adjusting them until its note matched the harmonics of the flowers around it.



"They're called harmony lilies, son. They're everywhere this time of the rotation." The farmer's lips twitched as he poked at the bruised, drying samples spread on the heavily stained bar. William bit the inside of his cheek, trying to ignore the smirks and shared looks the watering hole's few occupants were exchanging. Galactic Survey's guidebooks were notoriously incomplete. William didn't know anything about the local flora and fauna beyond what was supposedly edible and what might be poisonous.

"What makes them sing like that?" William pressed on, squinting a bit in the dim light of the dilapidated bar. Being the butt of the joke would be worth it if he could just learn a bit more about the strange plants that had kept him company on his long survey circuit.

"Dunno." The farmer shrugged and turned back to his drink. William scooped up the remains of his carefully collected samples and walked out, leaving his untouched drink sitting on the rough wood of the bar.



"You made an intergalactic call to tell me about *flowers*? Seriously, Will, this must be costing you at least a week's salary." Emily's disbelief came through the static with perfect clarity.

He huffed in annoyance. Calling her might have been a dumb idea. Her husband hated him — mostly because of how easily Emily talked to him — but she was the only one who might possibly get it. "Look, I know it's silly. It's just..." he broke off, not sure how to put words to his jumbled up feelings.

"It's caught your interest." Emily filled in for him. He could picture her curled up in the faux leather chair in her bedroom, the phone tucked between chin and shoulder while she folded laundry or skimmed through clips on the latest fashions. "Nothing catches your interest. Tramping around all those different planets and all you see is how similar everything is to everything else. Except for this. So now you don't want to leave. That right?"

William grunted an affirmative. It sounded stupid laid out that simply but he couldn't exactly deny it.

"So don't leave." Classic Emily solution.

"No money." William shifted uncomfortably. He didn't like the little thrill of excitement that shot through him when he thought about staying on Tulandra. It was too complicated. There were other things he wanted more. One other thing anyway.

"Hah. You have enough to call me but I get the drift. So make a few more credits off of Survey and then go back. Better yet, get a degree or something so they have to pay you to go back."

"It's just a plant, Em. Not worth changing my life over."

"Then why are you still talking about it? Besides, you don't like your life anyway. If you like this, even a little bit, it's better than what you have now."

"You might get bored without me." William smiled as he said it. Boredom had been Emily's chief complaint forever.

"I'll have Charlie and the baby to keep me occupied."

"You're pregnant?" And just that simply his daydreams of earning enough money to come back and sweep her off her feet went out the window. A husband she wasn't quite happy with was one thing but this meant she would have a family of her own. That was different. "Con-congratulations."

"I'm not naming him after you." She laughed, sounding relaxed and happy.

"You should see it out here, Em. I found a whole field singing all at once. All the flowers were shooting pollen into the air and with the sun shining through everything sparkled. You've never heard anything like it, like the entire world is trying to tell you something." His chest was tight. He didn't want to talk about her new family.

"Send me pictures. I couldn't stand to be that far from the nearest flushing toilet, especially these days." She was waiting for him to laugh but he couldn't manage.

"I'm going to find a way to stay."

"Good for you. You'll make it work." There was a question at the end. She was wondering what was wrong.

"I'm out of time. Talk to you later sometime. Bye, Em." For once, he didn't tell her he would miss her.



William couldn't see the faces of the audience but he felt their anticipation with each flick of his fingers. He thought he could just hear the rush of gasped breaths and the crinkle of hands clenching programs under the music of his lilies. They wouldn't have seen anything like this before. There had never been something like this. He was the first, the only.



"...and the seeds in the next planting are an outcross with old Terran *Lilium amoenum*. They should be putting up shoots any day now. The possibilities are really exciting." William

trailed off as the politely blank look on Emily's face finally broke through his enthusiasm and registered as the boredom it no doubt signified. "Sorry, Em. Too much of a good thing, huh?"

"No, no. I love hearing about your work." She gave him the smile he had seen her use all too frequently on her second husband before she dropped him. It was the one that meant she had checked out of the conversation almost before it had begun. They had been friends since elementary school. Quite often they knew each other better than either liked to remember.

"It's okay. That's all there is to it, really. How're the kids?" William smothered a sigh as she leapt at the change in topic. Five years working for Survey to earn the money for college, struggling through courses his haphazard early education had left him ill-equipped to deal with, masters, doctorate in alien botany and for what? Twelve greenhouses that were his life. Countless dusty papers published on obscure botany nets. A few equally dusty awards celebrating his 'landmark' contributions to the field.

All he had was twenty years of research that made his friends and family wince whenever he mentioned any of it. When it came right down to it, nothing he had ever done made people care about the thing he had built his life around. Even Emily. She was single again. He'd been waiting for that but he just couldn't see her coming back to Tulandra with him and he couldn't stop his research now. It was the only thing he had to take pride in.



The air in William's small greenhouse workshop was moist and warm. He sat perched on the edge of his rickety old chair, humming under his breath to the robust violet lily that was in the process of blooming. The frequency it was emitting didn't change. Not that he had really expected it to. No matter what he had tried, he hadn't managed to find a sound that affected them besides their own. Even recordings didn't work. They only modified their songs for each other.

Something tickled at the back of his brain. Maybe recordings were the problem. If people could just hear them the same way he did...

He wanted people to understand, to see what he saw in the little plants he had devoted his life to. It didn't seem possible. In the entirety of the galaxy a few bits of foliage weren't likely to garner much notice.

But there was something to the idea. Funding and sponsors might take awhile to drum up but he if he could be persistent enough maybe the idea would catch hold. A concert with flowers as the star performers was surely different enough to spark interest. He got to his feet, ignoring the twinge in his back. He had some calls to make.



The phone buzzed. William flipped it over, checking the ID out of habit. There weren't that many people he cared to speak to on a warm spring evening. The little window read: Remmis Entertainment Productions. He dropped the phone and had to lunge after it. There were a few contributors waiting to see if he could get real support but not enough willing to make a go of it without a big name backer. REP was just about his last hope. Everyone else had said no.

"William Reis speaking." He could have kicked himself for the tremor in his voice.

"Hello, Dr. Reis, this is Sam Hallerman from REP. I'm calling in regards to your proposal." William's heart sank. The tone of voice was all too familiar as Sam continued. "It's an interesting idea but we don't think we can find an audience for something so... inanimate."

"It's not like that." William's pulse raced frantically. There had to be something he could say, some way to explain more clearly. He couldn't take hearing 'no' again.

"Thank you for your time, Dr. Reis. Good luck." The man's voice was dismissive and impersonal. It made William's hands clench.

"Wait." William's mind raced. "Why don't I fly some of your guys out here? Let them see what it would really be like. On my dollar. What do you think? You've got nothing to lose." It would break him financially. Intergalactic travel was expensive. Even if he picked up as many teaching gigs as he could get it wouldn't be enough. He would have to borrow money — money there was no way to pay back if this didn't pay off. He could lose everything.

There was a long silence on the other end of the line and William tried to squash the stray stab of hope running him through. Finally Sam came back with the answer. "All right then. But no promises, no contract. Most likely we'll still say no."



Relaxing into the performance, William pushed the button to put the program on automatic and stuck the remote in his jacket pocket. As more and more blossoms burst open, he picked up two pairs of pruning shears that had been lying on the table waiting for him. The sharp edges glinted in the harsh lighting.

He walked forward to the front table. His heart had finally steadied. They sounded so beautiful, better than he had imagined. The flowers in front of him were silent now. On

average a note lasted 4.16 minutes with the longest he had measured at 7.83 minutes. That one had been an old plant with an extensive root system.



The pack on his back had gotten lighter over the long years he had walked these fields. Now all it carried was a carefully tuned frequency meter and a spade. He towed a hovercart of empty stasis jars behind him. Four years into his research, William had discovered that the harmony lilies emitted an inaudible hum just before the buds popped. That discovery hadn't come to much back then but it made his plan for collecting concert specimens easier.

The timing had to be flawless. For the performance to work, they had to be placed in stasis just moments before they bloomed. The spring breeze was cool against his forehead. He'd had hair to cover that once. Sitting stiffly down in the purple grass, he pulled out his tools. Transplanted lilies were his best bet. The cultivated ones just didn't have as pure a tone.



There was a collective intake of breath from the crowd as William neatly severed the first bloom. The blush pink flower dropped sideways, catching on the edge of the table and spinning like an open umbrella towards the floor. Its death note was scarcely noticeable under the vivid harmony of its brothers. The dying resonance was always softer, sighing and hollow.

The sound triggered the release of pollen in any living harmony lily that 'heard' it. Like most everything else, their unique characteristics were adapted towards furthering the species. The cascade of minute particles sparkled as they drifted slowly towards stage floor. William smiled. It looked almost like one of the fields back on Tulandra.



William walked through the storage compartment, scanning each case with his handheld. Each flower had been packed carefully in individual stasis jars, numbered and labeled. His

stomach clenched each time he made his twice-daily rounds. Too many cracked jars, an unfortunate program malfunction and it would be over before it began.

The ship was ninety-three days out of Tulandra. Just five more days until they landed on Remmis. Sometimes William wondered if his heart would survive the trip. Every shift and jolt had him frantic. It had taken so very long to bring his concert together. If it didn't work, he would be left with nothing.



William gestured with his shears and the assistants waiting in the wings emerged. Each moved to a section of flowers bearing shears of her own. In carefully choreographed accord, they began trimming blossoms. Gradually the tone of the concert changed as the number of dying notes overcame those still blooming.

At long last only one jar remained unopened. It sat on a pedestal at center stage. Behind the crystalline glass, the graceful plant rested in frozen perfection. William had studied them all and picked this one specifically.

It was moderately sized, perhaps two feet in height from dirt to crown, but full and symmetrical. Each blade shaped leaf glowed with health, emerald in the center darkening to purple-black at the tips. Its single bud stood proudly on its thick stalk. As the last dying notes from the other flowers faded, William put his finger on the jar's manual release. His breath came hard. This was it. The final moment.

He pressed the button and the glass fell away. The bud hesitated for a moment, deep violet outer petals clinging to each other before springing triumphantly apart. As the pearl pale center caught the light, William held his breath. The translucent call sang out for an eighth of a beat before he clipped the radiant fuchsia blossom. As it fell, the dying note merged, shifted, harmonized with its own echo. For a brief second it was rapture.

Silence reigned in the theater. William stood deflated and exhausted. It hadn't worked. He would go back to his greenhouses a failure. His work would fade away when he did, ghosting around in botany texts to be poked through by other unknown specialists, showing up in Galactic Survey's guidebook — inedible, non-poisonous species. He couldn't even find Emily with the blazing lights in his face. He had wanted so badly for her to see.

Someone began clapping. The sound grew until it was a roar. William raised his head in unbelieving amazement. The cheers swelled still louder. He stumbled forward, raising his wet face to the shining spotlight. Buoyed on his dawning ecstasy, he took his bow, fallen blossoms glistening bright and fresh on the dark wood of the stage.



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Kate O'Connor is a sometime pilot, archeology field technician on off days, and occasional dog groomer. Her work has most recently appeared or is forthcoming in *InterGalactic Medicine Show*, *Escape Pod* and *Daily Science Fiction*. Kate was born in Virginia, but spent most of her growing-up years in Indiana. She made her way out to Arizona for college and graduated from Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University-Prescott in 2009. These days, she's living in the New York area telling stories, digging up artifacts, and managing a kennel full of Airedales. In her spare time, she reads old folklore, rides horses, and tries to teach herself guitar. She has two dogs of her own who do their level best to make sure she doesn't take life too seriously. Kate has been writing science fiction and fantasy since 2011.

# These Are The Things Our Hands Have Made

Andrew Kozma

And then there was the day when the transmission towers came to life.

Before then, I had thought of power lines as held up only by those stripped and ratty-looking twigs that line every street in the city. Those utility poles are tall, yes, and sturdy, yes, and covered in creosote, yes, but they remind me of nothing more than Slim Jims fit for the gods. They carry power to our homes. They shine down on us with their streetlight eyes. If any manmade object were to come to life and rebel against servitude, it would be them.

But the newspapers carried pictures of the multi-legged transmission towers rampaging through small towns, marching down interstate highways, lattice steel monstrosities a hundred feet tall with fleeing people scattered like rice at their feet. Both internet and cable went down with the transmission tower rebellion. I hung out at Bill's house for the satellite TV, even though he'd stolen my girlfriend, Ruby. She was a psychiatric nurse and had been called in for the emergency, a fact for which I was thankful.

"I don't believe it," Bill said. He'd been saying the same thing every time photos of the transmission towers came up on screen. A few hours into the crisis, I began taking shots of Old Crow at every repetition. I had to stop when the networks got hold of video footage as Bill's denial became a chant, a monotone mantra he repeated to make himself feel better, though his eyes remained as wide and round as gumballs.

I started to get hungry.

"I don't believe it I don't believe it I don't believe it I don't believe it," Bill said. I fed him shots until he passed out, then rummaged through the fridge. Whole shelves were full of yogurt and pickle packs. I grabbed a few of each and sat back down on the couch. Bill had slumped to the floor, passed out in a puddle of his own drool.

The news anchor smiled through her lipstick. Across the bottom of the screen the ticker said that satellite connections might go out at any moment. The transmission towers were jealous. They were tired of being abused. They wanted us silenced.

I stared at the open containers of yogurt and pickles before me. If this was the end of the world, I didn't want this to be my last meal.

The man at Pink's Pizza was surprised to hear from me, but yes, they were still delivering. Cash only. Forty-five minutes or less.

"Or what?" I said.

"Or you don't get your pizza."

Bill lived in top-floor apartment on the outskirts of the city. Downtown cast its shadow over us as the day waned. There were no pillars of smoke. There was no sign of panic. In the sky, planes held to their approaches like circling vultures.

Through the opposite window overlooking the city, I hoped to see some evidence of the state of the world, but all I saw were the houses, trees, and roads. The streets were full of cars racing around like ants stirred up by a twig-happy kid. I imagined that kid up there above us, looking down on the world with a curiosity neither morbid nor cruel. Just curious.

The satellite cut off in the middle of a commercial for a new kind of cigarette, one that had all the flavor of tobacco, but no nicotine, no tar, nothing that could kill you, honest. The news promised a revelation after the break of what we should do to be prepared.

I was prepared. The pickles and yogurt were back in the fridge, and I'd plastic wrapped the packages I'd already opened. I'd searched the house and found a shotgun under the bed that I thought might be fake, but looked real enough. I knew nothing about guns.

The pizza guy dropped the pizza at my feet and ran off before I could pay him, which was odd until I realized I was resting the shotgun on my shoulder like a sledgehammer. The phone went dead as I called Pink's Pizza eager to give any explanation I could that they'd believe. But I knew what it meant, the phones going dead.

Pepperoni slice in hand, I went back to the window and there they were, flopping and twisting like minnows. The telephone poles struggled to snap the wires that held them tethered together. Finally, in the distance, a plume of fire. And walking through that fire, the first of the transmission towers to reach the city.

Bill started snoring.

"I forgive you, Bill," I said. "I forgive you for stealing Ruby, and I wish you both the best."

After all, if we can't communicate honestly with one another, what hope do we have?



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Andrew Kozma's fiction has been published in *Albedo One*, *The Cupboard*, *Stupefying Stories*, and *The Chariton Review*. His book of poems, *City of Regret* (Zone 3 Press, 2007), won the Zone 3 First Book Award. He has been the recipient of a Jentel Residency, a Houston Arts Alliance Fellowship, a Walter E. Dakin Fellowship, and a D. H. Lawrence Fellowship.

# A Trade of Tears

Tony Peak

Khallan righted his bicorne hat and trudged up the muddy slope overlooking Taliomar. Half a day he'd waited, so fewer people would spot him at this late hour. Evening fog snaked through the city as lantern-keepers on stilts lit street lamps with torches. Noble carriages scurried to their requisite abodes as red-coated Bravos patrolled the curbs. If he was successful, he'd ride in a carriage of his own soon.

The overcast sky darkened from gray to black, same as it had every day of his life. Never had Khallan seen the fabled Sun, hidden by Horizon Realm sorcery. Hurrying along, he sucked in a trembling breath.

Never had he been more driven as he approached a wheel-less coach atop the slope. It housed Aria, the most famed singer from Kingdom days. For years he'd heard her singing from afar, but hadn't dared to investigate. Until now.

Khallan gripped the hilt of his sheathed rapier and neared the coach. Rusted hinges had curled back from the door. Faded white and purple paint hung in chips from its wooden sides. Over the earthy scent of damp soil, an aroma of sharp perfume and musky linens wrinkled his nose.

"Who comes yonder?" a soft female voice called from the coach. Wind rustled filthy pink drapes on the vehicle's window. Locals claimed Aria had resided alone in the broken coach for many Solars, hiding her cursed Inborn features.

Thunder growled in the distance. A blue-white streak cut the sky, making Khallan grip the rapier tighter. Taliomar and all the cities of Calandren had been cursed by the Horizon Kin decades ago. Lightning was theirs to command.

Straightening his black Rake coat, Khallan cleared his throat. "Khallan O' Delver's Way."

Her milk-white hand, studded with tarnished rings, brushed aside the drapes. "Oh? Aria sang there once. The sunlight lit the ivy balustrades in such wonderful tones then. Yet no sun shines now, nor does Aria sing for Kingdom brass coins or princes. What does a Rake want with delicate little Aria?"

"I need to call forth a faerie, ere the morn. Talk is you know the proper song."

Aria's tinkling laughter sounded like an ancient harpsichord. "Faeries have almost been sundered by those who hate Horizon magic. All-too beautiful reminders of when we were the Horizon Kin's allies. Before the wars. Before the Inborn. And you desire one?"

Leaning on the coach, Khallan removed his hat. His blonde ponytail dangled past his cheek as he hunkered before the coach window. "I just want its services. I've no need of a pretty trinket to trap in a lamp. Aye, I even brought this."

He held up a small glass bottle to her open window.

"Horizon glass? You came to Aria prepared. But in all ways, I wonder? Aria always requires payment. You know Aria's plight, Aria's curse. Why would a Rake risk his reputation by coming to lonely, delicate Aria for a faerie lullaby?"

"The... the Lady Inganiad would very much like to hear it." Khallan glanced over the city, where the fortified mansion of House Aballinore dominated the streets atop a hillside. The faerie's magic would give Inganiad a child, and him a position commanding the Lady's guards. Long had he admired her. She had given him this one chance to prove himself as more than just another paramour in the shadows.

"And you will pay Aria?" she asked in a whisper. The tender hand gripping the coach window belonged to a younger woman than Aria should have been.

Khallan stiffened. "Whatever you require."

