

# FEVER DREAMS

SCIENCE FICTION \* HORROR \* FANTASY

ISSUE 4 \* JAN-MAR 14

ONE YEAR  
**1**  
AND COUNTING

\*

**MORE THAN 70  
PAGES OF FICTION**

From

**Matthew Pedersen**

**Rick McQuiston**

**Len Maynard**

**Mick Sims**

**Dean Fazzino**

**Reed Beebe**

**Dave Ludford**

**Fraser Sherman**

**Eleanor Adams  
Hale**

**Stuart McClean**

**N.O.A Rawle**

**H. Y. Hill**

**Richard Farren  
Barber**

\*

**POETRY**

**by Anna Sykora &  
Holly Day**

\*

**ARTICLES**

**by Jenny Morgan**



## WELCOME TO FEVER DREAMS ISSUE FOUR

**I**t gives me great pleasure to welcome you to issue four of Fever Dreams Magazine. It is

a particularly special welcome as we celebrate our first anniversary. That's right thanks to the support of writers, poets, artists and, of course, you the readers, we have managed to keep Fever Dreams going for a full year. In that time we have received in excess of 8000 submissions, and it may come as no surprise to some of you that Peter receives almost 30 emails a day from writers asking for advice regarding their work. I don't think I appreciated how much work he puts into this magazine until I was asked to take over for him during the final weeks of this issue. Peter, I wish you a speedy recovery because I'm not going to be able to do this job for long, its only been two weeks and I'm exhausted already.

I know that I speak for Peter when I say that we are delighted to have work from some of the writers that we published last year to include in our first anniversary edition. We owe our thanks to Reed Beebe, Rick McQuiston, Richard Farren Barber and Dave Ludford, amongst others, for helping us to put out a quality, free magazine and welcome you back to celebrate our first anniversary. We also like to thank Anna Sykora, who's poetry in issue 3 has encouraged others to submit their work.

Sadly not everything has gone according to



Issue Four Cover Art by Stephanie Bennett

### EDITORIAL by Al Thomas

plan this last year. The cold winter put an end to our Christmas edition of the magazine and has attempted to rob us of our editor. I know Peter would make a joke about the Elder Gods trying to stop the production of our magazine, but I think that, instead of a joke, I will merely acknowledge the hard work and tireless effort put in by our editor to ensure that Fever Dreams is completed and available for you, our loyal readers, each quarter.

Enjoy.

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## FEVER DREAMS PUBLICATIONS

**ARTICLE by Al Thomas**

In the last issue of Fever Dreams Peter wrote that we were going through some serious changes, and how right he was. While the UK continues to suffer at the hands of David Cameron's reforms, Fever Dreams has been equally affected. Many of the people who contribute to this magazine worked part-time, were students or members of writing groups in and around the UK. Many of these people have, as a result of the governments reforms, had to take on additional employment or increase their hours and have less time to dedicate to the magazine. Peter has taken over the coding and development of our new website, and I have taken on the additional responsibility of managing the book reviews. These issues have been further compounded by stresses that have originated within the established literary community in Dundee, many of whom continue to believe that speculative fiction is not a "worthy" form of fiction. As a result of this the decision has been made to move Fever Dreams Publications to Inverness in the summer.

This has highlighted an important issue for the staff that remain at Fever Dreams, that of money. Peter has always maintained that he intends Fever Dreams Magazine to remain free, and while he has spent months discussing the establishment of the Scare 2 Care line, there are no charities that are interested in becoming associated with a horror anthology. This has led to a conundrum, how can the staff of Fever Dreams raise the money to produce a collection

of short fiction? It is exactly for this reason that we are arranging for a Kickstarter account, with which we hope to raise enough money to produce our first digital and print anthology. Please keep your eyes on our social media feeds and, if you can spare a small donation, support us as we take this first step. We hope to have the Kickstarter account available in the summer and will be open for submissions of horror and science fiction around the same time. If things go well then we hope to be able to produce anthologies of science fiction, horror and fantasy fiction on a regular basis.

## SUPPORTING FEVER DREAMS

We hope that you enjoy the articles that we have collected together in this issue of Fever Dreams. While you are enjoying these articles our team will be working hard on the next issue. We are looking for your feedback. If you want to have your say on issue two or future issues then please let us know what you think on our Facebook and Twitter feeds.

In the meantime we are looking for writers to send us articles on writing, book reviews, film reviews, game reviews... In fact we are looking for you to send us anything related to the genres of science fiction, horror and fantasy. We were delighted with the amount of submissions that we received for issue two and we hope to receive the same support for future issues.



# Letters to the Editor

## CREATE TIME TO WRITE

In March of last year I took the bold, and some would say rash, decision to quit my career of some thirty years and concentrate on writing and studying English Literature through the Open University.

Whilst waiting for the next academic year to begin I had the luxury of the whole summer to write. What bliss it was! I was able to write for hours at a time in the peace and quiet of our spare room. The fruits of this effort were despatched to various publications, although I didn't hold my breath for the results. I can't recommend highly enough the benefits of removing yourself from the world to write, even for a few hours.

CATHY LODGE  
Newcastle upon Tyne

My Gremlins favourite weapon has always been subterfuge. They whisper "You're not good enough" and "You don't have time to write" but thanks to the article by Al Thomas *I should be writing...* (FD, Issue 3) these whispers have lost their potency.

I discovered that I do have time for writing and I have come up with a strategy for dividing my day into blocks. When I get up in the morning I work on a short story of at least 1000 words. I dedicate my afternoon to writing my novel where I have set myself a target of another 3000 words. Though it has only been in place for a few weeks I can already feel myself becoming more productive.

I firmly believe that almost everybody could find and set aside some time each day to write a set number of words and thus boost their output no end. Quality control can come afterwards.

JON WATSON  
Ipswich, Suffolk

## STEP BACK TO SEE CLEARLY

Focus is not my strongest gift and at times I've found that I'd rather wash dishes or catch up on my ironing than write. Many times I reached an obstacle and it seemed no matter how hard I tried or how many times I came up with "great" ideas, I just couldn't make it work. Days turned into weeks as I stared, frustrated at my screen. I started to wonder if I was really cut out to be a writer. Then I came across an article from Philip Meredith. He advised that when he finds himself struggling with ideas, he walks away. The break in thought gives the mind the freedom to work it out on its own.

The next time I got stuck, I thought I'd give it a go. I let go of all my worries and rather than feeling guilty for doing a load of laundry, I completely cleared my mind of the book. To my surprise the ideas started to trickle in. I knew exactly what I needed to do and, when I sat down at my computer, the words poured out. Thanks Phil.

A. HARRIS  
CHESHIRE

## WHAT THE BLOG?

I have noticed that many magazines request that any work submitted must not have been published in any format previously, including on a blog. At the same time, however, you can't use your blog as a publishing credit on your CV.

The reason, I assume, is that editors are looking for work that others rate your work highly enough to consider publishing it. I was delighted to hear from Peter that, in their mission to give new writers a voice, Fever Dreams is willing to consider work that was posted on a blog.

ABIGAIL FARLEY



**S**cience fiction is a genre that is replete with numerous worlds. Some are parallel versions of our own world, projections of alternate presents or futures, or stories set on completely

different places—far off planets, distant galaxies and far flung universes. Naturally these fantastic settings do not happen by accident, they are carefully considered and crafted by their authors. There are a number of reasons for this. In some cases the world is itself informed by the story being told, offering key developments of plot and character. The world enriches the story, providing a vivid setting and evoking the mood and atmosphere necessary for the work.

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**ARTICLE by Glenn Kohler**

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It is also important for the writer to understand that the world individualises your story, setting it apart from other stories in the genre. There will be resemblances to the settings of your favourite science fiction works, but the world is unique to you. Readers respond to an interesting and dynamic world, and will often read multiple stories and books set within it. So what is the key to creating a memorable setting for your science fiction story?

**CREATE YOUR WORLD**

Worldbuilding is a complex, and sometimes overwhelming, business if you are new to the genre. First of all, always develop in a way that you are comfortable with. If technology isn't something that you consider a weakness then don't focus on it initially. There is a distinct difference between "hard" science fiction, which focuses on science and technology, and "soft" science fiction, which is often more focused on societal or

environmental factors. I going to repeat a statement I made in the last issue here: You don't need to be a scientist to write science fiction.

The rest of this article consists of exercises that I use regularly to help create worlds which provide a background for your story. If you have a story in mind then it is important that the world fits your idea. For the most part I begin writing with a sketch of my world and then, as I write the story, I begin to fill in the details.