Young alley waifs still sang tunes about Aria's appetites. Khallan himself had whistled them as a youth. Though twenty Solars in age, the years hadn't lessened those fears. Stories about her devouring flesh, stealing one's breath — but he'd brave them for Inganiad.

"Pass Aria the bottle."

After giving her the vessel, he stepped back. Lamplight from the thoroughfares below revealed Aria's slim silhouette. A gauzy veil covered her features.

Long moments passed. Khallan almost cleared his throat to get a response from the infamous soprano, but a light hum emitted from the coach. Clean and unbroken, it filled the air and held Khallan in place. Rising in volume, the hum became a simple melody, crystalline and heartfelt. Khallan closed his eyes and took in Aria's vocal brilliance. It was a sound from a different era, when the sun shone. Surely a monster couldn't make such a noise?

Aria's voice lilted into a higher register. Eyes still shut, Khallan stepped towards the coach. The lullaby drew on something within him, as if Aria tugged a string attached to his soul. She sung in an even higher timbre, breathy and sensuous while possessing an innocence so sweet it made his skin tingle.

He'd no idea she could sing like this. By the Noon King, maybe she was bewitching him...

A bright glare flittered before his eyes, and Khallan opened them. A pinkish mote of light hovered between him and the coach window. Tiny wings buzzed like the honey bees of Kingdom legend. He thought he spied a sharp face and limbs as the faerie flew into the coach. Not since childhood had he grinned so much. A real faerie!

Aria's song took on a cooing quality, but the sound of the bottle being uncorked added an odd dissonance. The faerie's pink illumination revealed Aria sitting on patched cushions,

her body swathed in an old white ball gown. Lace as fine as spider webs lined its collar and cuffs.

With deft hands Aria placed the bottled faerie beneath a pillow. "Now you must pay."

Eager to get the faerie to Lady Inganiad, Khallan leaned into the coach window. Aria cringed from him. Perhaps all the gossip and stories about her had been false. There seemed nothing to fear from her.

"What do you wish of me?"

"Close your eyes." Her priceless voice shook.

Khallan grasped his rapier handle in instinct but obeyed her. Maybe she wanted a lock of his hair to work some esoteric Kingdom witchery, or a drop of his blood to create an ogre or shade panther.

Slender, soft hands caressed his cheeks, then traveled down his chin. Fingering his ponytail, drew circles along his earlobes. Khallan had never been so lovingly touched, not even by the strumpets selling their bodies on the curbs. Breath smelling of rotten dusk berries passed over his face.

Khallan tensed. "What—?"

Stiff feathers brushed his nose and ruffled. Wet lips brushed his cheek.

Eyes open, he jerked back as Aria turned away. White and violet feathers covered her neck, crown, and ears. Her sallow, sunken cheeks might have belonged to a lovely face. Large amber eyes blinked and a sob rose in her throat, but no tears came.

Cursed at random by Horizon magic, Inborn couldn't shed tears. As punishment for human wars against them, Horizon Kin had caused many humans to grow bestial features. Inborn never aged, bore children, or dreamed. Most had been exiled to the Channels beneath Taliomar's streets, like in other cities. No doubt she'd wanted to nip his face, bite off his nose. Steal his breath.

Pink light lit the coach interior as the bottle rolled out from the pillows and rested between them.

Shoving her back with one hand, Khallan snatched the bottle with the other.

"You must pay Aria!"

Khallan stuffed the bottle into his jacket, donned his hat, and hurried down the slope.

"Never tread this way again," her anguished voice echoed from above. "Never!"

A chill not borne of storm or night made him shudder. As thunder boomed overhead, though, Khallan glanced back and snorted. The coach now seemed more like a hovel, with some old hag inside. He had the faerie. Soon he'd have Inganiad. Fearing an Inborn was just his old superstitions.



House Aballinore numbered among the wealthiest noble families in Taliomar. It still possessed a brigade of loyal soldiers and two batteries of old Kingdom cannons. Strolling up the cobblestone path to the main gate, Khallan kept a hand on the bottle inside his jacket. Oil lamps hanging from carved pewter rods lit the abode's thick stone walls and battlements.

Two guards attired in blue buff coats, tricorne hats, and black gaiters barred his path with ceremonial halberds. "State ye business, Rake," one of them said.

"Aye, I return from a mission for the good and gracious Lady Inganiad." Khallan pulled aside his left jacket flap. Pinkish luminescence glowed forth.

The guards gaped at each other, then recovered their stoic bearing. "In with ye, then."

Khallan doffed his hat and passed through the thick wooden gates. Beyond the three-foot thick walls stood a four-storey mansion dotted with tall rectangular windows. Porticos chased with pewter and white-painted roundels contrasted with the structure's broken guttering and chipped shingles. Soldiers in the same blue and black livery sat around campfires all across the dirt lawn. Leafless trees, dead since Kingdom days, cast gnarled shadows.

A butler in a wig so silver it shined led Khallan into the house proper. Old Kingdom tapestries hugged the walls as if glued to them. Soft red carpet cushioned his footsteps. Smells of dust, soap, and wood oil hung in the air, reflecting efforts to maintain the mansion despite Taliomar's supply shortages. Ancient suits of armor, oil paintings, intricate glassware, and banners stolen from rival Houses crammed the floor and walls. Many of them stolen by him.

Entering a room with a grand dual-staircase, Khallan bowed at the waist as the butler departed. Lady Inganiad waited at the top of the stairs. A slight smile creased her oval, powdered features. A tall white wig covered the flaxen curls he knew she had underneath. Her pastel blue gown, trimmed in golden lace with matching elbow-length gloves, hinted at the finery he'd see everyday once she awarded him. No more muddy alleys for him.

"My Lady, I have returned with this here promised item." Khallan produced the glass bottle. The faerie's pink light glowed, much like the warm emotions in his heart.

"How very pleasant." Inganiad lifted her gown and descended the stairs. Her steps were hesitant, as if she walked with new feet. Every few seconds she steadied herself on the banister.

As Khallan neared her with the bottle, her smile dropped. Green eyes regarded him with cold focus.

"I trust you had enough propriety not to be seen by my rivals? House Keis Dor and House Gallartan must not know I have resorted to hiring Rakes off the street."

"None can know about my deeds. Aye, milady's reputation is safe." Khallan bowed again. Why was she so distant? Usually she embraced and kissed him.

Inganiad sniffed and walked into an adjacent sitting room. Again she touched the wall or an upright suit of armor for balance as she went.

Oil-painted murals encircled the sitting room. Each depicted old-fashioned scenes of nobles hunting among green-leaved trees or across sunlit hillsides. Two plush divans sat opposite each other. A single oil lamp lit the empty room. Khallan grew excited. Soon he could cast off this black Rake jacket and don the blue livery of the Master of the Guard of House Aballinore!

Inganiad sat on one of the divans and grunted. With agitated movements she enveloped her feet in the folds of her gown. "As you know, I am to provide Lord Aballinore with an heir."

Her voice sounded flat, tuneless. The voice of a woman accustomed to being obeyed, but never truly being heard.

"Aye, milady—"

"You have done me a service, Khallan. None outside my handmaids know that Lord Aballinore is... infirm when it comes to what I want." Inganiad's stony gaze softened and she tugged off her gloves. "Forgive my frustration. Come hold your Lady's hands ."

Sighing, Khallan knelt before her divan. Scented hands squeezed his, their blue-lacquered nails biting into his flesh. Surprised, he looked up. In their previous trysts, she'd never touched him in a rough manner.

Staring at him, Inganiad's bodice rose up and down in quick breaths. She swallowed several times. "Will the faerie work?"

"My lady..." Khallan smiled to calm the fear he sensed broiling inside her. "Aye, the Lord will be fooled and think the faerie's old Kingdom magic gifted you a child."

She squeezed his hands harder. "That is not why I require that faerie. Pull up my gown and petticoats."

In times past, Khallan's blood would have burned with passion at such a request. Making love to her in the four-poster bed upstairs or in the wine cellar had been in his thoughts much of late. He could give her a child and guard her far better than the elderly Lord Aballinore. It mattered little if the public remained ignorant of their affair. The desperation in her eyes brought no fire to his blood now, though.

Gently he lifted the hem of her gown, then the silken petticoat beneath. The familiar cloying scent of her lily fragrance and thigh sweat mixed with something rank and thick.

Inganiad wore no shoes, nor would she ever again. In place of the dainty feet he'd kissed were a pair of canine paws. Golden-brown fur covered them and reached up to her calves, enveloping the shaven skin he'd so enjoyed.

"You're an Inborn." Khallan's statement made her flinch and rub her knees together.

"Give me the bottle," she whispered.

Stilling himself, Khallan passed her the small glass vessel. The faerie darted about inside, wings pattering against the bottle's interior.

Face hardening, Inganiad popped the bottle open and grabbed the faerie. Such dexterous speed had never been hers. Khallan drew back. With her other hand Inganiad snatched his jacket collar, holding him in place.

"Your dirk," she said with deep intonation. A sweat bead crawled from beneath her wig and plowed through the powder lining her right cheek.

"Milady?"

Inganiad jerked his collar with terrifying strength. "Spill the faerie's blood on my feet."

"But I—"

She lowered her face near his. "Have you so easily forgotten how you suckled those toes, how those calves straddled you in the hot hours of our nights together? They can be so again, and I shall have my child. Our child. Now slay this frivolous trifle."

Closing his eyes, it seemed he was back in Aria's coach. Her breath wafting over his face, her frightened touch. She'd not been a horrid beast. All those years he'd heard that voice... and the woman before him now, the one he thought he'd loved, acted the monster. Faeries had been lost to the world, and now she asked him to kill one just so she could be whole again? Even if he did so, Khallan wondered if the coldness in her eyes would ever fade.

"Nay... milady."

Inganiad slapped him.

"Listen to me! A faerie's blood might remove this curse. But I cannot be the one who kills it. You must draw its blood!"

Khallan didn't recoil from her furious scowl. "I said no."

Gnashing her teeth, Inganiad clasped the faerie in both hands. Sobs heaved up from her stomach and filled her bodice with agonized inhalations. Khallan's heart wilted like Kingdom crops had done when the sun disappeared. Her eyes clamped shut. Blue-dusted eyelashes fluttered. Her fingers dug into the faerie.

No tears came.

"May the Dawn Queen damn you!" Inganiad wrung her hands and crushed the faerie. A tinkling pop sounded as the pinkish luminance winked out. With a cry she tossed the rare Horizon glass bottle against the wall. It smashed into a mural where an ancient prince hunted with his dogs.

"So you leave me to be the Bitch of Taliomar? I shall have you whipped and branded and hung from the walls! Guards—!"

Khallan leapt to his feet and drew his rapier in one motion. The blade's tip touched Inganiad's throat. Pangs of betrayal and hurt hammered in his chest. His selfishness was no

less than hers, desiring to father her child and command her guards. Attempting to rise above a lowly street Rake, he had sunken to new depths.

Inganiad's glare melted as her shoulders shuddered with greater sobs. She tugged off the wig and tossed it to the floor. Blonde curls, matted and sweaty, framed her pleading visage. The faerie flopped from her hands to the floor. Not taking his eye off her, Khallan stuffed the limp body into his jacket.

"What am I to do? I'll be exiled, like all the other Inborn! The curse will spread to the rest of my body, it always does. Will you not help me?"

They stared at each other. Self-loathing filled Khallan as his face scrunched up in sorrow. He had slain the faerie as much as she. Killed the illusions he'd had about love. About himself.

"Khallan?" Hope rose in her eyes.

Something wet ran down Khallan's cheek. "Aye. A trade. Hand me that yonder faerie."

He wiped away the tear, keeping it on his fingertip. As she slowly passed him the tiny crushed body, he dabbed his tear on her cheek. Inganiad shut her eyes and kissed his hand.

"Please, no. Khallan... please, I'm sorry. I can still be saved..."

"I have shed a tear for you, milady, for you have none. May the Noon King shine on you someday."

Khallan kept the rapier up as he backed away. Body tense, he prepared himself to fight and flee House Aballinore. With so many soldiers about, he had little chance of escape. Little chance of anything now.

Hugging herself, Inganiad looked away. All trappings of haughty nobility gave way to the terrified human being beneath. She gave no shout for the guards, shot him no hateful looks. Instead she touched his tear on her cheek and whimpered. It almost sounded like the whine of a puppy.

Khallan sheathed his rapier and hurried from the sitting room. The oil lamp's dying light revealed the grime and dust coating the world he'd tried to enter.



Mud had dried on the slope, but Khallan took cautious steps. In a few hours dawn would creep over Taliomar, though little difference would be discernible in the sky. He refused to glance at House Aballinore on the hillside.

Stopping a few feet from the coach, Khallan cleared his throat. A pale hand drew aside the rotted drapes.

"Who disturbs Aria? You are no dream or nightmare, so be gone with you."

Khallan walked to the coach window and removed his hat. "Khallan O' Delver's Way."

The hand clenched into a fist and shook at him. "Aria warned you! Aria will peck out your eyes! Now go!"

"You have no beak." He eased closer to the wagon, then drew the small body from his jacket. On the way he'd bought a shred of muslin cloth and wrapped the dead faerie in it.

"Aria has nails." The hand clawed after him, but Khallan grabbed it and remained still. Unlike Inganiad, Aria didn't take advantage of her increased Inborn strength. For all her struggle, he could have been wrestling a child.

"Know you of a ditty to send a faerie home?"

"Humans have burned the faeries' homes. Be gone, Aria says!"

Khallan took a deep breath, then yanked open the coach door. Paint and splinters flaked off it. Ducking, he entered as Aria scurried into the far corner.

"This one has no need of a home now." Khallan unwrapped the muslin around the faerie. Aria gasped and hugged her knees.

"Faerie blood for a child?" Aria asked in a scolding tone.

"Aye, she once wanted that. As did I. Twasn't slain by my hand. Know you a song or not?"

"Aria has a price. Aria doesn't want you to be the one to pay. Go!"

Khallan knelt and laid a hand on her shoulder. The trembling form underneath made him swallow in guilt. "I'll pay as much as you want. Yet this here faerie deserves a funeral ditty. Deserves some honor, I should think."

With a shaking hand Aria touched the small corpse. A plaintive cry excited her mouth, then transformed into a flowing melodic discourse filled with despair. Her song now had a raw edge mixed with deep, rich intonation. Breathily delivery lent each note an intimacy Khallan would have died for. An intimacy he'd never built with Inganiad despite their sexual dalliances.

Warmth seeped into Khallan's palms. He straightened as Aria lay both her fine-boned hands over the faerie. The song rose into higher registers but lowered in volume. No words, just emotive sounds.

Pinkish light glowed in Khallan's grasp.

Aria's voice lowered just above a whisper, soothing Khallan's own troubled heart even as the faerie's body disappeared. In its place a mote of pure pink light flitted from their touching hands and flew about their faces. Though it possessed no wings or body now, its animated life made emotions rise within Khallan's chest.

As soon as Aria sang her final note, the mote sped from the coach into the night.

Khallan stared out the coach window on one side, then the other. The mote had vanished.

"Go. You owe Aria nothing." She hunkered in the corner.

"I'll hear none of that. Aye, we've a trade." Khallan drew her towards the window facing Taliomar. She didn't struggle, not even as he slipped the veil from her face. Beauty still resided there, though the physical and vocal loveliness she possessed paled in comparison to the splendor in her eyes. All the emotion of unspent tears welled up in them. All for a faerie Inganiad had killed just to save herself, while Aria had simply empathized with its fate.

Khallan embraced her while gazing out over Taliomar. Oil lamp light flickered in the breeze as Aria whimpered and sobbed against his body. Tender fingers dug into his hair, cradled his ears. Quivering lips released hot breath on his neck, whispering all her fears and regrets. After a long while her body ceased shuddering with sobs.

"Dawn is near," Khallan whispered.

"Aria... Aria thanks you." She pulled back from him and looked down at her hands. "Aria has not been hugged for so long. Hasn't touched, or smelled, or heard..."

"Nay. My thanks to you." Khallan exited the coach and cleared his throat. "Maybe I'll come again for a ditty?"

"Aria would like that." Huskiness permeated her breathy voice.

Walking down the slope, Khallan righted his bicorne hat. He almost slipped in the darkness until a pink light darted in front of him. It steadied, then floated over the dried mud trail, illuminating it. He smiled and followed the mote as an old Kingdom lullaby drifted from the coach above.



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

# Four Scenes From Wieczniak's Whisk-U-Away, And One Not

Ferrett Steinmetz

**H**ave a seat, the two of you, and your little girl. You took a taxi here, as I requested? Oh, good. The mall owner, Mrs. Tiffin, she's always hounding the police to tow away everyone's cars. I tell her you're my customers, travelers, you need a place to park overnight — but no, she claims you're stealing spaces from the Hallmark store. That's a valid complaint, I guess, since sometimes people are gone for weeks... but I'd like it to be more convenient for you. When you return, you should just step out of the dimensional gate from Perth, Australia, and into your car and whoosh, you're home! Not sit around this old place waiting for a cab. But I have a taxi driver — a friend of mine, Gregor. He'll get you back in a jiffy if you call ahead. He's a good man. Reliable.

I'll just put in the adjustments here — it takes a good fifteen minutes for the computer to figure out the mathematics of folding space correctly, even with the assistance of the computer on the other side of the gate.

Can I get you some coffee? Fresh from the market square. Organic, better than that tinned stuff. And here's some apple cider for your little girl. Sweet, but nutritious!

So what brings you to Australia?

Family, you say? A cousin you've never been able to visit before? Why, that's the joy of teleportation! Even if it isn't really teleportation, you know. But it's so affordable. Five hundred dollars and your family steps through my gate, you're bioscanned to check your identity, and poof! You're in Australia! Not stuffed into a plane with sweaty businessmen and upset babies, no waiting in long lines — just step into a small shop here in Cleveland and step out of a small shop in Perth!

Of course I'm overjoyed! This is my second big adventure, you know. My first was when I emigrated to America as a young boy. Built a good plumbing business. I was always good with my hands. But always, I read magazines such as *Popular Science* and *Wired*, always I experimented, and when it turned out that space-folding technology was going small-scale, I sunk my entire life's savings into this very business. I had to be a part of the future. Small shops transporting people everywhere.

Oh, the airports are installing teleportation gates, but who wants a big, centralized place clogged with lines when you can step straight into downtown Perth? No, you want a Mom-and-Pop shop, like me. And they lie! Oh, they lie. They tell you a ticket to Australia costs more because it's farther away, but that's old-scale thinking. It might cost you more if you could go to Mars, thirty-five million miles away — but Perth is only ten thousand miles!

That's so tiny on an interdimensional scale! Those big-box places try to convince you there's a huge difference, but actually it's a matter of pennies. Little guys like us keep them honest.

Oh, I know, it's not that big a price difference. \$500 with me, \$600 with them. But you know how much I make on each trip? Fifty dollars. That's it. No, truly! Most of my money goes towards paying off this marvelous machine. Best investment I ever made. I stay late at the shop, reading manuals, tinkering. But oh, you should see my electricity bills! No, trust me, I cut close to the bone. I want lovely families like you to go to Perth and Switzerland and Jamaica and all sorts of places you never could have afforded before. Reuniting families, spreading global understanding... It's marvelous!

Ah! Here we go. It's folding space as we speak! Watch the gate! You'd think it'd be more dramatic, but no! It's like an old television snapping on: dimness, a crackle of electricity, and then — there we are! That's an Australian breeze coming through the gate. Wave 'hello' to Liz. She's my favorite Australian, she'll set you up with a hotel if you need one.

What's that? No, no, little girl, don't cry. What's your name, pretty one? Sasha? Sasha Khanina, now that's a beautiful name. Almost as pretty as you. And you must be, what, eight? Eight and a half, of course, I should have seen that. Let's wipe away those tears, what's bothering you?

No, of course the gate won't close on you while you're stepping through! We have two full minutes before the fold collapses. What, you think I'd let a little girl get chopped in half? What do they teach children in schools these days anyway?

Here, take my hand. Do you know how to waltz? It's very simple. Follow my feet. One, two, three, one, two, three... That's it. Now, follow me and we will dance across the globe. Ready?

Cleveland... to Perth. Cleveland... to Perth. See how we dance across the doorway and back? Just a little tickle as we cross the boundary. Nothing to fear. I do it a hundred times a day. And you, my darling, are doing something so magical you'll tell your grandchildren about it — the day you waltzed across continents. And now, one more time to Perth... and whoosh, we're back in Cleveland.

What's that? You want to dance more? Oh, my love, would that I could, but already my electrical bills will eat me alive. No, instead, I shall hand you back to your wonderful mother, who will take you to see some wonderful relatives. Take pictures with your camera phone, Sasha! If you like, send them to me, I never see enough photos of happy people. Take good care of the Khaninas for me, Liz!

Good bye, my friends. Good bye. And enjoy!



Why, if it isn't my good friends the Khaninas! And Sasha, my child... you're so big! How old are you now? Fifteen? Well, you have a maturity I haven't seen in some twenty-year-olds. Can I get you some coffee? It's from my friend Trejean, in Jamaica. From his hands to mine, and neither of us left our cities! Still amazing.

What? Yes, things are a little more hectic these days. You'll have to forgive me, but the computers have gotten so fast. It's nice they can do the necessary calculations in under five minutes, but it leaves so little time for visiting! I barely get time to offer someone a coffee before they've stepped off to Aberdeen! Not like you, of course. You, I make special time for.

Oh, business is good, thanks for asking. See this shiny new gateway? I took out another loan for it. Those awful Vortechs franchises, they're everywhere. Have you seen their commercials, with the world turned into a block of Swiss cheese? They think of their customers as mice! And their stores, the same everywhere, all fluorescents and white plastic. So cold. *Tchuh*.

So, people don't like the waits. I have to go quicker, quicker, Mr. Wieczniak — as if spending some time in pleasant company before stepping through a gateway is an inconvenience! You've tasted my cider, Sasha — what do you think?

That's very kind of you, Sasha... but I wish you wouldn't use that word. I don't like the term 'pop-shop.' But perhaps I should! After all, if this is a Mom-and-Pop teleportation shop, I am the Pop, eh?

Why don't I like it, Sasha? Well, to call a dimensional folding point a 'pop-shop' just seems disrespectful. This glorious gateway took thousands of man-years to think up — the brightest scientists and the best engineers, wracking their brains, working together to devise perhaps the most terribly clever thing in a long history of clever solutions. And yes, maybe you walk through this dimensional fold in a pop — but all the tiny things it took for this to happen are understandable!

To reduce its name to the amount of time it takes to travel ignores the amount of time it took to devise. And *that's* why I dislike the term. It makes all this human effort seem like magic.

Yes, yes, of course *you* understand. I've told you how it works enough, haven't I? And of *course* you want me to explain all of my gateway's upgrades! We'll start with — no, no, your parents are shaking their heads. Here, would you like to program the coordinates instead? Look how quick it calculates! Watch your fingers fly!

How long will you be staying in Perth? All winter vacation? It's so nice you've become so close with your distant cousins. Though I guess they're not so distant any more! Here, bring them some raw milk cheese from Ohio's Amish! I drove down to get it — you have to with them, of course. Such a treat for the Australian Khaninas!

Okay, the gate is opened. Say hello to Liz for me, have a good — what's that, Sasha? You wish to dance across the globe? Oh, my love, every time I think, "Oh, she'll be too mature for this silly game," and — you say never? Well, you are fifteen. That's old enough to maybe be forever. It doesn't matter, take my hand.

Cleveland... to Perth. Cleveland... to Perth. Just a little tickle as we cross the boundary.



Sasha! What are you doing here? Where are your parents, you're crying, you—

All right, yes, I'll read it. But—

Sasha.

You got in. You got into MIT. Oh, my lovely one, you're going to be an engineer! That's marvelous, I always said you had the brains to do anything. And you're going to major in dimensional engineering.

No, no, I'm well, I just need to sit down. Fetch me that box of Kleenex, would you? Look at me, now we're both crying, how silly when we're so happy.

My Lord, Sasha, this is so *good* for you! There's a lot of work for dimensional engineers these days. They've already opened up permanent gates in the major cities for commerce, you know. Now they're discussing walking-gates for people. They need bright young women like you to help make the gates safer and more efficient — we're burning far too much energy to keep them open and the fracturing leakage needs to be kept down. Such a solid career. You're young, you don't know what a boon this will be, never lacking work. You are the future, little one.

What do you mean, you'll miss me? That's crazy talk. Any time you want to visit, talk to the independent teleportation shops in Cambridge! They all know me. You'll have to walk for a bit, I know, those awful Vortechs shops are everywhere now. But find a real shop, one with a beating heart, and I'll cover your expenses. Maybe you can even tinker with this old darling, yes?

...the money? Oh, we're a small Mom-and-Pop operation, but never worry. For you, it's covered.

Yes, yes, you must tell your friends. Go! Run! No, wait — let me open up a gate to Liz, she'll get you a taxi. Tell your cousins in person! Surprise them!

There's the gate. It opens so quick these days. Soar, little one! Persevere! Triumph!



Oh my Lord, if it isn't Mrs. Sasha Khanina, Ph. D. Oh, let me hold you! You're a boon for old eyes, you really are. It's so good to see you, and...

This little one must be your daughter, Lydia!

Of course, I knew. I read all about you. See that picture on the wall? I'm sorry, my eyes don't see the dust as well as they used to, let me Windex that off. But yes, that's you on your graduation day. I tell all my customers, 'That's Sasha Khanina, she works as a chief engineer on DuPoint's intracity gates, she's forgotten more about these machines than I will ever know.'

I've read all your publications on my datapad. Sometimes they get a little arcane for me — the technology is more complicated and the brain isn't what it used to be. But I read over and over again. I get the gist. It makes me proud.

Oh, no, never apologize for absences, Sasha! You're gating around the world, installing the latest technology, fine-tuning very complex devices... It's good work. Hard work. And raising a family, too! Let us never forget, family is the most important thing. I know in your heart you meant to visit, and that's enough for an old man like me. I get your Christmas cards. They make me smile.

And you, little one? It's an honor to make your acquaintance, Miss Lydia Khanina. Your grip is so firm! You must be... eight? Oh, eight and a half, of course, I should have seen that. What's that, Sasha? She's at a special age? What age?

...the age you were when *you* went through a gate?

Now, you can't have kept her from gates all this time, Sasha. The world is too small these days, you must have brought her through... Oh, good, you did. Now that anyone can step from Cleveland to Paris on a special walkway, it would break my heart to think she'd never been to the great cities of the world. That's the wonders of technology, the way gates have brought everything so close. Have you taken her to New Washington yet? So much effort, yet it seems so simple. Sending those automated bots millions of miles to construct a gate, and now anyone can pay ten dollars to walk to Mars. In my childhood, I thought we would colonize the galaxy through rockets, but no — it's gates...

So there's no need for me, Sasha. My gate is old, it goes only to cities without permanent gates installed. I keep it mainly to keep me company — some people still don't go to Vortechs. I get by. Better than a retirement fund, I suppose. And surely DuPont has better and faster—

They don't dance. Ah.

Well, we'll open the gate — no, not to Liz anymore, I'm afraid. She had to become a Vortechs franchise to keep her head above water. They don't let me use their network. I can't

blame her, she has to do what puts food on her table, but the new man in Perth — well, Perth's suburbs — his name is Mike, he's almost as nice. I'll open the gate.

Here, little Lydia, do you know how to waltz? It's very simple. Follow my feet. One, two — oh, no, she ran straight through. She's not afraid of gates, is she? To her, they're as natural as the air and sky.

I guess we'll have to show her how to waltz. Take my hand, Sasha. Ready? Cleveland... to Perth. Cleveland... to Perth. Look how elegant we are!



What do you mean I have a visitor? That's crazy, nurse — nurse — I'm sorry, I forget your name. What is it again? Peter, that's right. Peter the day shift nurse. My memory, it's not what it once was, but at least I know your face. And you must have me confused with someone else. I don't have visitors.

You're certain it's for me? Mr. Wieczniak. You checked? Well, all right, it's probably a creditor or something. I—

...Sasha.

Oh, I wish I could say it was good to see you, Sasha! But I didn't want you to see me like this. Look how thin I am. I can't even walk. I — I was hoping to slip quietly out of this world, like a man exiting a busy party.

How have you been?

No, me, I — it's the usual tale. You know it is, you're in the field. Those old gateway models, they were unshielded. We didn't understand the dangers of dimensional fracturing. It was harmless for everyone else, thank God, a couple of zaps twice a year wouldn't hurt anyone, but for me? Dancing between gateways a hundred times a day? I'm lucky to have lived as long as I did. Few of the original operators are, really. It's a blessing. They give me good drugs.

What? Where's my wife? I never had a wife, why would you think that? Oh. No, Sasha, that's just a saying. I was a small store, everyone called it a Mom-and-Pop operation. But there was no mom. Who'd want a crazy tinkerer like me? I was never home, I was up all nights reading science books and fine-tuning my gateway... I'd have made a terrible husband. I'm glad no one had to endure my meanderings.

No, what am I saying? It's awful, Sasha. I'm alone in this hospital and I'm scared and I don't have anyone to be with me, and I'm sorry, it's just been a bad few months. You're such a good girl. I shouldn't put my troubles upon you.

No, of course I don't want you to leave. Now that you're here. Please, I couldn't be happier, it's a solace. Thank you, thank you, thank you. Thank you for finding me. Thank you for remembering me.

You know, it's funny, Sasha. I've been reading a lot about religion ever since I got sick. It's all a bunch of hoey, of course. I've read too many books about science to believe there's some crazy all-powerful man in the sky who's interested in us.

Still, I can see the appeal. The Buddhists believe in reincarnation. You walk out one door, you walk in another. Life to death, death to life, and back again. I like to believe that if we could sit and watch it all from the right viewpoint, it would be like a glorious waltz, everyone dancing in and out again. And...

I've been holding myself here so hard, Sasha. I should let go, I know. The drugs only help a little. I tell myself I'm just going through another doorway, that's all, just a little step to someplace I've never been, but... maybe that's true and maybe it's not.

Please, Sasha.

Take my hand.



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Ferrett Steinmetz has published over thirty short stories since rebooting his writer-life at the Clarion Writers' Workshop in 2008. In 2012, he was nominated for a Nebula for his novelette *Sauerkraut Station*. He lives in Cleveland with his wife, a barky black dog of indeterminate origin, and a friendly ghost. He blogs entirely too much about puns, polyamory, and politics at [www.theferrett.com](http://www.theferrett.com).

# The Unworthy

J.W. Alden

"Rise, oh God of Creation," they sang, and so I did. I rose and called the sea. The waters came and washed that place clean as I swept my arms east to west, delighted at the bewildered sounds they made. I bore the tiny priests no ill will, despite the inconvenience their little ceremony had caused. Troublesome vermin are never worth one's enmity, though one does not abide their gnawing presence when it can be helped. So I washed them away, smiling.

I found more of their kind to the north, living on top of one another in piteous shambles of clay. The sound of my approach drew them out of their holes in scurries and staggers, some fleeing in terror, some falling to their knees in reverence like those at the temple. In a moment of charity, I weighed the fates of these a heartbeat longer than the last, nevertheless reaching the same end. The sea could not find that place on the hills, so I called to the heavens above, raining hail and lightning between each mirthful heave. Soon their earthen abodes were but dust on the wind, and those still living spent their last breaths begging for mercy as the maelstrom of my will took hold and ground the life from them.

All but one. One stood in brazen defiance of my wrath as the ashes of her home billowed about her. One dared look up at my form with malice in her eyes and fire in her heart. She stood at the center of the ruins, boiling with a fury so palpable I could taste it on the breeze. In my merriment, I set aside the desire to extinguish the stubborn light behind those eyes and decided to indulge this fleeting curiosity.

"Speak, insignificant one," I said, half expecting the sound of my voice to cleave her in two.

"And what would I say to a beast who laughs at the scattered lives of the ones I love?" she said. "I will not play at your mercy, destroyer. I can see it would be of no use."

"A fool's bounty has been sown, and I am the reaper. I destroy but for the good of these lands, to purge them of the ignorance that brought me here. Only the unwise would invoke that which can summon the likes of me."

"Were they not doing the bidding of their creator? Was it not your sigil carved into the very face of the mountains? They followed your commands. They called out to you, seeking guidance, and you reward them with death."

My laughter shook the hills and stoked the flames in the woman's eyes. "What arrogance, to think those words were written for you! You and your foolish ilk have deemed yourselves central to my design, never pausing to consider the likelihood of your own insignificance. Do you think the birds hold their own kind to such high esteem, even as they

soar above the valleys? Do the slithering vermin of the fields think themselves masters of the cosmos, favorite of the gods? I wrought this world and it wrought you. But I have no more love for you than a baker's love for the mold on his bread."

She tested my patience with a spell of silence then, which I allowed only that she might have learned something before I destroyed her. "You are a pitiful spirit," she said at last. "You don't deserve the power you wield. What kind of demon destroys the fruits of his own labor?"

"You're not listening, little creature. These lands were not made for you. I forged this world as a beacon to the divine. I sought to attract an equal, that I may quench the loneliness I've endured across the eons and share the breadth of infinity with a mate. Imagine my disappointment when I answered the summons to find *you* people gawking at me. Your entire existence makes me regret ever having labored over these lands. The least I can do is cleanse them before I depart."

"You are the disappointment, old one. And you are as blind as you are vile. Your equal stands before you — and has judged you unworthy."

The moment the words left her lips, her perfection became apparent. As realization struck, the ground opened beneath me and I fell into the arms of darkness. I called to the heavens and the sea, but they did not hear me; they did not come. Earth enveloped body and soul as I plunged into the black embrace, haunted by visions of what might have been.



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J.W. Alden always had a fascination with the fantastic. As such, he's made speculative fiction his domain. He lives just outside West Palm Beach, Florida with his fiancée Allison, who doesn't mind the odd assortment of musical instruments and medieval weaponry that decorate his office (as long as he tries to brandish the former more often than the latter). Alden is a graduate of the 2013 class of Odyssey Writing Workshop and a member of Codex Writers.

# Verdure

Brandon Barrows

The sun is finally starting to come up, but I don't feel any safer. Little rays of sun filter through the mass of vegetation that surround us in a nearly three-hundred-sixty degree radius, but it's still only barely enough to notice, let alone shed any actual illumination. The green is all around us — wet and dense and, it seems to me, angry at the intrusion of the squad stomping our clumsy way through. We don't belong here; we know that, but the jungle keeps on reminding us all the same and the dangers it presents aren't lessened by daylight.

If it's sunrise, that means we've been marching for a good eight hours already. And if that's true—

*Bang.*

A single shot. The report rings for only a split second before the sea of hungry flora swallows up the sound, pulling it in and absorbing it like the ocean does a weak swimmer. In that instant, I stand frozen: a greasy, dirty, green-and-black statue in the overgrown yard of a planet whose seemingly-random alphanumeric designation I can't even remember right now. It's not what they trained us to do, but there are some things even rote memorization and screaming drill instructors can't overcome. I imagine everyone else does the same, bound by a ligature of fear.

I'm wrong.

I see movement from the corner of my eye and simultaneously hear Sergeant Rickard screaming for everyone to drop, find cover, return fire if you have a shot. Without making a decision, my head turns toward the sight rather than the sound. Not three feet away, the guy everyone calls "Spank" takes an awkward, sideways step toward the nearest tree trunk — trying to find support or trying to obey orders, I'll never know — and crashes backwards, his hands clutching the growing spot of red sprouting from his belly. His eyes catch mine and silently ask a question, but damned if I know what. A plea for help, perhaps. Maybe it's, "Why me?"

Maybe it's, "Why not *you*?"

The sergeant yells for cover again; one of my squad-mates takes the initiative and pulls me down into the organic detritus coating the jungle floor. He looks as scared as I feel and I want to thank him, but I can't remember his name, or even his nickname. Everyone gets a nickname within a few days of basic training whether you want one or not. I want to thank him but the fact that I can't remember what to address him by crowds out all other concerns. In that moment it feels so very, foolishly important.

Instead, I nod and he mirrors the gesture.

We lie on our bellies, waiting, clutching rifles many of us have only fired on training ranges light-years away, trying not to make a sound and instead breathing so heavily I'm sure half the continent knows where we are. It's been two weeks in this soggy hellhole without so much as a peep from the other side; guess our luck's run out.

All around us the scene is repeated in various permutations by our squaddies, though I can only make out a couple of other friendlies from my narrow perspective. It doesn't matter; I know the other guys are out there. So do They.

I wonder if They're as scared as I am. As *we* are.

They're the faceless enemy we've never seen outside of holo-stills and tri-vids, wrapped head to toe in environment suits that we're told They need simply to exist in an Earth-variant environment. I wonder why They want this world so badly if They can't even breathe the air. I wonder if to Them *we're* They: anonymous and endless, an obstacle to whatever plans they have.

*Bang.*

Another shot. I'm so amped with adrenaline and pointless thoughts that the sound barely registers before it fades into the verdure. I haven't learned to accurately gauge distance through the thick foliage yet, and I'm not sure where it's coming from. The sergeant says you learn quick or you don't get the chance. I think I'm finally getting the hang of it, though, because I'm sure this shot isn't as close as the last one. I throw a glance toward my still-living neighbor, but he's peering intently at the green wall before him, carbine held in a white-knuckled death-grip.