### CREATING THE WORLD

For some writers the story will zoom in on the cultural aspects of the world, and how the hierarchy and society is constructed, but, without a physical sense of the world, it is impossible to envisage what the society might look like. Many writers fail to recognise that the physical world also impacts on the society. If you look at our own world cultures then you will see that societies which developed on coasts and around rivers developed boats sooner for example. This has an impact on the types of jobs that people do, the basic elements of their diet, the way relationships are built, desirable qualities in a potential partner and even the leisure activities that people will pursue. This can make a focus on culture over environment counterproductive.

One of the ways I encourage students to get around this is by envisioning the landscape with an additional degree of depth. Make a note of some ideas for the following:

- The typical weather, or weather patterns of the region.
- A land animal that inhabits the region
- A plant or herb that grows in the area

Now take these ideas and write a brief passage in which someone tries to spend a night sleeping rough in the region. Focus on what they will eat and drink, the wildlife they

will encounter and the sounds that fill the air. Really try to inhabit the landscape and bring it to life.

### SOCIETY AT LARGE

Now that you have some idea of landscape and weather in the area, you will have an insight into the type of culture that will develop there. The next question, and in my opinion a fundamental one, is about how people live.

The key here is to ask questions about the type of homes people live in. Do they live in wooden shacks or robust stone houses? Do they live alone or in extended family groups? Do they live in small towns or large cities? These details will all have an impact on the way in which your society operates.

Once you have a clear idea of where people live then you can begin asking questions about the way people relate with one another, the nature of family groups and the type of jobs available. If people live in coastal towns then their working life will be very different to those who live in cities, for example. What would the prime industry of the region be?

### FROM THE GROUND UP

Now your society is starting to take shape, even if its just in your mind. At this stage its important to find a method that works for you. Some writers swear by spider diagrams but personally I like index cards. Either way you should begin to focus on different areas of your society.

**Food and Drink:** If your society is based on agriculture its diet will be different to one based on fishing. Think about what people eat and where they get it from. Is it simple fare or have they developed sophisticated culinary techniques?

**Social Interaction:** On a simple level this can be built on your ideas about diet. Does your society have traditions of feasting? What kinds of social gatherings or celebrations do



they indulge in? Do people tend to congregate at work or through technology?

**Leisure:** Thinking about social interaction will help you think about what people do with their leisure time. How much time do people have to spend on hobbies? Do they indulge in group sports and games or more solitary pursuits?

**Wealth:** When considering leisure time, you will probably begin thinking about class division and distinctions between the rich and poor. Does your society have any sort of class system?

**Government:** Wealth and class systems are probably an important element of your system of government. Is the structure of your government dictatorial, democratic, communist or even anarchistic?

**Law:** With a government and class system in place its time to start thinking about the legal system. Is it restrictive or free? How is the law enforced? What does your society consider to be a crime? What punishments do people face?

#### FINDING THE CONFLICT IN YOUR WORLD

One of the major benefits of this approach is that it often makes developing characters and stories significantly easier. As you worked through the landscape and culture, particularly the categories above, you may have planted some seeds for the kind of stories that will grow from your setting. If you follow standard story structure arcs then you will be familiar with the idea of the set-up or introductory phase of the story. This phase is the ideal time to introduce readers to your world, allowing you to establish the characters and the setting that they inhabit. As the story transitions into the conflict stage you will begin to see the value of the groundwork that you have laid.

If you consider the modern world that we inhabit then there are all manner of conflicts that surround our day to day life. Some of

these are literal conflicts but there are also more subtle struggles. It might be the fight against a corrupt regime, a battle for justice in the courts on behalf of a loved one or the constant struggle against financial instability and poverty. Take some time to look at your world and identify where these hot spots are. On the surface you may have created a perfect seaside village but as you look closer and begin to scratch the surface, you will identify the flashpoints within your setting.

As a writer of science fiction the key question to keep asking yourself is “What if?” These are the two words that define the genre of speculative fiction. The time you invest in creating your world will stand you in good stead for more than one story. Many series are set entirely within one world, and some even follow the same set of characters over the course of time. A well-developed setting can give you plenty of material as you move forward as a writer, so its always time well spent.

While worldbuilding is an essential element of creating science fiction, it is not the only element. Character and plot are just as important and don't forget that you still need to write the story once you have created a world that you are comfortable with. I know plenty of writers who have convinced themselves that worldbuilding is writing. Don't be fooled. Worldbuilding is not writing. It may be fun but if all you do is tinker with the details of your world then your story will never get written.