A wet shuffling sound signals movement behind me. I turn, bringing my weapon up without conscious thought; guess I am learning, after all.

My eyes lock with Sergeant Rickard's as he crawls a last yard through the mud, then springs into a crouching position. He lifts his right hand, separating the five fingers out as far as they'll go, signaling me and my nameless buddy to spread out, move forward and reconnoiter. It's an enduringly-useful gesture that any soldier — from centurions in ancient Rome all the way up to United Systems Colonial Forces grunts like me — would recognize. Something about the planet's magnetic field plays hob with communications, so we rely on the classics more often than not.

The sergeant waves us forward impatiently. He hasn't even spared a look for Spank, lying crumpled in the mud. He probably figures there'll be time for that later. Maybe he just doesn't care.

*Marcus.*

My friend's name is Marcus. It pops into my head while we're regaining our feet, as quietly as possible. I still can't remember his last name or whatever nickname he goes by, but it's a start and somehow it makes me more comfortable in his presence. It's the two of us against however many of Them are hiding out there. Probably a lone scout or sniper,

otherwise we'd be full-on engaged by now. Marcus plunges into the green ahead of me and I make a mental note to thank him later. It's important.

I sneak forward in a duck walk, hot on his heels. The sergeant doesn't follow, but I catch flashes of movement all around us and what little I see tells me enough to know it's the rest of our squad spreading out in a circle, hoping to surround the enemy. It's one of the standard engagement plans we've been taught — one of the most basic, but part of me is still proud to remember it.

When I think I'm in position I stop, drop to one knee and listen. I can see Marcus not far off and another guy who calls himself Dozer Dave; stupid nickname, but a nice guy. He catches my eye and gives me the barest nod. I don't bother reciprocating; he knows, he'll understand.

Another minute of fearful silence, then the sergeant's voice rings out a little ways off. "All clear!"

I get to my feet, trying not to think about the miles of marching yet to do, the hours still to go in my greasy, mud-soaked clothes, or how chafed I already am. Dozer Dave walks over, smacks me lightly on the back as he passes and grins without saying a word, before heading off in the direction of the sergeant's voice. Marcus begins that way, too, but I stop him with a hand on his shoulder.

"Hey," I say, trying to keep the shaking in my knees and the ice still sitting in the bottom of my belly out of my voice. "Thanks. For back there."

He sneers. "Save it. Next time someone says 'cover', you drop or get shot, dipshit. Your ass ain't my responsibility."

I don't know what I expected him to say, but it wasn't that. I guess it's as valid a response as any.

I swallow, avert my eyes and nod but he's already walking away. I hurry after him to avoid being left alone, feeling stupid and ashamed but trying not to show it. Not that he could see it anyway with his back to me.

In a clearing barely big enough for two men, the eight remaining members of our squad crowd around Sergeant Rickard, who stands with his hands on his hips, staring upwards at the jungle canopy. "We'll call that a 'dry run'." He doesn't bother looking at any of us as he speaks.

"Wherever that bastard was, he's long gone now and since he got his 'prize shot', I doubt he'll trouble us again." He sniffs and wipes a bit of mud away from his cheek, like he's stalling to think about what he'll say next. "For a first engagement, most of you did just fine," he continues, finally turning his head from the branches and vines above us and now looking directly at me. "The rest of you'll get it or you won't. Even I can't make a soldier out of everyone." He clears his throat, looks around at the rest of the young men standing near him. The sergeant probably isn't even forty, but most of us are half that.

Rickard turns away from me, points at a pair of guys somehow less muddy than the rest of us, standing on the opposite end of the little clearing. "Davis and Ronstadt, go grab what's left of Private Spanczyk. No man left behind, useless or not."

I was right the second time. He doesn't care.



We resume our march without incident. Six hours later, my belly is cramping from hunger and my legs are so tired I can no longer feel them when we stop at last and make camp on the edge of a rare stretch of open, unforested land, covered in tall, tawny-colored grasses.

As I peel off my boots and the sodden, disgusting rags that used to be socks, the sergeant walks by, watching me as he passes. He doesn't say a word, but the corner of his mouth twitches and I know what he wants to say: *Useless. Only difference between you and Spank is he wasn't lucky.*

I turn back toward the campfire someone else built and I'm only sharing, knowing he's right. My face is hot, but it's not from the flames. I couldn't make it back home: couldn't cut it at university, couldn't find a job after dropping out. What made me think I belonged out here where I can't even run away again? I'm not a soldier — I'm a liability.

Someone taps me from behind; I turn my head and see it's Dozer Dave. He's smiling as he claps a hand on my shoulder. Before I can think of something to say he says, in a voice calculated to reach only my ears, "Fuck 'em," and walks away, leaving me to dry my feet alone.

I stare into the fire for a while then pull an MRE box from my pack, thinking of how bad they taste but glad they'll at least assuage the pain in my gut. It's then, thinking of taste, I notice there's a saltiness already on my lips. I swipe at my face and my fingers come away wet. I look up to see Marcus sitting on the other side of the little fire, shaking his head in disdain. Damn it, am I actually crying? How long has he been there, anyway?

I start to wipe at my eyes with my palms and remember what Dozer Dave said. *Fuck 'em.*

Maybe he's right. I can't be the only one who feels like this; the only one who had no idea what he was signing up for. I *know* I'm not the only one who misses home and I'd bet I'm not the only who's shed desperate tears, thinking about how hopeless his situation is. I'm just the one who got caught.

I look over at Marcus again, now wolfing down a meal ration of his own. Marcus who saved my life then called me a dipshit. His gaze flicks up toward me, and I flash a little grin,

tears still crawling through the filth coating my cheeks. His brow furrows a little in confusion then he turns his attention back to what passes for food.

I shift away from the tiny strip of grassland we've made camp on, back toward the jungle. Though we cut a path as we traveled, it's already beginning to disappear; the brush is rushing in to fill the gap, unnaturally fast by Earth standards. Within a couple of hours, it'll be like we were never here. I spent nearly a full day stumbling and sweating through mud, vines and lord knows what else and it's almost like it never happened. I realize once again that I was wrong: this place isn't angry at our intrusion — it's completely indifferent. The jungle has been here forever and maybe it always will be. We're merely a passing irritation, an inconvenient blip in the cycle of its life and it won't give us the satisfaction of its attention. The sergeant was right; the verdure does have a lesson to teach, just not the one he thought.

I smile again as I peel open the plastic food container on my lap and dig in. They may never make a soldier out of me, but Dozer Dave, with two little words, has somehow awakened my inner philosopher. Just like that I'm an adherent of what may be the universe's simplest, but most profound school of thought.

*Fuck 'em.*



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Brandon Barrows lives in the shadow-haunted hills of Vermont with his wife and a pair of elder spawn cats, writing comic books, prose and poetry. His detective comic series *Jack Hammer* is published by Action Lab Comics and *Voyaga*, a science fiction graphic novel, was published by AAM/ Markosia, both with art by Ionic. His horror one-shot *Red Run* was published by Alterna Comics, and he has contributed to the New York Times-bestselling anthology *Fubar* from Fubar Press.

# Million Hearts in the Valley of Death

Savannah Hendricks

**T**he stack of red is rather high, but I toss mine in anyway. A few others slide down, like unstable tomatoes piled strategically at the grocery store. I arrived sooner than one would anticipate, but I'm far from alone. A steady line of men and women slowly walk up to the pile and toss, adding to the stack. Over time I can no longer see mine.

The wind hits the dust and we cover our eyes, getting only glimpses of the sand caressing over the red. Then the wind passes and it's calm once again. Miles of small mounds covered in a dusting of sand remain like grave markers.

"Where do we go now?" I ask a man to my right, rethinking the question... "What do we do now?"

The man laughs. "We go home and start over again."

A rusted silver bus pulls up and we meander near, robotically boarding one at a time. I take a seat next to the man with the greedy laugh minutes ago.

"I hope you aren't already looking," the man states.

My hand moves up to cover my lower neck. "Already? No, I mean why would you even assume that? All I did was sit down."

"It starts that way, every time. I never should have even answered your question, yet it seems that is the flow of it all."

"The flow of what exactly?" Looking around I noticed every set of seats has a woman and man in them.

"Love. It doesn't matter what caused it; we always return, trying once again."

"Oh, well I'm not looking for it anymore. I," emphasizing with boldness, "don't need it."

"Of course you don't, neither do I." The man extends his hand towards me. I'm Randal." He shakes my hand with great gentleness.

"Beth," I say, shaking his hand in return.

Randal gives an auspicious smile, taking his time to let go of my hand.



Savannah Hendricks is the co-author of *Child Genius 101: The Ultimate Guide to Early Childhood Development* (Vol 1, 2 & 3), with her first picture book, *Nonnie and I* releasing this fall. Savannah's career has included working with special needs preschoolers, a nanny, and a case manager. She holds degrees in early childhood education and criminal justice/criminology. She loves spending time with her two dogs and loves football season. Her stories have been included in over 20 children's magazines, and she has been a member of the SCBWI since 2006.

# The Fine Art of Fortune-Telling

Michelle Ann King

"She's not in," I say. "She probably forgot all about it, I told you she's flaky like that. Come on, let's go. We can get something to eat on the way home. Pizza would be nice."

Alan looks at my hand, which is gripping his elbow, and then at his finger, which is still on the doorbell. "It's usually traditional to wait until the bell stops ringing before you decide nobody's going to answer it."

His tone is mild but his eyes are disapproving. I stop tugging at his arm. My husband is blessed with both a tolerant nature and a well-developed sense of decency, which is one of the reasons he's so perfect for me. His expression is my litmus test of good behavior.

And it clearly isn't considered decent to try to duck out of your own mother's memorial ceremony, especially in favor of a trip to Pizza Express. Even Alan's tolerance has some limits. In my husband's world, when your parents die you mark the occasion appropriately. And since I like his world and want to carry on living in it, that's what I've agreed to do.

Of course, it's the 'appropriately' part that's likely to cause the trouble.

The door opens. I sigh and face front. "Hello, Auntie," I say. "It's good to see you. You look very well. This is my husband, Alan."

Three statements, one of them true. I prefer to avoid outright lies if I can — vagueness and general obfuscation are usually more effective anyway — but I've learned that in the case of social etiquette, lying is pretty much unavoidable.

Alan gives her his most charming smile. "It's very nice to finally meet you, Hope."

Social etiquette isn't something my family ever bothered to study. Hope looks him up and down, then leans forward and sniffs him. "Prig," she says, and shrugs. "You always had weird tastes, girl." She holds the door open. "Come in then, if you're coming."

I try to throw Alan an "it's not too late for pizza" look, but he either doesn't catch it or ignores it. Instead, he steps inside.

The hallway's been painted since I was last here; the black walls are a much more attractive apple-white now, with a nice accent of olive green gloss on the woodwork. It makes all the carved runes and sigils stand out a lot more, but I suppose you can't have everything.

As I pass them, the symbols briefly re-align themselves to spell out *this is not going to end well* — in five different languages, in case I didn't get the point — then resume their former positions. I hate it when hallways get all smart-arse on me. Luckily, Alan doesn't seem to have noticed.

"Make yourselves at home," my aunt calls out as she slips through the seventh door on the left. "You know where everything is. I'm just finishing up with a client, I won't be long."

Alan looks around, wide-eyed. "This is a hell of a big house," he says. "It doesn't look like it from the road, but it must be massive. Has it been extended?"

"Something like that," I say, and lead him into the kitchen.

That surprises him, too. "But this is tiny. House like this, I thought it'd be huge."

I grab the kettle and shuffle past him to get to the tap. "My aunt's not a big cook."

"Mmm," he says. "I can see that." He's standing in front of the open fridge, which contains an empty ice tray, a dish of chicken bones and a box of candles. "I hope you're going to be okay with your coffee black, because there's no milk." He shuts the fridge and opens a couple of the cupboards. "Or any sugar. Or any anything."

He holds up a jar half-full of something that looks suspiciously like toenail clippings. "Doesn't look like she's a big eater, either. I can't see a single thing in here that might be remotely edible."

I wave a hand. "Oh, she's always on some diet or other. She's probably got loaves of bread and chocolate bars stashed in secret hiding places all around the house. Don't worry about it."

The kettle starts to boil with a sulphurous smell. I flick it off. "What say we don't bother with the coffee, eh? I'm sure she won't be long."

"Fine by me," he says, wrinkling his nose and replacing the lid on an ornate silver canister of something that probably wasn't Nescafé.

By the time I dump the foul water out of the kettle — I dread to think what she's been brewing in there — and turn round, Alan's wandered back into the hallway. "So what kind of client has she got down there?" he asks.

I follow him. Behind me, the kitchen door closes. It doesn't do much to shut off the smell. "Don't worry, Hope's not a prostitute. She's—" I hesitate for a second: is this much less embarrassing? "She's a fortune-teller."

Alan's eyebrows attempt to join his hairline. "For real?"

I wonder if he still thinks it's strange that I've never talked about my family much. "For real."

"Is she any good?"

"She's accurate. I'm not sure how many of her clients think that's actually a good thing."

Alan edges up to the doorway of what Hope calls her receiving room.

"We probably shouldn't disturb her," I say, reaching out for his arm, but he's already pulling apart the beaded curtain hanging in the doorway to peer into the room beyond.

Currently, she's receiving a young woman with pale skin and tiny features that she overcompensates for with a huge expanse of frizzy red hair. The two armchairs are angled at

forty-five degrees to each other and are the kind of soft, overly plumped up ones you sink into rather than sit on, but Frizzy is somehow managing to perch on the edge of hers. Everything is pressed firmly together: knees, hands and lips. There's a tarot deck on the coffee table, and she's eyeing it hungrily.

I'm glad to see the cards. Hope can read anything, and likes to prove it. I've watched her read palms, tea leaves, biscuit crumbs, a waste bin full of used tissues and the pattern of dandruff on the shoulders of a man's jacket. My aunt, the Psychic Dandruff Reader.

"What's your question?" Hope asks Frizzy.

"I want to know when I'm going to meet my future husband," Frizzy says.

Hope rolls her eyes, but hands over the deck. "Shuffle."

Frizzy does as she's told, handling the cards like an expert. She cuts the deck and gives it back to Hope, who turns over the top card.

"Nineteen years," she says. "Next question?"

Frizzy blinks at her. "Excuse me?"

"When you'll meet your future husband. Nineteen years' time. Third of December, probably about half past eleven. You might want to put it in your diary. Now, if there's nothing else, I've got business to attend to. That'll be fifteen pounds, please."

Frizzy gapes. Hope smiles pleasantly, not showing her teeth. There's a shift in the air, like a blast of hot breath. I close my eyes and dream briefly of an alternate universe where I'd managed to persuade Alan to turn tail at the door and spend the evening happily scoffing thin crust mushroom and olive pizza.

Beside me, Alan tenses. "What was that?" he whispers.

"What was what?" I ask, even though I know exactly what he's talking about.

"Didn't you hear it? It sounded like a laugh. A weird kind of laugh."

"Nope. Didn't hear anything." I take hold of his hand. "Why don't we leave them to finish up? We could pop back outside for a bit, get some fresh air. I could do with a cigarette."

"You don't smoke," he says, but it's distracted and he won't look at me. He pulls his hand out of mine. "That noise, it sounded like it was coming from—" He stops, looking behind me. "Jane? Wasn't the kitchen back that way?"

I'm saved from having to answer by Frizzy. "If you think I'm paying you for that, you're crazier than you look," she says.

She jumps to her feet, working up some righteous anger. "You're a fraud. Clearly, you just want to make people think their lives are going to turn out as sad and miserable as yours is."

Oh dear. Beside the doorway, the hallway wall flickers. *This is definitely not going to end well*, it declares. I have to agree.

Alan jumps and lifts his hand to brush the painted plaster. "Jane? Did you just see—"

Frizzy cuts him off again. "I've been to three other readers and they all told me that I..." she trails off, watching Hope gather up her cards. "That's a weird deck," she continues. "That's not the one you just had, is it? What is that? It looks — is it some kind of Lovecraft deck?"

"Pretty, isn't it?"

"Uh—"

"And you know what? It has another prediction about your future. Because now I don't think your future involves meeting a husband in nineteen years' time. I don't think it involves meeting a husband at all."

Frizzy backs up a step. Finally, she looks nervous. She was lagging behind me by at least five minutes on that. "I don't think I want another reading. I mean, thanks. But that's all right. I think I'll just go now."

"Do you?" Hope says, laying down a card. It's very large, and very brightly colored. Most of the color is red. "Do you really think that?" She smiles again, and this time she shows her teeth.

Frizzy screams.

The room door — and I would have sworn there wasn't a door before, just the bead curtain — slams shut, which makes Alan let out a little breathless shriek of his own.

In truth, I feel a little breathless myself. The heat in the house has become stifling.

"We should probably go," I say.

He swallows hard, still staring at the door. "But what about your mother, the memorial service?"

My Alan. Still concerned about doing the decent thing.

I shake my head. "I don't think that particular ceremony is one you really want to see."

He stares at me for a long time then backs up a step, just like Frizzy. The look on his face isn't much different, either. "Who is that, in there? Who is she?" His voice drops again. "What is she?"

"She's my aunt."

"Aunt. You mean family friend, right? Not actual family. You're not related. Not by—" he falters on the last word, then recovers. "Blood."

I want to say "no, of course not," because how could that be? How could I be kin to the thing he glimpsed through that door?

I want to agree, to reassure him that he's right, that his wife is still just his wife, that nothing's changed, that the fabric of the world hasn't ripped open for a little while, exposing something unspeakable underneath.

I want to leave, walk out of this house and go home. I want "unspeakable" to be not just a description but a command: we'll never mention this place, or my Aunt Hope, again. Things will settle down, go back to normal. Alan will fall back into his old role of protective,

mentoring husband. I'm a little eccentric, yes, I have some emotional issues, yes, but we have a good life. He knows that, to the best of my ability, I love him.

And life will go on, and we will be happy, and all will be well.

Except that it won't, will it?

Alan is optimistic, positive and naturally good-natured, and that has carried us a long way. But he isn't a fool. He knows what he saw here today, and what it means. I can see that knowledge in his eyes, even as he's begging me to tell him it isn't so.

My Happy Ever After blows apart like a house of cards, as it's done so many times before.

I've tried so hard to keep us out of all this, but it never works. Wherever we go, my mother's always found us and set off some variation of the same chain of events. Alan finds out the truth. Then he leaves me, or he dies. That's her idea of a happy ending.

I've been an idiot to think that just because she's dead, she can't still fuck with me.

I thought we could manage the one evening. Just one evening with Hope, who's almost as assimilated as I am. I thought we could drink the toast to my mother's name (there was a little flask of red wine in my handbag for Alan, he would never have noticed) say our goodbyes and that would be an end to it, once and for all.

Like I said. Idiot.

"Jane?" Alan says. His hand is reaching out to me but his feet are backing him away. The hallway's opened up even wider now, and he glances nervously down it.

"I'm sorry," I say. My throat is tight and the words hurt as they force their way out. My voice cracks. "I didn't want this to happen. I never do."

His eyes widen. "I don't understand," he says. It comes out plaintive.

The sounds from behind Hope's door are increasing in volume. Her blood's up now, and I don't know where it might stop.

"Run," I tell him, even though it breaks what I have of a heart. "Just run, Alan."

I expect him to refuse, at least to argue. He's stood his ground beside me in worse situations before. But he doesn't.

Can there be some element of transference, some kind of access to a collective pool of memory? I don't know how that might be possible, but there's a depth of understanding — understanding and fear — in Alan's eyes that he doesn't have any right to. He hasn't earned it yet, this time round.

Nevertheless, he runs. He leaves me behind without a second glance and runs.

Some interminable time later, the noises stop. The heat fades, and that painful, sliding sense of dislocation eases off. Planes and angles drift back into normal configurations. The house feels like a suburban semi again rather than a disjointed, unhinged little corner of the universe that's grinding and scraping against the rest like nails against slate.

The door opens and Hope comes out.

"Oops," she says.

She wipes her mouth and looks around. "Your fella go home?"

"He went somewhere."

She gives me a sheepish look. "Sorry about that. It's just with the, you know, occasion and everything. I got a bit carried away. Didn't mean to embarrass you."

I shake my head. "You know, Alan's dad is an alcoholic. I've heard all the stories about family dinners spoiled by Alan Senior getting drunk and picking a fight, crying or throwing up in his Sunday roast. That's what you call getting carried away. That's embarrassing. This is—" I stop. What's the point? This is my life.

Plaster dust is still falling from the ceiling. Hope brushes it off my shirt. "Tell you what," she says brightly, "I'll do you a reading, make it up to you."

"No thanks, Auntie."

"But it's a good one, look." She hovers her hand over my sleeve, tracing the swirled pattern of white smears on the black cotton. "You're going to get him back," she says. "You're going to start over, and it's all going to be fine."

"Not this time. Not anymore." I push her hand away. "Shall we just get this done?"

"Suit yourself."

I follow her back into the kitchen, now returned to its usual place at the end of the hall. She picks up the silver canister Alan left on the counter and pours out the thick, viscous blood into two chipped water glasses. "I couldn't find the bone goblets," she says. "I think they're in the basement, but it's been a bit... unsettled down there, so I left it. It's the thought that counts, right?"

She raises her glass, the contents glinting red on black in the late afternoon sun. "We honor our fallen," she says. "We drink of Her blood so that She may live forever in us, her clan in flesh. We hold Her name in our hearts and Her memory in our minds."

She takes a mouthful of the blood and continues the recitation. I tune it out.

When she's finally done, she looks at me. "Your turn."

I raise my glass and swallow the contents down in one go. "Whatever," I say, and slam the glass back down on the table.

Her lips purse in reproach. "There is such a thing as going too native, you know."

"Are we finished, now?"

"Not quite. There's the matter of your legacy."

"My what?"

"She left you something. The titles, estates and all the family stuff go to me under rite of succession, obviously, but she didn't forget you. Much as some might think she was entitled to."

"What are you talking about?"

She leads me towards one of the wall units, which she opens with a flourish. "All yours."

This cupboard was empty when Alan went looking for sugar, I'm sure. But now there's a single item on the bottom shelf. A small pouch made of old, dark leather.

I don't need to open it to know what's inside. It looked different every time I stole it, but it always felt the same. It's been a grimoire, a cauldron and even — on one memorable occasion — a 16 foot catamaran. Blasting through into a parallel dimension in the middle of a Formula 1 offshore powerboat race was a hell of an experience. But whatever it appears to be, when you get up close it always feels like swarm of ants, crawling and nipping just under your skin. Its abilities are easy to access but horrible to use. Maybe there was supposed to be a lesson in that.

I look at my aunt, who nods. "It's yours now."

Of course it is. Now that I don't want it, she gives it to me. That's how it works with my mother.

I shut the cupboard door and resist the urge to scratch every inch of exposed skin. "Thanks, but no thanks."

Hope just smiles. "Be nice if things were that easy, wouldn't it?"

"Goodbye, Auntie."

I can still hear her laughing by the time I get outside the house.

Alan isn't waiting there for me. He isn't at home, either. His stuff is all still there, but that doesn't necessarily mean much. More than once, things have got bad enough for him to run with nothing but the clothes on his back.

This could be one of those times.

I go into the kitchen. Unlike my aunt's, it's well stocked. I have developed quite a taste for food.

In the cupboard that should have been overflowing with crisps and peanuts, the shelves are empty. Empty except for a single leather pouch. It falls from the shelf into my hand, and I can hear the faint, soft sound of laughter.

The trouble with this sort of power is that if you don't use it — don't give it the occasional workout, so to speak — it leaks. Makes holes. Fuck knows what plane of reality my Doritos are now existing on.

I toss the pouch from hand to hand. It's heavy.

I swore to myself — and to Alan, not that he remembers — that I wasn't going to do this anymore. I've lost count of how many different Alans there have been, by now. Dozens. More. All of them have loved me, and one way or another that's fucked up their lives. I never meant for it to turn out that way, but that doesn't make it all right.

But like it or not, it belongs to me now. I tried to refuse it, and yet here it is. If I try to ignore it, it'll eat my house.

Once more, then. Just once more.

After all, things are different now. My mother, the usual catalyst for trouble, is dead. Aunt Hope won't seek me out the way her sister did; she doesn't hate me that much. I've learned such a lot — surely with no more outside interference, this won't happen again. Once last time will pay for all.

I pull the drawstrings of the pouch open and reach inside. It's a ring this time, a chunky, hideous signet ring inset with a huge green stone. I slip it on my finger, which immediately goes numb.

When I can see again, I'm standing in the doorway of the Nags Head at the Angel, Islington.

This is always where it begins. Sometimes her name is Kerry and sometimes it's Kelly; sometimes they work together at a bank and sometimes at a financial services firm, but they've always just broken up and he's always lost and vulnerable.

I look a little like her, except that I'm taller, thinner and have a larger chest. I didn't do that deliberately, it's just one of those complicated by-products.

It's a Friday in late June — it always is — and the day is beautiful and clear. The sky is a deep, dreaming blue, lightly gauzed in places with thin cloud. The street is full, shoppers and workers weaving in and out, sunglasses and bare shoulders and the sweet, drifting sound of a radio above the growl of the slow-moving traffic.

I push my fringe off my face, and walk inside the pub. The change from bright sunlight to dingy dimness is sudden, but I don't exactly have to wait for my eyes to adjust. They're used to darkness.

It's a deceptively big pub once you get inside, narrow but deep. At the bar I choose the stool right next to Alan and order a Bushmills, straight up. Irish whiskey is Alan's drink, and Kerry/Kelly hates it. She only drinks red wine, and is quite a snob about it. She doesn't like pubs, especially this one, which is why Alan always comes here to get over her.

I drink my shot. The bright heat burns out the taste of my mother's blood, and I order another. My hands are still itching. The barman serves me with a grin, and this time Alan looks up. "Bad day?"

"You have no idea." I pick up my refilled glass and hold it out. "Here's to better fortunes."

He nods and picks up his own glass. "I like that. To better fortunes."

We drink. "I had my fortune told today, in fact," I tell him. "She said I'm going to get together with the love of my life and live happily ever after."

The barman snorts. I slap my empty glass down on the bar and point at Alan's. "Buy you another?"

He laughs and swivels on his stool to face me. "Well, if it's written in the stars... who am I to argue with destiny?" He holds out his hand. "I'm Alan."

The barman is rolling his eyes now, but he still pours our drinks. I've actually always loved that slight formality of Alan's, that air of a bygone courtliness. Apart from him, my lovers have been as interested in eating me as fucking me.

I take his hand. "Jane. Very pleased to meet you."

He doesn't flinch from my touch, nor object when I hold on slightly too long for politeness. But then why would he? You can't tell, not physically. Not if I don't want you to.

Alan smiles, takes out his wallet and pays for the drinks. "Jane, would you like to go and get something to eat?"

I smile back. "Why not? Pizza would be nice."



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Michelle Ann King was born in East London and now lives in Essex. She writes mainly SF, dark fantasy and horror — probably due to a childhood spent reading Stephen King and watching zombie films. She has worked as a mortgage underwriter, supermarket cashier, makeup artist, tarot reader and insurance claims handler before having the good fortune to be able to write full-time. She loves Las Vegas, zombie films and good Scotch whisky. Michelle's stories have appeared in various venues, including *Daily Science Fiction*, *Penumbra Magazine*, and *Drabblecast*.

# Marshmallow Walls

Brittany Foster

I lay like all of the others, restrained and silent and calm. Cold and alone, like a single rock on a frozen shore. Content in my ignorance and blissful in my numbness. The occasional scream will penetrate these soft marshmallow walls, but more often than not it is completely silent here... until the voices come. The crying, pleading voices that consume me and slice through me like razor blades doused in vinegar. They come just before the pretty ladies in white. Those pretty ladies in white know how to make the voices go away.

My body is numb. So is my mind. I lack the capacity to communicate in totality. I am a wraith now, listless and dead but still living. Perhaps I always have been, but perhaps not. I lay, staring at nothing, day after day after day. Rubbing my face against the white softness that surrounds me.

Today I feel a strange sensation in my body. A tingling in my limbs and a spark behind my eyes, in that place that is often quiet and asleep. My consciousness is waking and I am afraid. My muscles contract and release as I begin to rock back and forth, back and forth, feeling my body press into the soft white. I see faces forming before my eyes. Screaming, terror-filled, pleading faces. I hear their voices, but I don't know what they are saying. They are covered in red, like candy apples that haven't been coated quite enough. The whites of their eyes and teeth are bright and stark in all that red. The faces become more clear, and they look... familiar? I feel a tug inside my chest. I know these faces. But how? Who are they?

I listen to the voices, trying to hear the words, trying to connect them to myself. My skin feels cold and bumpy as the crying voices rip through my brain and fear dances through my bones. Slicing, tearing, and slashing with barbed wire shoes. The faces blaze behind my eyelids, and I feel something. I feel that I loved those faces. I had something with those faces. Those red screaming candy apple faces. I remember a woman. All blue eyes and long brown hair. The subtle curve of her hip against my palm and the sublime smoothness of her skin. A whisper in the dark and lips against my ear. I remember a child with bright eyes and wild curls floating around her face, her small hands like starfish. I remember why I am here, and where I am, and who I was before.

I scream from the very depths of my insides, trying to drown the voices. Drown the pain and memory and loss. I hear someone yell and I don't know if it's me or just the memory of a voice. I thrash around in my bed. This torture, this pain, this memory. It's peeling the skin from my body and gnawing through my flesh. I scream louder and kick at the walls, trying to push everything out and away. I smell the sharp sweet tang of copper and remember

the stickiness of blood on my fingertips. I throw my head back, hoping to end this in sweet blackness, but it meets softness. Everywhere is softness in this room.

I hear a click and it's the pretty ladies in white. But they aren't pretty to me anymore. They are salvation and damnation all wrapped in white and smelling of soap. I throw myself forward and gnash my teeth. I know what they have come for, and I cannot decide what I want: memory and freedom or ignorance and restraint? I feel like it would be blasphemy to forget the faces and torture to remember. The ladies come, making sounds that I can't hear. One holds my head against her white soft body, pulling my jaws apart. Warm wetness slips over my lip and down my chin. My skin becomes cool as the saliva dries. The other slips a hard white something into my mouth. I can taste the bitterness in the back of my throat, and I don't know if it's from the white thing or my own bile rising up. It is so far back that I have to swallow. In order to scream at those voices I need to get rid of that thing in my throat. I swallow and then I shriek. I can feel it leave my body in an unimposing and sorrowful way.

The ladies leave, watching me through a tiny window in my door. I lay, remembering, suffering, a tortured and dying soul, until the voices leave. I reach out to them, afraid to let them fade. The faces and the voices go away, melting into the darkness behind my eyelids. They are gone, and I am alone. I am restrained and silent, and calm. Cold and alone. Content in my ignorance and blissful in my numbness. Protected by these marshmallow walls.



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Brittany Foster is a wordsmith living in Canada with a passion for the dark, twisted, and macabre. She went to Ryerson University in Toronto where she studied Publishing and has been working with books, authors, and words ever since. She makes a practice of reading copiously, writing when she feels the need, and drinking vast amounts of tea with far too much sugar. When she is not reading, writing, working, or entertaining her husband and pets, she enjoys playing video games, gardening, and politics.

# Grimm's Home for Geriatrics

Rebecca Demarest

## Staff Briefing Notes on the Residents

- Cinderella has been leaving her right slipper in the stairwells again. Please make sure to pick it up and return it to her when you find it; we've already had one staff member fall and we don't need a repeat of last year's run on hip replacement surgeries. We're not sure how she keeps getting out of her ward, so please keep an eye out for her fairy godmother or any talkative mice.
- Pinocchio has developed a splintering condition. I only bring this up as we need to make sure to keep Aurora well away from him. I hardly need to remind you all that her narcoleptic condition is triggered by the pricking of her finger and Pinocchio is leaving a mile-wide trail of splinters behind him.
- Little Bo Peep has been set off frequently over the last week, by whom, we're not sure, but please make sure to find and stop whatever joker keeps asking her where her sheep are. She's reached her limit on sedatives and the side effects are starting to show.
- Please remind the therapy dog handlers that Belle's room is off-limits. She keeps thinking up new ways to 'express her love' to the poor animals, trying to turn them back into her husband. The last thing we need is the ASPCA picketing outside. Nor do we need the publicity of having any of our residents arrested for bestiality.
- We discovered yesterday that Hansel and Gretel have been hoarding their arthritis and heart medications to use as markers should someone decide to lead them out into the woods again. Make sure when you give them their pills they actually swallow them.
- If you're serving on the cafeteria line, do not give Jack any beans; he has been burying them in the fake plants. In other news, we've discovered where the atrocious smell was coming from in Ward 2, and all the planters have been sanitized.
- Finally, Ariel has been restricted to sponge baths only. Her dementia has progressed to the point where she no longer remembers she hasn't had gills for decades and insists on running baths in an effort to prove to the staff that she can breathe underwater. Regardless of how persuasive she sounds, don't be fooled, she cannot.

That's it for today guys. Thanks for your attention, and may your day be happily ever after.



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Rebecca Demarest is an author, designer, and illustrator living in Boston, MA. She has had stories published in several journals including Epiphany and Far Off Places, and her first novel, *Undeliverable*, debuted in 2014. In her spare time, she crochets, gardens, and goes climbing with her boyfriend.

# JC The Ski Bum

Joyce Reynolds-Ward

"Jesus taught me how to ski," the kid in the bright orange ski pants said to the middle-aged lady next to me on the chairlift.

She barked a sharp but friendly laugh. "You mean Haysus, don't you? Didn't know they had a Latino ski instructor up here." She waved a hand toward the day lodge, the bright lights for night skiing casting shadows on the run below us.

"No bullshit," the kid insisted, pushing his goggles up onto his camouflage ski helmet. "Jesus. No Latino guy, the real thing. As in Jesus the Christ. The Son of God."

"Come on," the lady bantered. "You can't convince me of *that* chunk of blarney, Thomas."

"No, really, Mrs. K. Jesus's a ski instructor up here. How else did I learn to ski so well in two seasons?" Thomas scratched the scraggly soul patch on his chin.

"You're a natural athlete, kiddo," Mrs. K said, shaking her head. "Even if you *are* full of BS."

"For real, Mrs. K!"

"Tell me another one, Thomas. I might just believe *it*."

We approached the ramp. Mrs. K put up the bar, sliding off easily with Thomas and turning left while I turned right. I kept an eye on the kid as they headed down the run ahead of me. Both skied with the lithe grace of experienced skiers who could pick up the flow of the slope and the fall line with the greatest of ease. I stopped in front of two fir trees, the front one with the top freshly snapped off, to watch Thomas and Mrs. K as they approached the terrain park.

Mrs. K avoided the first rail but stopped downslope from it. The kid did a 180 and started skiing switch, gliding backward down the black diamond slope without a pause, glancing back to keep track of the rail. He rode the rail gracefully, then dismounted with another 180 and raced after Mrs. K.

I shook my head and prepared to follow them down the easier slope that angled off next to the terrain park. *Jesus the ski instructor*. Heard a lot from kids, but that? Mountain kids learned to ski quickly, especially if they had *any* athletic talent.

The faint scrape of metal edge on snow followed by a surprised warning Yelp! startled me. I looked up to see a big burly man careening in my direction, skis fixed in a snowplow wedge, sliding downhill far too fast for an easy stop. Before I could move away, he rammed me hard, sending me flying onto the sharp points of the broken tree, leaving me with just enough time to regret not wearing a helmet before blacking out.



It hurt like hell when I woke, lying on the snow next to the trees. The guy bending over me wore a red jacket — instructor jacket or ski patrol, I wasn't sure which. Icicles from the light snowfall crusted the ends of the reddish-brown hair poking out from under his helmet.

"You all right?" he asked, and I realized I'd heard him repeating that question for several moments before I was actually conscious enough to register what he was saying. The night ski lighting seemed to create a halo around his head. "Are you all right?" he repeated.

"I hurt," I said. "Hit my head, I think." I waved a hand somewhere toward where I thought the tree might be. To my surprise, moving my arm didn't hurt too badly.

He rested a bare hand on my head, and the pain lessened even more. For some reason I thought I saw a faint shadow of a divot in his wrist.

"He gonna be okay?" came from a harsher voice, much like the panicked yell from the guy who'd clobbered me.

"You got away with it, Pete. *This* time," the red jacket guy said.

"JC, look, you promised me this would work!" Pete blubbered. "I didn't want to hurt anyone."

"I said it would work if you listened to me and did what I told you to do," JC countered. "But no, you had to go and try *this* slope, see if you had a hand for tricking. I *told* you it wasn't clear."

"Didn't think it was *that* hard," Pete muttered.

"Yeah. Wasn't that what you said about crucifixion?"

Pete grumbled and pushed up beside JC to look down at me. "Look, man, I'm sorry. I miscalculated. You gonna be okay? What's your name?"

"His name's Casey," JC said.