Hopefully these exercises will prompt you to spend some time thinking about your setting before you put pen to paper. I would also note that this is a great way to generate ideas if you are having trouble coming up with the spark for a story, and I have even taken this approach when going back and looking over older pieces of work. There have been times when I have had to admit that an idea just won't work but the themes or settings generated have turned up in other stories. Time spent asking “What if?” is never wasted.



## **T**he most common problem facing new writers is one of voice.

What is a writer's voice? What does it mean in real terms? Go into any bookstore or library and you will be confronted with a polyphony of voices. Each book is a product of a unique view of the world, a unique linguistic style and a specific way of saying things. Some of these are certainly better than others. As is the case everywhere else in life, there are the stand outs and the show offs who seem to draw and hold the majority of attention but there are also the shy neglected writers at the back of the crowd who have managed to grab some attention because of the skill and excitement of their tale. They come from a range of genders, ages and races with diverse experiences of life but what they all have in common is a voice. One of the most difficult things for a new writer is establishing or finding their voice. Here are some pointers to help you think about this subject and, hopefully, assist in the definition and refinement of your own voice.

### KNOW YOURSELF AS A READER

One of the first questions that I ask a new writer is "What kind of books do you like?" The majority of novice writers often feel that they should be writing at a certain level, in a specific style because they have been taught through their reading that a literary voice

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### ARTICLE by Philip Meredith

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sounds a certain way. This can be a very literary style, like Dickens or Austen, or more contemporary, like Steven King, but the voice they are trying to emulate is invariably different to their own. Unless you are trying to write in a specific literary style, for example Lovecraftian fiction, then there is no point trying to copy another writer's style and voice.

It is also worth thinking about what subjects interest you. What style of books do you find interesting? Thrillers? Crime? Romance? Many novice writers make the mistake of thinking that Horror or Science Fiction is enough of a subject material, but when you look at the real subjects behind their favourite works a different pattern emerges. Philip K Dick, for example, was fond of creating stories that explored the fragility of what is real and the nature of identity.

The kind of reading that you enjoy will give you some indication of the type of stories that you will want to write, and that in turn will inform the style of your voice.

### KNOW YOUR READER

The most common advice given to novice writers is to write the kind of novel that they want to read. This is why I told you to look over your bookshelf. If you are intending to write a commercially minded novel then you

should be aware that your intended reader is “the market.” If this is the case then you need to have a working knowledge of that market. It does not matter which target audience you are writing for, you will need to have studied plotting and trends in the market. I know a few writers who have successfully managed to develop a voice to fit the market but this is not the most satisfying or safe strategy. Your voice will emerge through the pressure of writing and rewriting and revision and self-discovery. Skipping this part of the process is a bit like becoming a painter in order to create forgeries, rather than developing a style of your own. Your stories are part of the unique fingerprint as an author which is why you should think carefully about the type of stories that you want to write.

#### BE PASSIONATE

Kurt Vonnegut once said that your subject should be something that you want to get up on your soapbox and shout about. If you write something with passion, that fills you with fire, it will show through in your work. Passion is a key element in finding your voice. Often novice writers get hung up on the notion of perfect prose. This is a problem because it can make your writing sterile and dispassionate. Editing is essential and important but to really find your voice you’ve got to let go and let the work get a bit messy. Find something that really lights you up.

#### PRACTICE THE ART OF WRITING

For many years procrastination was my greatest enemy, but I realised that it was only by sitting at my desk and putting pen to paper that I could finish my work and improve as a writer. Until the novel or story is written it exists only within the confines of your mind. It’s all hypothetical. As it bleeds out onto the page it will be stranger, less complete and, very likely, less well written as you would like. Some of your sentences will be fit for the trash but you will at least have something to work with and edit. You will have a text that you can

edit and refine and, ultimately, develop into something neater, more defined and more representative of the vision in your head.

#### BE HONEST

Your vision of your story can ultimately be a problem when it comes to the behaviour of your characters and the progression of your story arc. I am constantly telling writers that you must be truthful about your characters and honest about their motivations. This also applies to your motivations for writing. Keeping a notebook or diary to hand in which you can record your thoughts and observations of the world can be invaluable. You may be surprised by the way you see the world when you read it back.

When you read your writing ask yourself “What does this say about the story?” and “What does it say about me as a writer?” Be kind to yourself. It’s easy to cringe at the badly worded prose when you hear your voice for the first time but mistakes are normal. They can be edited and changed. Putting the work aside can often help, giving you a degree of distance when you’ve forgotten the fact that you’ve written it.