My head was feeling better but I wasn't quite sure I was hearing them correctly. I must have really rung my chimes when my head smacked that trunk.

"I think so," I said slowly. I wiggled fingers, toes, and legs. All there. I ran my hands up and down my sides, surprised that my parka wasn't ripped and that I didn't have long pieces of wood sticking out of me. I did remember hitting those splinters, and a faint soreness suggested I'd remember it more tomorrow.

JC ran his fingers along my neck, then down my chest. "A few aches and pains, but nothing big. Don't think we need to call for a backboard — good thing, Pete. Be hard to explain what we're doing over on this run, because I'm not supposed to bring beginners over here. Why don't you get Casey's equipment, and I'll put him back on his feet?"

Pete muttered assent, while JC turned to me and helped me sit up. Now I could see the name plaque on his coat — JC, no further details. Odd thing though. He still seemed to have a fuzzy halo around his head.

Pieces started to come together. *Pete*. I looked over at the burly guy gathering up my skis, shaking his head mournfully as he looked down at one bent pole, and a ski woefully out of camber. He had that faint glow about his head as well. I looked back at JC. He'd slid his goggles up on his head, and I could see faint marks across his forehead. Goggle imprint, or something else? I squinted, but still couldn't make it clear. I began to doubt again.

"Up on the count of three," JC said. "One-two-three!" He eased me up, with less effort than I expected.

Pete trudged up. "Dude, his skis are wrecked." He offered up the ski bent the wrong way, along with the twisted pole.

JC made an annoyed sound and took the crooked ski. He pulled off his left glove and I spotted the shadow of that big divot in his wrist once again, before his parka slipped back over it.

"Pete, all it takes is a little twist and this stuff goes back into shape. It's not rocket science." He started to turn away from me.

"You taught that kid to ski, didn't you!?" I blurted. "Thomas. He said Jesus taught him how to ski."

Pete raised a brow at JC. "Thought you were going incognito, JC?"

JC scowled. "You know how kids are. Even hormonal, pubescent males with an eye for the girls. Can't fool any of them. He guessed it right away."

"The Old Man won't like it. We're not supposed to be coming back. Deities, saints, the works."

JC shrugged and handed me my straightened ski, which looked better than ever. "He's got his own shady history of sneaking down here and talking to folks in the desert all the time. We've got an agreement about me and skiing."

"Kids." Pete shook his head.

JC snorted and made no further pretense of what he was doing as he ran his hand down my ski pole. "There you are, Casey. Your equipment's all fixed, you're all fixed. Everything's been made right. Consider it a little local anomaly for your troubles."

"Thank you," I said. "But hey — any chance I can sneak in a lesson?"

After all, if Jesus himself was in fact a ski instructor, what kind of lesson could he be teaching? As a self-respecting ski bum, I wasn't going to pass up the chance.

Pete grinned at JC. "Gonna do it?"

JC shook his head ruefully. "The things I do," He paused for a moment. "Sure, why not? One of you to get down this slope, two of you, what's the difference?"

Pete laughed, and went to get his skis. JC and I snapped back into ours.

At first, the lesson was no different from any other I'd done with athletic beginners who learned skiing quickly. JC took us through the drills — poles lying vertical across our palms, facing our upper bodies downhill no matter which way we turned our hips and lower bodies. Then we whipped through the higher level drills, weight changes, quickly moving into pole plants and the next level of techniques.

Pete improved quickly from the rank beginner status capable of causing a wreck into a passable intermediate skier able to take on the black diamond runs at Treetop. My skills didn't pick up quite as quickly as Pete's but I still wasn't looking too bad. For once I could feel the fall lines and how they flowed down the slope. The three of us fell into a smooth, rhythmic pattern as we played with gravity down the steepest lines we could find on the lit runs.

"This is addicting," Pete panted at the top of one bowl that we'd hiked up, looking for unmarked snow. It was only slightly off of the beaten path. Even though this particular bowl wasn't lit, the light reflecting from the low hanging clouds was enough for us to see our way down.

JC grinned at him. "Best invention yet, hmm?"

"Beats fishing in the Dead Sea or shepherding any day. Gonna have to go talk to the Norse about this one. Sometimes those pagans come up with good ideas."

I laughed and pushed off first.

About halfway down this bowl, suddenly the snow around me snapped, the loud crack of a slab avalanche. I tried to beat it, but the avalanche caught me, sucking me in at waist level, before it tumbled me down the slope in a flood of white. I couldn't tell what was up or down as I rolled down the slope. One of my skis popped off and I lost track of my poles. I kept my hands in front of my face, trying to swim through the mass, fighting to keep a breathing space clear.

At last I came to a stop. I tried to move my arms and legs. Nothing. It was as if I were cast in icy cement. I could barely move my hands.

*So this is how it ends*, I thought.

Or was it? I clawed at the snow around me, enlarging my breathing space. If I were lucky, I'd only be a few inches under. As I worked through, I was able to free my arms and push them above my head — not that was any guarantee as to which end was up. But at least I had a decent breathing space carved out now.

Cold seeped through me. I wasn't wearing an avalanche transponder. I hadn't planned on skiing anywhere near an avalanche site. Yeah, I was skiing with JC and Pete, but who knew if they'd be able to find me? Or even — and this possibility struck me as I lay in the growing white cold — if it had all been a figment of my imagination? After all, there have been days when I could ski almost this well on my own.

*What a stupid move.*

On top of everything else, I started getting sleepy. Until now, I hadn't realized how tired I was. The rhythm of a good night's skiing kept me going. But now, my side ached, my head hurt, and the pain wasn't enough to distract me from the growing drowsiness. *Oh crap.* Hypothermia. Shock. I didn't dare give in. That'd lead to a final sleep.

At last I started murmuring a Rosary. Not much else to do. I went through several decades before my eyelids drooped, and my lips became heavy. At this point, the white stillness was mesmerizing. White was the color of death I decided, not black. And a white death seemed oddly comforting and satisfying.

I accepted the white, and passed under its curtain. Maybe I'd find out if tonight had been a dream, up until the avalanche.

Maybe not.



I woke coughing and choking, and colder than the deepest frozen depths of Hell. JC's hands on my shoulders were warm, and Pete's hands on my legs were almost as warm.

"Touch and go there," Pete said to JC.

"It's not his time," JC said. "You with us now, Casey?"

I nodded, not wanting to admit to the doubts that had crossed my mind.

Pete laughed softly. "Don't worry about it, Casey. Everybody has doubts now and then. You're looking at the King of second thoughts."

"We didn't find your stuff," JC said. "But we'll replace it for you."

I shook my head. "Guys, I think it's time to call it a night. I don't want to make it three."

"Enough for one night," Pete agreed. "Let's say we go to the Sasquatch Inn?"

"That dive?" I couldn't believe what he had said.

J.C. grinned broadly. "Best kind. Good food, good drink, and good company."

"But, but—"

Pete guffawed and slapped me on the back. "Don't believe the Old Man's propaganda. We had a lot of fun parties in the old days. Still do, when we can. Even invite a few other deities into the game." He winked at J.C.

"The water into wine is a dead giveaway, I'm afraid," said J.C., rolling his eyes. "Doesn't help that Loki has to switch it into mead every time."

"He's not on shift at the Squatch tonight, is he?" Pete scowled at J.C.

"Nah, I think his Old Man called him home on business. Haven't seen Loki or Thor all season."

"What are you talking about?" This whole situation was far too confusing.

"Don't worry about it, Casey." J.C. kicked out of his skis. "Tonight's on us, and we've got a tab at the Squatch. Mary'll slip us an extra pitcher, I've heard there's swag getting handed out tonight, and maybe even a couple of X-Games medalists feeling frisky for a few bar games. You've had a blessed night, so let's make it even better."

I couldn't argue with that. The only sweeter incentive could have been the presence of a lonely sponsor looking to fill a contract hole caused by someone else's bad luck.

Not my night for that much luck.

But Pete and JC fed me up, got me drunk, and poured me into my bed at the inn.



Next morning, I woke slowly. I hurt a little bit, certainly not as much as I should have. And, miracle of miracles, I didn't have a hangover!

But I sighed as I remembered my skis. I'd gotten rather fond of them. They'd taken me past the rank beginner up to a semi-confident intermediate who could tiptoe out on the easier blacks. And now-well, they were buried under the snow somewhere up in that anonymous bowl, and probably weren't in skiable shape.

On the other hand, the sacrifice was well worth the experience.

I dragged myself out of bed. Then something caught my eye. Two pairs of skis rather like the ones JC and Pete had been riding last night leaned against the wall. I checked them out, stroking the topsheets, inspecting the bindings. One was a nice pair of twintips, just what I needed to try my new tricking skills. The other was a nice pair of all mountain fat skis, perfect for powder skiing. My size. I checked the DIN settings on the bindings. My setting.

Then I spotted the note on the table.

*'Hope these work to replace your skis. Good riding. JC.'*

I half-grinned.

Below that, in a rougher hand—

*'Don't do anything I wouldn't do.'*

Pete hadn't signed it, but I knew it was him.

I laughed, and went off to breakfast with a lighter heart. Maybe I'd get lucky and run into them again. But if not — well, it'd been worth it.

Thomas and Mrs. K sat at a table by the window, looking out on the street below, as I helped myself to the lavish continental breakfast our inn offered. Thomas looked away from Mrs. K, and our eyes met. We studied each other for a moment, and then he grinned and gave

me a two-fingered wave. I waved back at him, then found a seat on my own, overseeing the slopes above the street.

It was, after all, another good ski day.



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Joyce Reynolds-Ward is a Portland, Oregon writer, skier, horsewoman, and special education teacher. Her novels *Pledges of Honor* and *Seeking Shelter at the End of the World* will come out from eTreasures Publishing in 2014, and her novels *Netwalk: Expanded Edition* and *Netwalker Uprising* are available through various retailers.

# Interview with Award Winning Author Mike Resnick

**M**ike Resnick is the author of more than 70 novels, 25 story collections, 250 short stories, 9 non-fiction books, and 3 screenplays, as well as the editor of more than 40 anthologies. He has been nominated for 36 Hugo Awards (a record for writers) and has won the award 5 times. In addition, he has won many other awards from places such as France, Japan, Spain, Croatia, Catalonia, and Poland. He is first on the Locus list of all-time award winners, living or dead, for short fiction, and 4th on the Locus list of science fiction's all-time top award winners in all fiction categories. In addition to all of this, Mike also produced a weekly column on horse racing for more than a decade, and for eleven years wrote a monthly column on purebred collies, which he and his wife bred and exhibited.

At *Fantasy Scroll Magazine*, we strongly believe that Mike Resnick holds the secrets to self-cloning.

## Q & A

**Iulian: Everyone starts somewhere, and most writers begin their career in a dark place filled with rejection and self-doubt. Could you paint us your beginnings? Was there a defining moment, a point in time when you knew you were going to be a writer for the rest of your life?**

Mike: I sold my first article at 15, my first poem at 16, my first story at 17, so in all honesty there was never a question of whether or not I could sell, but rather could I make a living at it. I took a job editing men's magazines and tabloids, wrote literally a couple of hundred anonymous novels in the "adult" field (not as rare a start for writers in the 1950s and 1960s as you might think), and have been a full-time freelance writer since 1969. It wasn't until I started selling science fiction regularly in 1981 that I knew I could concentrate on this field and ignore the others 95% of the time (though lately I've sold 3 mystery novels, just for a change of pace).

**What do you consider your biggest accomplishment as a writer and, related to that, what is your all-time favorite work?**

I think my greatest accomplishment as a writer, other than paying my way for 45 years, has been all those awards and nominations for so many different stories, which I hope implies that I have continued to write quality fiction over quite a long period of time. My best book is

clearly *Kirinyaga*, which is up to 67 nominations and awards world-wide. My bestselling book is *Santiago*, and my favorite of my own science fiction novels is *The Outpost*, which sank like a stone.

**You moved through your career to multiple-award-winning status and having more stories written than most people have read in their entire life — could you name some of your main influencers? I am talking about other writers, editors, maybe even people that are not related to writing in any way but had a mark on your career.**

I just love what I'm doing and work at improving it every day. Some reporter once asked Pablo Picasso what he did for a hobby, and he replied, "I paint." And the reporter said no, that was what he did for a living; what did he do for a hobby, to relax and enjoy himself. And Picasso said, "I paint." Me, I write.

I had quite a few million words in print before starting my science fiction career, and of course I had my own style and my own methodology. I suppose if any science fiction writers had much of an influence on me, they'd be my two favorites: C. L. Moore and Robert Sheckley. Though no one ever has or ever will influence me more than Carol, my wife of 52 years. I bounce every idea off her, accept almost all of her many suggestions, and never send a story out until she's approved it.

**You've edited quite a number of anthologies over the years. What is your process and what do you love most about these anthologies?**

All but one have been by invitation only. They don't pay enough for me to read 600 submissions, 80% of them sub-literate. This doesn't mean I don't buy from new writers. I bought more first stories in the 1990s than the 3 surviving digests combined. Anyway, I begin by inviting maybe a dozen established pros who I think will work well with the theme — all anthologies are created around themes these days — and whose names can go on the covers, and then I invite some newcomers whose work has either impressed me (in print, in workshops, online) or who have been recommended by some pro I trust.

**You are also the editor of *Galaxy's Edge*, a fairly new speculative fiction magazine that is available both online and in digital formats. How different is the process of editing a magazine versus editing anthologies. How do you find the time for it?**

It's actually a lot less work than an anthology, which will usually run about 20 new stories. *Galaxy's Edge* runs 4 reprints by big names that can sell/hype the magazine by their presence, and serializes a novel by another. In addition, we run columns by Greg Benford and Barry Malzberg, and we've begun interviewing a major pro every issue. This frees most of my editing time for the real purpose of the magazine: buying 5 or 6 new stories from new or

lesser-known writers. I agreed to edit it once the publisher agreed to the format, which permits half the fiction to be by new and newer writers.

**For *Galaxy's Edge* you elected to keep unsolicited submissions off and simply solicit work from writers directly. Is there an advantage to that model? Isn't that reducing the possibility of discovering new talent?**

I co-edited Jim Baen's *Universe* and worked on/with other pro-zines, and it's my experience that if you open them to submissions and pay pro rates, you'll get an absolute minimum of 500 slush stories a month, probably more. I just haven't got time for that, and the magazine doesn't yet have the budget for slush readers. As for finding new writers, I judge Writers of the Future every year, which exposes me to their 12 annual finalists; I've taught Clarion, and have bought from Clarion "grads"; other workshop leaders that I trust have been encouraged to send their best students to me; and of course I meet dozens of hopeful writers online and at conventions.

**A lot of writers aim to write things that can later be turned into TV Shows and movies. You've written screenplays before. Do you actively write for the screen and if you do, how is the process different? Which one of your books would you really like to see made into a blockbuster?**

No, I absolutely don't. I write for the market that's commissioned my book or story, and that's that. I've optioned maybe a dozen pieces to the movies over the years, but in every case they sought me out, I didn't walk in cold and try to hawk my stuff to them. As for the screenplays, I never write them on speculation; that's a fool's game. I write them only on assignment.

**In the second issue of our magazine, we've included your story "*Winter Solstice*," a Hugo nominee from 1992. Tell us a bit about this story: how did it come to be and what does it mean to you?**

I wrote that the day I found out that my mother-in-law had Alzheimer's. I kept wondering what it must be like to know every night when you go to bed that you will wake up a little less intelligent/cognizant the next morning, and I decided to work it out fictionally. I remembered that Merlin, in T. H. White's magnificent *The Once and Future King*, was said to be living backward in Time, though White never quite defined what that meant, and it seemed a perfect vehicle with which to explore the problem.

**Now a couple of questions that might not be directly related to your writing, but their subjects find their way into your inspiration one way or another. First one is Africa — your writing often shows influences from the African culture, and you've travelled to**

**Africa on several occasions. What is drawing you there and how has Africa affected your writing?**

First, it's a gorgeous and exotic continent, with societies that are totally unlike our own. (Example: none of the 43 languages spoken in Kenya had a word for "wheel" as recently as 1900 A.D.) More to the point, I think just about everyone will agree that if we can reach the stars we're going to colonize them, and if we colonize enough of them sooner or later we're going to come into contact with some sentient races. Africa offers 51 separate and distinct examples of the deleterious effects of colonization on both the colonized and the colonizers, and that makes it perfect raw material for a science fiction writer.

**The second question is about horses. You've produced a horse racing column for more than a decade, but you do not bet on races. Why is that? Are horses a source of inspiration? Give us some detail as to how you got involved with this.**

It seems to me that I have always loved horse racing. And I love it as a beautiful, colorful, exciting *sport*, not as a gambling proposition. I don't know when I fell in love with it, but I know that when I was 12 I took the money I'd made from a summer of caddying and subscribed to *The Blood-Horse*, a weekly magazine devoted to the sport and the thoroughbred, and last week I renewed it for the 60<sup>th</sup> year. Back in the mid-to-late 1950s when I lived in a northern Chicago suburb I used to cut high school classes to watch Swoon's Son and Bardstown and Doubledogdare work out in the mornings, and I've been known to fly to New York just to watch Seattle Slew take on Affirmed or Dr. Fager go up against Damascus. I know the sport intimately, which means I know that while as a better you can very occasionally beat the race, you can't beat the races. In fact, the one thing about the sport I dislike is that its primary support comes from the poor slobs who bet their unemployment and welfare checks on it.

**A lot of our readers are also writers. Notwithstanding the fact that there is no universal advice that works for every writer, what would be your personal advice to young, aspiring writers trying to break into publishing?**

A writer's one irreplaceable commodity is Time, and you can't afford to waste it. (I have not watched a single episode of any TV show since 1982. Not only do I not feel culturally deprived, but it's enable me to write an extra 35 to 40 books.) Another thing is to consider enrolling in one of the better writing workshops — Clarion, Writers of the Future, the one Nancy Kress runs in Taos, a few others. And remember the adage that anyone who *can* be discouraged *should* be discouraged. This is a *very* tough field to break into — or to stay in, for that matter — and if you let rejections or harsh criticisms discourage you, maybe you should take up birdwatching instead.

**Dear Mike, thank you very much for sharing your thoughts and wisdom with us.**



## Interview with Author Tim Pratt

**T**im Pratt is a science fiction and fantasy writer and poet. His work has appeared in a number of markets, including *Asimov's Science Fiction*, *Realms of Fantasy*, *Orson Scott Card's InterGalactic Medicine Show*, and *Strange Horizons*. His story *Little Gods* was nominated for Nebula Award for Best Short Story. His *Impossible Dreams* (Asimov's July 2006) won the Hugo Award in the Best Short Story category. Tim is also a senior editor at *Locus Magazine*. Above and beyond all that, he is also an awesome human being, which is why he kindly accepted to participate in an interview for our magazine. Thank you, Tim!

### Q & A

**Julian: Tim, your works began surfacing in the late 90s/early 2000s, and your career has exploded, in a good way, ever since. Tell us a bit about the time before the fame; how did you start, what pushed you to writing and when did you know you were ready?**

Tim: My six-year-old son knows I write books, and he asked me the other day if I was famous, and I said, "I am *tiny* famous. People who really, really love science fiction short stories might have heard of me. But mostly I am not famous." (Who wants to be famous, anyway? The famous writers I know spend a lot of time doing things that aren't writing — talks, interviews, book tours, getting six thousand emails a day — and I don't like doing those things as much. I'd take the money, though.)

But as for your actual question, I've been writing for as long as I could write, pretty much. I remember writing things in third grade, about kids who went to a bizarre alternate world full of monsters, but there's a story in a shoebox somewhere at my mom's house that I wrote in second grade, so I was clearly doing it by age 7 at least. I liked reading science fiction and fantasy and comics so I mostly wrote that sort of thing. I got a manual typewriter as a kid and later an electric typewriter — the latter changed my life. When I was a teenager I started submitting stories to magazines, a bit haphazardly — it was harder to find out how to do that sort of thing before the Internet, especially in rural North Carolina — and got more serious about doing so in college.

I made my first small-press poetry publications in 1998, and my first story publication in 1999 — I think I got paid ten dollars for that! In 2001 or so something clicked for me — I figured out how to write a certain kind of story pretty well, at least — and I started writing the stories that would be my first professional sales.

When you look at the timeline as a whole, I am revealed to be a very slow learner.

**Tell us a few words about non-writer Tim Pratt. How did you grow up, any particular influences in your life, and, of course, what (perhaps odd) jobs have you had before going full-time writer? Since writing, have you ever considered any other career?**

My assumption was always that I'd work some job I didn't care about and write on nights and weekends, pursuing my true passion. It pretty much went that way, except I stumbled into a job I *do* care about in late 2001, and have been there ever since.

But going back, I did the usual sort of crap retail jobs in high school, and in college worked in the Dean's Office of the College of Arts and Sciences for all four years. (That was great. Nice people, and lots of free meals, because whenever there was some fundraising event where they needed an honor student in attendance for local color, I was sitting there outside the dean's office, so I was an obvious choice.) After college I worked for an antique store (which was awesome and paid crap), and then by luck and happenstance stumbled into a gig as a copywriter for the in-house advertising department of a big-box hardware store. I worked there for six months, being paid more money than I'd ever seen in my life, but I didn't like the work much, even though my co-workers and boss were great.

I took that money I'd saved and moved more-or-less on a whim across country to Santa Cruz, California, driving three thousand miles in four days. My best friend was doing grad school out there, so we became housemates and I spent a year there sitting in cafes, writing my debut novel (*The Strange Adventures of Rangergirl*), and working for a wheelchair design/disability advocacy firm. (Which kind of cleansed my soul after working in advertising.)

Then I fell in love with my now-wife Heather and moved up to Oakland to be with her, and applied for a job at *Locus* magazine in the Oakland hills (it's a trade magazine covering SF/F publishing). I got hired as an editorial assistant in the fall of 2001 and have been there ever since — now I'm a senior editor, do most of the news writing and the obituaries, a lot of the layout, occasional book reviews, etc. I work there four days a week, and on the fifth day, I stay home and write books. It's pretty much the best day job a writer/editor can have, since I've met tons of people in my field, my bosses get it if I need time off for conventions or to hit a deadline, and there's an immense SF library in the basement.

When not working, I hang out with my family, cook, drink beer in my yard (weather permitting), read in a hammock (weather permitting), make boozy popsicles, and watch horror movies. My life revolves around love and art.

**You attended Orson Scott Card's workshop early in your career, and later on the Clarion Writer's Workshop. How important were these to you, how did they help you,**

**and would you recommend beginning writers to invest their time and money in such an event?**

I did a 10-day intensive workshop run by Orson Scott Card in 1996 (he had a relationship with the Interdisciplinary Studies program at my college, where he used to teach. It wasn't his "boot camp," though I think it was a similar setup). He was hugely encouraging, one of my first real supporters, and his support convinced me to keep pursuing writing at a time when I was thinking of giving it up in favor of something more practical.

In the summer of 1999, right after I graduated college, I went to the Clarion Writers Workshop and learned a lot. Many of my classmates are still hugely important to me personally and professionally (or both!). All my teachers had valuable insights to offer, but Michaela Roessner, James Morrow, Tim Powers, and Karen Joy Fowler all made particularly deep impressions on me. I think I would have become a decent writer anyway eventually, but they accelerated my development by years.

Clarion's not for everybody, but it was good for me. In general, I think it's a good idea for a new writer, at some point, to show their work to people who know something about the field they're writing in, and who can be trusted to give honest feedback. You have to be ready to take honest feedback, though.

**What would you call the defining moment in your writing career, the moment when you knew you turned pro? What story, market, or anthology had a part in that?**

It's hard to pin down to just one. I guess I'm a pro now. I sell most of what I write. But it's a spectrum, not a border you cross.

I sold a story to *Realms of Fantasy* in 2002, "The Witch's Bicycle," a long contemporary fantasy novelette, somewhat ambitious, certainly the best thing I was capable of writing at the time. That was my first pro sale. I loved *Realms* — Shawna McCarthy has a great editorial eye, and you often got full-page illustrations for your stories, many of which I have framed and are hanging on my walls. I was a *Realms* regular for a few years after that — I think I published something like eight stories there from 2002 to 2007. *Strange Horizons* was also an early supporter of my work. I had a story there in 2000, not long after they opened up, and they published my story, "Little Gods" in 2003. That was a Nebula Award nominee, and the first time people started paying attention to my work in the field. In 2005 I had a story in *The Best American Short Stories* (something I'd never even bothered to dream about, as it seemed so unlikely), and won a Hugo Award for my story "Impossible Dreams" in 2007. After those last two accomplishments, the yammering voice of doubt in the back of my head quieted

down, and I thought, "Sometimes, I'm pretty good at writing stories." Now my only problem is that I don't get to write stories ENOUGH, as most of my time and attention go to novels.

**Publishing a lot, you deal with many editors on a day-to-day basis. Without naming names, unless you want to, do you find working with editors difficult, helpful, annoying, etc.? Any bad, or enlightening, experiences you'd like to mention?**

Most editors are great! People don't get into this business to get rich (if they do, they have made poor life choices). They do it because they love the work, and as a result, I can gleefully geek out with most of my editors, and love the opportunity to meet them and hang out in person. The worst things I've had to deal with were people who had ambitions that outpaced their competence as businesspeople. With a couple of minor exceptions, I don't have any horror stories. I've been lucky.

**You also find yourself on the other side of the wall in your position of senior editor for *Locus* magazine. How did you get involved with *Locus* and what does your role entail?**

I covered some of this above. I write a lot of the news. I help edit the interview transcripts into final form. I do the obituaries (probably the part of my job I take most seriously). I help with doing layout and digital conversion (turning the print magazine into a readable e-book).

I heard that *Locus* was hiring soon after I moved to Oakland in 2001, and sent in an application. I got an interview and met our founder, Charles N. Brown (he passed away a few years ago). He offered me the job on the spot, which I found surprising, until I learned he was friends with Michaela Roessner, one of my Clarion teachers. I'd mentioned Clarion in my application, so he called her up and asked her about me; I guess she said nice things! For the first couple of years it was mostly filing and running errands and driving Charles around and cleaning out gutters, but I gradually took on more responsibilities.

I also edit fiction, having edited and co-edited a couple of anthologies (most recently original anthology *Rags and Bones* with Melissa Marr), and a little zine called Flytrap that I co-edit with my wife Heather Shaw. I love editing, because I love finding amazing stuff and showing it to other people and I also love giving writers money.

**You write speculative fiction (short and long), poetry, and non-fiction. What is your writing process, and how do you manage to juggle so many things? Do you have clear goals set ahead of time, or are you more of a spur of the moment kind of writer?**

My writing process is... I sit down and write stuff? I just write whenever I feel like it, unless there's a deadline growing uncomfortably close — but I like writing, so I do it pretty often. I never developed any rituals or anything. I am a binge writer, by preference, when it comes to

drafting — I like to spend several hours at a stretch pounding out words. Since becoming a father, such long stretches of uninterrupted time are harder to come by, so I've adjusted as necessary. In recent years I do most of my writing on my day off from *Locus*, with nights and weekends added in when a deadline looms. I produce about 300,000 paid words a year (which works out to just a bit over 800 words a day, which isn't so much — not that I write every day). That's enough for maybe three novels (most of my books are around 80 or 90,000 words long) and a few stories and reviews.

I am not a strict outliner, but I usually have some idea where a story is going when I begin. I daydream a lot; a crucial part of the process. I don't usually know exactly how I'm going to get to my ending, though, and that provides a lot of the excitement in the writing process. Often when I reach the end, the original ending I had in mind no longer works, so I can surprise myself then, too.

I don't juggle all that much. I work on one novel at a time, almost always. I might take little breaks to do stories or poems while writing a novel, but usually only when I have a deadline I need to hit. Ideally, I prefer to focus on one thing at a time.

**If you were to choose one favorite novel and one favorite short story from your own works, which one would it be? Related to that, for people who haven't read your works yet — what would be the best place to start getting to know your world?**

My favorite novel is *Heirs of Grace*, a contemporary fantasy that came out as an e-book earlier this year, and will be out in print in June. (It is also the novel I most recently finished. These facts may be related.) I think I did exactly what I wanted with that book, and it's a standalone, so there's no commitment to a series if a reader picks it up. It would be a good place to start. By far my most popular books are my Marla Mason urban fantasy series, beginning with *Blood Engines* and going on for another eight titles, so far. Even they're mostly standalones, though, being "ongoing adventures" of a set of characters rather than one big story cut into volumes.

"Cup and Table" is one of the best short stories I've ever written, as is "Impossible Dreams" (that's my opinion, which is inherently suspect, but readers seem to agree). They are weird fantasy and science fiction, respectively. (I think my story "Antiquities and Tangibles" is underrated. I'm fond of it.) They're all available free online in various places at this point.

**You write a lot of reviews — who do enjoy reading lately? What was the last book that made a big impression, or, perhaps, a book you wish you could've written yourself?**

I don't review much anymore, really. Mostly just the odd small-press horror title that won't get coverage otherwise, or crime novels that have enough of a supernatural element for me to

justify reviewing them. For pleasure I mostly read crime and mysteries, and for those, I love Ken Bruen and Joe R. Lansdale (who also writes great fantasy/horror, of course) and Kate Atkinson, and the late Donald Westlake/Richard Stark and Robert B. Parker.

In the SF/F field, I've been enjoying K.J. Parker a lot in recent years, and will read anything Caitlin R. Kiernan writes, and I like a lot of Joe Abercrombie's work. Lauren Beukes is great, too.

As for things I wish I'd written... John D. Macdonald once wrote that as a professional writer "you read everything with grinding envy or a weary contempt." I felt some major grinding envy when I read Robert Jackson Bennett's forthcoming *City of Stairs*. I don't think I *could* have written it, but I wish I could've.

**What's next for you? Is there anything else you'd like to add?**

Oh, there are always things on the horizon. I'm writing a sequel to my Pathfinder Tales novel *Liar's Blade* (which is incidentally one of the best books I've written, roleplaying game tie-in or not), will soon begin work on another Marla Mason novel called *Lady of Misrule*, and recently signed on to write a middle-grade novel I'm excited about. There are stories coming out here and there, too.

I am on twitter a lot as @timpratt, and blog very intermittently at [www.timpratt.org](http://www.timpratt.org).

**Dear Tim, thank you for agreeing to this interview and for providing us with such elaborate and detailed answers!**



# Interview with the Editors of *Strange Horizons*

*Strange Horizons* is a magazine of and about speculative fiction and related nonfiction. Currently the magazine has a trio at its fiction editorial helm, running the daunting task of selecting great stories and making them even greater. They are Brit Mandelo, Julia Rios, and An Owomoyela.

**Brit Mandelo** is a writer, critic and editor whose primary fields of interest are speculative fiction and queer literature, especially when the two coincide. She currently has two books out, *Beyond Binary: Genderqueer and Sexually Fluid Speculative Fiction* and *We Wuz Pushed: On Joanna Russ and Radical Truth-telling*. Her work — fiction, nonfiction, poetry; she wears a lot of hats — has also been featured in magazines such as *Stone Telling*, *Clarkesworld*, *Tor.com*, and *Ideomancer*. She is a Louisville native and lives there with her partner in an apartment that doesn't have room for all the books.

**Julia Rios** is a writer, editor, podcaster, and narrator. She promotes *QUILT BAG* speculative fiction with The Outer Alliance (in part by hosting the Outer Alliance Podcast), is the staff interviewer for *Stone Telling: The Magazine of Boundary-crossing Poetry*, and occasionally reads stories for places like PodCastle and Pseudopod. Julia is half Mexican, but her (fairly dreadful) French is better than her Spanish. She loves cats and colorful things, and expresses the latter by dyeing her hair bright colors and messing about with papercrafts.

**An Owomoyela** is a neutrois author with a background in web development, linguistics, and weaving chain maille out of stainless steel fencing wire and whose interests range from pulsars and Cepheid variables to gender studies and nonstandard pronouns, with a plethora of stops in-between. A graduate of the Clarion West Writers Workshop in 2008 and attendee of the Launchpad Astronomy Workshop in 2011, An's fiction can be found in a variety of venues, including *Lightspeed Magazine*, *Asimov's*, *Clarkesworld*, and several Years Best anthologies.

## Q & A

**Iulian:** It is a little bit unusual for a magazine to have three main editors of fiction. Could you describe your process? How do you split the work between you and how are the final decisions made?

**Julia:** We all read stories we are considering seriously, and then we come to consensus decisions about which stories we'll buy. Once we accept a story, we decide which one of us will be that story's editor, and that person takes it from there. We try to split things up evenly, so all of us do roughly equal amounts of work.

**Brit:** The workload also tends to sort itself out without much special effort. We all read incoming submissions, and as Julia said, then we'll pass on stories that were promising for the other editors to read as a group. And though we work on consensus, it's not necessary for all three of us to adore a story for us to end up buying it — so long as someone feels very strongly about it, we're likely to pick it up.

**An:** This also means that we cast a wider net than we might otherwise: we've taken several stories that strongly struck a chord with one of the three of us, which might have been passed up if any single one of us were reading. We also tend to read with an eye toward what the other editors might like, and pass things on to the decision-making round if we think it might strike one of our fancies.

**Iulian:** *Strange Horizons* is known for its high quality material to the readers, and for being a very challenging market to break into to the writers. What do you expect from a good short story? And the corollary — what is the fastest way for a short story to turn you off?

**Julia:** We look for stories that are engaging and interesting. We love character driven narratives with a strong emotional arc along with the action. Unfortunately there's no magic answer that will tell writers exactly how to get published. As for things that don't work for us, we do get pretty quickly turned off by homophobia, racism, sexism, and other discriminatory viewpoints.

**Brit:** I tend to look for a sense of "movement" or of something having happened or changed — whether for the character or the world or the plot. Vignettes that are more like snapshots are a hard sell, for example. So more or less, what Julia said: engaging stories with a strong arc.

**An:** Complexity is my big one. I like stories that don't give pat, easy answers, and which don't portray characters or situations as singularly one thing or another. Stories that really dig down into the ramifications of their premise and can explore those ramifications through character action make me happy.

**Iulian:** I am certain your magazine's submission queue must be always full. When you find a story that is not 100% acceptable, do you take the time to work with the author to

**fix that last 1-2%, or at the magazine's level that type of activity is simply not justified? Describe the way you approach your interaction with authors.**

**Julia:** We do send revision requests in some cases for stories we find really interesting. It pretty much comes down to whether or not we can see a clear fix for the parts that don't work for us. If we can, and the rest of the story really works for us, we may ask an author to revise. If we can't see a clear fix, we usually let the story go, albeit with some reluctance.

**Brit:** Since 99% of our submissions come out of the slush, we do a *lot* of back and forth communication with writers. We have in the past gone several rounds of revision requests with an author whose story was promising but not quite there yet — and we did end up buying it in the end. Because we often work with new writers or writers at the beginning of their careers, we tend to have strong lines of communication with them. We like finding stories that are promising and seeing them grow into stories people end up loving.

**An:** I think the work we're willing to do with an author is proportional to how in love we are with the potential of the story in question. We have taken on stories which need a lot of work — stories we'd otherwise send a revision request for — because they've struck a chord, and we want to keep them in an iron grip and not let another magazine grab them or risk never seeing them published at all. At the same time, we've let technically proficient works go because, for whatever reason, we didn't fall in love with them. And then there are the occasional works we buy that we have almost no editing work to do on: they come in like perfectly-polished gems. Because individual taste is a fickle thing (and because we are all busy people), it helps a story's chances when it's extremely strong, but editing work is a tool we're always open to using.

**Iulian: You have a large amount of volunteers helping you with the magazine. Tell us how important is it for an editor to have a strong editorial team? What is the general structure of your magazine and how do the responsibilities get split?**

**Julia:** We are an all-volunteer magazine. This means that no one gets paid for their work — we're all doing it because we love the work and the mission of the magazine. We have a team of first readers who help us read incoming submissions, and all three editors also read roughly the same amount of incoming submissions as our first readers do. We try to split the work evenly so that no one is overburdened and all stories get a thorough and careful consideration. We put our first readers through a rigorous test process so that we're sure our tastes and theirs match. We appreciate all their hard work, and we trust them to pass interesting stories up to us.

**Brit:** Obviously, having a team you trust to work well with you is the most important thing at a magazine. We put a lot of effort into finding readers whose tastes fit the magazine and who love working with slush — and each other. We tend to have good lines of communication and a comfortable atmosphere behind the scenes.

**An:** One interesting aspect of our slush process is that every night, an email goes out to the editors and the first readers containing a rundown of all the slush our first readers have gone through: a summary of the story, the rating they've given it, and the reason for that rating. If something is slated to be rejected, the rejection is delayed for a week in case another reader wants to check out the story and add their own notes, or rescue it from the rejection pile. This encourages cross-talk, and helps us keep an eye on how we're thinking about stories, as well as trends in the stories we see.

**Iulian: All three of you are also writers. How do you find the time to edit the magazine and write at the same time? Does your position as editor influence your writing or the way you approach your own submissions?**

**Brit:** I'd say I have less time to write, though I suppose that's obvious. Anything that takes time and thought is going to cut into productive writing-time. But, I don't mind so much, because I enjoy the work and the project we're continuing with this magazine — it's got a long history that we're part of now, and that makes it pretty worthwhile. As for how editing has changed my approach, I don't know that it has very much.