#### KNOW YOURSELF

Your stories come from deep within your unconscious mind. Creativity is not formed in the rational part of your mind but depends upon our ability to make connections between seemingly unrelated things that shed new light on our world. Finding your voice is a journey of self-discovery that strays between the rational mind, that writes the words on the page, and the creative mind, that generates the ideas. The rational mind is the part that wants to control your writing and make it perfect. Save that part of yourself for the editing, and let the creative part of you flow. Don’t be frightened by what emerges from the dark corners of your mind. It’s all a useful part of the process of writing something truly original in a new voice that no-one has heard before. A voice that is distinctly yours.



# HELP WANTED

**T**here might come a time when focusing on a new story when you

find that you have written yourself into a corner. You realise that you can't move forward or backward without extensive rewriting, or worse, sending the whole project back to the drawing board. Often this happens when the writer is seeking to make something happen but can't find a way for the main character to make it happen. It could be a timeline issue, where the character in question needs to be in two places at once, or it may be because of the nature of what needs to happen. For example your character would need to do something that is out of character or that he/she is physically or morally incapable of doing.

## TIMELINE

Timeline is the sequence of events whereby the story unfolds in a realistic way. In science fiction these issues are muddled because characters can travel from A to B through a stargate or via teleportation technology, and can even travel through time. In fantasy there are superhuman powers and magic available that will enable the wielders to bend the rules of normality.

It doesn't matter what magic or technology is available it has to obey a set of rules and these rules need to be defined in advance of

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**ARTICLE by Jenny Morgan**

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the event. If you drop these features in simply to write yourself out of a corner then your reader will notice. The real solution is either to go back and introduce the feature earlier in the novel or, and this is probably the best option, to go back and re-jig your story and timeline in order to make sure that the event becomes possible. The problem is that the further you are into a project the more extensive the amount of re-writing required. Any changes you introduce will then need to be checked as other events and characters are affected by the domino effect.

## CHARACTER

The nature of the event could be anything from answering a phone to killing another character but you must ask yourself whether the event is feasible. Is it feasible for my pacifist heroine to suddenly kill this character, even in self defence? Can my disabled hero really drag himself out of bed and across the room in time to answer the phone before it stops ringing?

Once again fiction offers plenty of options for writers who want to write themselves out of these corners. Ever wonder where all those evil twins and doppelgangers come from? Tempted to try and put that superhuman effort

down to bursts of adrenaline, temporary rage or parental instinct? Then again what would persuade our disabled character to make the superhuman effort to answer the phone if he didn't know he was in danger?

Let's assume that you don't want to resort to one of these excuses and want your story to unfold as realistically as possible. We are forced to come up with a realistic scenario that allows our character to accomplish the task at hand without straying into the realms of the improbable.

The biggest problem for many writers is that they get hung up on trying to find a way for the main character to accomplish the task. There is, however, another way to circumvent these problems, and one that can help bring another dimension to your story and add new interest and excitement for both you and the reader.

#### HIRED HELP

I'm not referring to you hiring someone to fix your manuscript. You could do this but you would probably have to share credit. What I mean is, use a stand-in or extra.

Lets take an example. Your heroine is trapped in a building and has no hope of getting help. What she needs is a distraction. Easy, you might say. In true 80s action movie fashion she will sneak around the guards, acquire something flammable, a lighter and get to a car in the street. She lights the touch paper and runs like hell. Except if she has the ability to do all that then she's not really trapped. It also implies that the building has a store of cloth or paper to make fuses, some alcohol to hand to douse it with and, if she doesn't smoke, the availability of a lighter or matches.

You may be thinking that if she's breaking into a building then this is all within the bounds of reality and is certainly not a huge stretch of the imagination. I would argue that the decision to destroy a van by blowing it up has an impact on the character who makes the decision. We may not have questioned when Arnie did it

because he's Arnie and its what we expect but this character isn't Arnie.