**An:** My writing time has always found its way into odd corners of my life, so it's largely unaffected so far as a time crunch goes. I have noticed that it's sometimes more difficult to push through first drafts: there's always the specter of "Would I care about this, if it came through our slush?" to contend with. On the whole, though, being an editor means that I can help bring more stories into the world — stories that I could never have written — and that's phenomenal. I almost feel more engaged with getting good stories out there than I would if I took all the time I spent on *Strange Horizons* and directed it toward my own writing.

**Iulian: There's only so much that you can publish in one year, and I am sure sometimes you must make tough choices. What are the hardest choices an editor has to make?**

**Julia:** There are times when we receive stories we really like that are too similar to other stories we've bought and have on the schedule. Letting go of those stories is always hard, but we know we need to maintain a balance in what we publish.

**Brit:** Oh, yeah, those are the most painful — especially when they're otherwise great stories. Another thing that's hard is getting back a revision that's still not quite where it needs to be, for a story that otherwise has a lot of good stuff going for it.

**An:** There are some stories, too, where they come in and they've got a lot going for them, and we know they *could* be fantastic... but they're not there yet, and none of us have any idea how to fix them. Those are stories we'll sit on for a week or two, and talk about in meeting after meeting, trying to work out if we can pin down specific revision suggestions. It's always difficult to see what something could be and have no idea how to help the author get it there.

**Iulian: Who are your editor heroes? Was there anyone in particular that you could name as a having a major influence on your style and approach to editing?**

**Brit:** When it comes to style and approach, those are fairly personal and tend to develop over time — as folks might have noticed, there's far less material out there for "aspiring editors" compared to "aspiring authors." Also, since the editors' hand is invisible for the most part in the end product — as a reader, we don't see where the story started — it's hard to put a finger on whose actual process of *editing* would have been an influence.

**An:** When I was beginning to submit short stories to specific markets, the previous editorial team at *Strange Horizons* made an impression on me: they were always prompt and polite with their responses, and they gave me some very considerate personal rejections. I never managed to sell them a story, but I still remember that my interaction with *Strange Horizons* was always a good one, and hope to continue that.

**Iulian: Your magazine pays professional rates and its funding is done mainly through donations and fund raisers. Is that the secret of having a profitable e-magazine that also attracts well-known writers?**

**Julia:** We really don't have anything to do with the money side of the magazine. As mentioned above, no one who works for *Strange Horizons* gets paid, and we're a non-profit, so everything we raise goes into creating the magazine and paying contributors. We don't know who our donors are, and we prefer it that way for ethical reasons when considering stories. The fundraiser model has worked for *Strange Horizons* for many years, though, so presumably it's a good model.

**Brit:** I would also say that attracting well-known writers is done by offering competitive pay, a big audience, and a history of publishing good work. Not so much by where the money comes from, fundraising or subscription models. (I also wouldn't say we're "profitable," since no one makes a profit but the contributors.)

**Iulian: What are the most valuable non-monetary rewards you get from running the fiction editorial department of *Strange Horizons*? The award nominations, the increase in subscriptions, a friendly email from a reader? What makes it all worth it in the end?**

**Julia:** Hands down the best things are finding stories we love, sharing them with the world, and occasionally hearing back from others who loved them as much as we did. That's what motivates us.

**Brit:** Well, we don't have any monetary rewards — the editorial staff of the entirety of *Strange Horizons* are volunteers, as we've said. So, this is more or less all a "for the love" venture on our end.

For me, what makes it worth the work is the sense that I am helping to contribute to a world that has more stories in it than yesterday, and that those stories are giving voice to more and more diverse perspectives. I'm trying to make a positive dent, more or less, while also offering people something good to read.

**An:** We're a very loving magazine. Really, though, it is a matter of finding work you love, work that speaks to you, work that illuminates aspects of your experience and the experience of people you care deeply about and which isn't well-represented, work that you wished had been out there for you to read, and getting it out there. If there's a chance that one of the stories we've published would not have been published without us, we've done our job.

Seeing writers at the beginnings of their publishing careers is also fantastic. We've had stories that represent the first professional publication for writers, and stories that represent the first publication for writers, full stop. And it's so exciting to get in at the ground floor, as it were, because a lot of these writers are immensely talented and working in very cool areas, and I look forward to (hopefully) long, prolific careers from all of them.

**Iulian: What's next for *Strange Horizons*? Do you have any new visions or ideas for the magazine's direction? Is there anything else you'd like to add?**

**Brit:** What's next: keep publishing good stories. Keep finding fresh voices in the slush and also publishing familiar ones. More or less, just maintaining the editorial vision that has made the magazine successful: trying to encourage diversity in our slush pile and our front page, and supporting a solid community of writers and readers.

**An:** Here's a vision for our slush pile: keep surprising us, guys. Keep doing things we would never have thought of. My vision for our direction is to continue expanding what it means to be *Strange Horizons*.

**Dear Brit, Julia, and An, thank you so much for taking the time for this interview!**



# Artist Spotlight: Sabbas Apterus

The cover for our second issue was created by Slovakian artist Sabbas Apterus. His art and style impressed us, and we wanted to showcase his works in our magazine. We are happy he agreed to that and to this interview.

**Iulian: Tell us a little bit about yourself: where did you grow up and how did your early life influence your future as an artist?**

Apterus: Hello, my name is Peter, a.k.a Apterus. I am from Slovakia and I aspire to be a concept artist and illustrator. I enjoyed drawing since my early age. Almost half of my family members do some creative thing or another, so they supported my hobby and somehow expected that I will be creative as well. Drawing was the easiest thing to do, and most importantly, I could do that during lectures at school and didn't get noticed. I occasionally represented my high school in amateur art competitions, and as some kind reward I was allowed to draw during class and not be bothered as long as I got my tasks done.

I attended the Academy of arts in Banska Bystrica, Slovakia for six years, where I had an opportunity to create my own art on a higher level, mostly traditional graphics and hyper realistic sculpture. I learned much about art, its history and contemporary trends, but almost nothing about the kind of digital art I am doing at the moment, so I am starting all over again. After graduation I started to work in game design and improving my skills.

**What are your favorite design tools and how did you learn them?**

I use Adobe Photoshop for the majority of my work. At first I used Photoshop just like any other amateur, as a tool for adjusting photos or creating some very simple drawings, having no clue of its full potential. At college I learned all the advanced techniques, although I never came to contact with the freehand digital painting, because our lessons were focused on use in commerce, product design or photo manipulation. I bought a tablet only recently and in my advanced age (I'm 26) I began to do digital painting.

**Are there any other artists out there that you admire and whose work has helped shape your work?**

There are many that I admire. Some for their vision, originality, others for the use of their skills. I am following my favorite artists on various forums and trying to learn as much as I can from them. If I have to choose a few names, they would probably be Sergey Kolesov,

Marc Brunet, Jae Cheol Park, Fenghua Zhong, or Martin Carlsson. Their work inspires me to try harder and become better.

**Where do you find inspiration?**

Sometimes I focus on the subject; sometimes the technique and experiments lead me to the final result. My goal is to be able to depict the atmosphere and the feeling that I want to be dominant in each piece. I focus on fantasy and sci-fi, because there are no boundaries of what should be done and how should it look like, when we are talking about simple figurative subjects, of course.

So my inspiration lies in my imagination (which is of course hugely affected by the imagination of others), usually as a sudden glimpse of an image that I later decide to improve. Sometimes even one line is enough as a foundation of the whole concept and the general feeling I want the image to emanate, other times it requires a long period of planning.

**How would you break down your workflow in steps?**

The most important thing is to create a concept, even for a simple painting practice. To put it simply, I need to know what am I doing before I start. It doesn't matter if it is a result of a week of planning and sketching, or a split second glimpse of inspiration. I just need to understand the thing I am doing.

The next thing is to update my knowledge of the subject. If there is a material that I never tried to paint, or a pose, or anatomical detail that I am not familiar with, I look it up, or sometimes, when the scene is too complicated, I make a dummy in 3D software that I later use as reference.

Then I draw a simple sketch, paint lights and shadows, adjust the composition, until I have a solid black and white foundation for the piece. Then I add colors and continue using everything that I did up to this point as a background and palette for the final piece, which I am building over it. I like when each stroke has its own color value, it feels more solid rather than a blurry color overlay over a black & white picture, because that is exactly how it looks like if done that way.

Finally, I do a few final touches, for example, adding glow, adjusting the color values and contrasts. Basically all the Photoshop work that is needed to make an existing image better.

**Your work is very fantasy-driven. What drives you to that subject?**

As I said, mostly the freedom and that the subject can be anything. Fantasy and sci-fi themes have been a part of my life for a long time. I enjoyed books, movies and computer games to

the point that reality became boring and I found myself often fantasizing about other worlds, so naturally, I began to draw it. At college I focused strictly on issues that affected everyday life, and as a pessimist, my work was quite macabre.

**If there was one piece of advice you could give to other beginning artists, what would that be?**

Get noticed. Sometimes is more about your social skills than the quality of your work. Create profiles and portfolios on as many image sharing sites as possible and be active there. Allow strangers to tell you their opinions of your work, comment on other artists works and always compare yourself with the best there is. This could be big pain, especially if you are not a social person, but it is very important to be active part of the community. And, of course, never be satisfied with your knowledge and skills.

**We selected one of your pieces for the cover of our magazine. Tell us a few words about how that piece came to be.**

It started as a simple painting practice for which I chose an armored female robot character in a simple pose on an undefined background with lights. There is really nothing more behind it, it was just enjoyable making this picture. I was quite satisfied with the result and I was learning much about the technique, so I continued and the practice became a work of an illustration. In the spirit of dissatisfaction with oneself and it being my favorite picture, I decided to re-make it. I remodeled the figure, changed the pose a bit to make it more fluid and natural, replaced the hair, which was a goofy looking ugly mess, with something that resembles actual hair a bit more...

It was fun to see, comparing both the original picture and the remake, how much I improved in a few weeks. I'll probably repeat the process soon.

**Where can we find you on the web?**

CG Society — <http://apterus.cgsociety.org/>

Deviant Art — <http://apterus.deviantart.com/>

Facebook — <https://www.facebook.com/apterus>

**Dear Apterus, thank you for taking the time for this interview, and, most importantly, for creating an awesome cover for our issue!**



# Book Review: Warbreaker (Brandon Sanderson)

Tyson Mauermann

Warbreaker

by Brandon Sanderson

Tor Books; June 9, 2009

**B**ack of the Book: "After bursting onto the fantasy scene with his acclaimed debut novel, *Elantris*, and following up with his blockbuster *Mistborn* trilogy, Brandon Sanderson proves again that he is today's leading master of what Tolkien called "secondary creation," the invention of whole worlds, complete with magics and myths all their own. *Warbreaker* is the story of two sisters, who happen to be princesses, the God King one of them has to marry, the lesser god who doesn't like his job, and the immortal who's still trying to undo the mistakes he made hundreds of years ago. Their world is one in which those who die in glory return as gods to live confined to a pantheon in Hallandren's capital city and where a power known as BioChromatic magic is based on an essence known as breath that can only be collected one unit at a time from individual people.

By using breath and drawing upon the color in everyday objects, all manner of miracles and mischief can be accomplished. It will take considerable quantities of each to resolve all the challenges facing Vivenna and Siri, princesses of Idris; Susebron the God King; Lightsong, reluctant god of bravery, and mysterious Vasher, the Warbreaker."

When I read *Warbreaker* it was my first foray into the mind of Brandon Sanderson and while I have no intention of returning to the *Wheel of Time* series (the first five books were enough for me) I have to say that *Warbreaker* is an amazing adventure.

The characters in *Warbreaker* are quite interesting. We have three main characters that we follow throughout the book. We have Siri, the young girl thrust into a difficult situation when she is hauled off to be the bride for the God King, Vivenna the older sister of Siri and the one who was supposed to be the God King's bride, and Lightsong a newly created/crowned god. All of the characters and the supporting cast do an excellent job of propelling the story forward. A mercenary/sell sword named Vasher is a great edition to the story and so is his talking sword, which could be compared to Elric's sword, *Stormbringer*. While Vasher does not get a lot of time in the book, when he does grace the pages they are well worth it.

The major strength of Warbreaker is the magic system. It requires you to take a person's soul or essence in order to increase your own power. You can sell or buy souls or essence for a price. As you gain more and more souls your power increases as does your ability to detect color. Color and the ability to see subtle differences in others and in your surroundings play a significant role in the novel.

The world of Warbreaker is divided into two religions or camps. One camp, the camp Vivenna and Siri come from, are against the use of colors and of bartering in essence. This was interesting as Vivenna comes to the God King's city and sees a restaurant for the first time and is perplexed at the need for them. On the other side is a world that believes that you must garner as much essence as you can in order to improve your social standing. The various gods must have a soul a week and the God King must have even more than that on a weekly basis. It is a clash of beliefs.

The heart and soul of Warbreaker is political suspense and a mystery. As you read along you learn that not everything is copasetic in Hallandren, the God King's capital city. The plot thickens with every turn of the page and there are a few twists and turns along the way that make for a very unpredictable voyage.

The cover of the book is also worth noting. It is an amazing piece of art. I really love the vivid colors and look. It draws you right in. To go along with the review, below the book's score is a making of the artwork for Warbreaker. It is fascinating and worth your time if you want to see it 'magically' appear before your eyes. Enjoy the video and the book as both are truly amazing.

**Plot — 9**

**Characters — 9**

**Style — 9**

**Overall — 9/10**

Artwork Video Link: <http://youtu.be/IqjWP18hPHE>



© by Tyson Mauermann

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# Movie Review: Godzilla (2014) (Gareth Edwards)

Mark Leeper

**CAPSULE:** Kaiju Noir. With the Japanese franchise on the King of the Monsters in hiatus, the Godzilla character is being loaned to Warner Brothers so that Gareth Edwards can make an American Godzilla film. This is a script whose drama is better than Toho's usual fare, but audiences may find the new film is dark and drab and slow at getting to the fun.

Rating: high +1 (-4 to +4) or 6/10

In the American version of the first Godzilla film (titled GODZILLA, KING OF THE MONSTERS) the camera drifts from the monster's destruction to show you a woman with two small children sitting at the base of a building. The mother is saying something, but we see only her lips move. In the original Japanese version (titled GOJIRA) the woman is audibly speaking and she is telling the children, "We will be with your father soon." That is perhaps the most somber scene of a somber monster film, but it was only in the Japanese version. GOJIRA did not pull its punches. But there has been nothing so solemn in a Godzilla film since. The new GODZILLA has a man looking through a window and watching a loved one dying just inches away. After sixty years we finally have a film that is again willing to disturb the audience. This year's GODZILLA has some strong stuff, but somehow not all that depressing today.

The tone of the new film is uneven. Sadly, there is not so much serious drama all throughout of Gareth Edwards' GODZILLA (2014), but it is there. The original was a reminder to Japan of the tragedies of their then recent war and its nuclear conclusion. This film harkens to those memories, but also has earthquakes at a nuclear plant and a tsunami to bring back more recent memories. As an origin story the screenplay by Max Borenstein is at least returning to the some of the tension and gravity of the original.

Toho's kaiju (giant monster) films after the first were never prized for their good writing. They often would go seriously funky with props like robotic Godzillas, alien flying saucers, and time travel. One even had a Japanese Indiana Jones character. In a later series (there were three series really) there was a Japanese defense unit called G-Force, commissioned to fight the giant monster who had both a grudge and partiality for Japan. The stories were never very good. They rarely went much beyond excuses to stage kaiju smack-downs.

The Toho studio of Japan has twice opened up its franchise to allow American film companies to make their own Godzilla films. In 1998 they let Roland Emmerich make a Godzilla film, but I believe did not let them use the characteristic Godzilla shape. The result was a poor story married to what fans call G.I.N.O., short for "Godzilla In Name Only." The result was a film almost nearly good enough to be called mediocre if they had not used the Godzilla name. But they did use the name and real Godzilla fans will never forgive them.

GODZILLA (2014) opens in 1999 when two eggs and a skeleton, all enormous, are found in the Philippines. Shortly thereafter a nuclear plant in Japan is destroyed in an apparent earthquake. This constitutes a large professional and an even greater personal loss for plant supervisor Joe Brody (played by Bryan Cranston of BREAKING BAD). Fifteen years later Brody, still a haunted man, is still trying to prove that what destroyed the plant was not a natural disaster. Was it a natural disaster? I guess it all comes down to whether or not you consider giant monsters to be natural. Max Borenstein wrote the screenplay based on a story by Dave Callaham. The first reel is a little slow-going and expository, and the real action is saved for the final act.

While the Japanese films are anxious to show their monsters to the audience as soon as possible, director Gareth Edwards is coy about giving us views of his giant creatures. The audience is kept in suspense. Mostly his focus is on the human story. Sadly in GODZILLA the main character is just not very engaging. Edwards' biggest failing with this reincarnation of Godzilla is that he does not give us a central character we really care about. There were better actors in this film playing more compelling characters and more of the spotlight should have been on them.

Of course, the visuals are as important as the characters. Tonally and visually this is a gray and dark film. I do not remember a single fight that occurs in the daytime. That makes for a darker mood, and it also covers up CGI errors. This is the first Godzilla movie that does not have a man in a Godzilla suit. This film is fully CGI in its monster effects, but the design each of the three monsters are built on human torsos and would probably accommodate a man-in-suit implementation of the monster if need be in sequels to this film.

As for the darkness in the story's tone, that is probably necessary after September 11 and the film CLOVERFIELD taught the world the dangers of being in proximity to deconstructing buildings. The opening titles take a swing at government secrecy as by redacting parts of the titles even as they appear.

This is only director Gareth Edwards' second feature film. That does not sound like he would have had much experience with a big budget, but his first film was MONSTERS, a film with economical giant monsters that take a back seat to the story of characters trying to return to

the United States from a Mexico ravaged by the presence of aliens. The record of focusing on people and not using a lot of special effect undoubtedly demonstrated that he would be the right person to direct a post-9/11 kaiju film. I rate the new GODZILLA a high +1 on the -4 to +4 scale or 6/10. Technical note: Godzilla seems to have hands with opposable thumbs. That would be very rare among real dinosaurs. Arguably a Troodon had a rough version of a grasping hand, but not a very effective one. Godzilla does seem to be able to use his hands well.



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Originally appeared on: <http://leepers.us/godzilla.htm>

Film Credits: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0831387/combined>

Official Trailer: <http://youtu.be/vIu85WQTPRc>

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