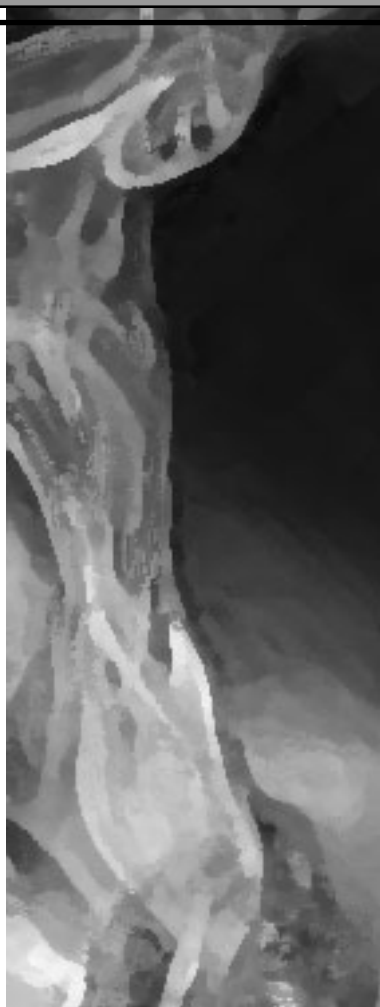
Technology has advanced sufficiently since the 80s and just about every body carries a mobile phone. Here's where we bring in the hired help in the form of a character who will create the distraction that our heroine needs. It could be a friend, family member, colleague or a street thug who owes her a favour. This person may have appeared earlier in the story and we are just bringing them back. If not then it would be easy to write them in with only a minor impact on the timeline and the other characters.

This promptly solves both problems at once. It also gives me another character to get my teeth into. I can spend some time thinking about the character and taking on the challenge of bringing such a violent and anti-social individual into the world of the story. I'm freed from the question of timing and am allowed to concentrate on writing the scene without agonising over how my heroine can be in two places at once, or having to re-write an extensive quantity of my manuscript in order to shoe-horn in a new technology or explain how my heroine acquires the inventory, skills and character to complete her improbable task.

As an added bonus I've also gained an extra character for my novel and at least two chapters as I will need to explain how my heroine is acquainted with her saviour. I have a new viewpoint on my heroine as I write the history of these two characters and explain why our extra is willing to risk getting shot or blown up in his quest to liberate our heroine. The best thing is that afterwards my extra just turns and walks away. He does his job and solves my problem at the same time but I have the possibility of using him in future should I find myself in this situation again.

# TO SLEEP PERHAPS & GHOSTS

by Anna Sykora



## TO SLEEP PERHAPS

**I**t all turns out OK  
the poor corpse doesn't care  
when creeping worms consume its flesh  
its heart its empty stare

or do you think this body  
laments what it has lost  
a cry in the wind  
a tear like rain

detaching from the rest

## GHOSTS

**L**ike leaves that scuttle  
torn from the trees  
almost colorless  
disembodied

memory's ghosts of love  
may linger

after we turn dust

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Anna Sykora has been an attorney in New York and teacher of English in Germany, where she resides with her patient husband and three enormous cats. To date she has placed 126 stories, mostly genre, in the small press, and almost 300 poems.

Motto: eat your rejections like pretzels....



# SHOES

by Holly Day

If it hadn't been for the new shopping mall  
they never would have found the bodies  
six skeletons, strung with dried skin  
tied to trees in the heart of the forest.

after the bodies were identified  
as coming from good, upscale families  
that still lived in town, naming  
some of the new roads leading to the shopping mall  
after the dead girls  
seemed like a good idea.

after further consideration, though  
they decided to just give the girls  
a really nice funeral.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Holly Day was born in Hereford, Texas, also known as "The Town Without a Toothache." She and her family currently live in Minneapolis, Minnesota, where she teaches at the Loft Literary Center. Her published books include *Music Theory for Dummies*, *Music Composition for Dummies*, and *Guitar All-in-One for Dummies*.

# THE MORTIIS STATION CONTRACT

by Matthew Pedersen



**I** was nearing my destination ahead of schedule. I'm guessing that was down

to the upgrades I'd done to the engines a few weeks ago when I got back from my last mission. Funny how smoothly things can go when you don't spend your credits on tequila...

I'd been having trouble getting contracts lately. Carobry, my contractor, said it was because the market was in a bad state, but I think that was just his excuse for purposefully screwing me out of work. I guess I really couldn't blame him, my conscience did tend to get in the way of me fulfilling the items in a contract. That, or maybe the freak was just greedy and insane. God knows I'd be crazy if I were one conscience formed from three bodies in a gestalt tank...

Oh well, it wasn't really the time to worry about that stuff. I was getting paid a lot

of money to get rid of all the security on the Mortis Vampire Clan's space station, the Life-Hold, and given the fact that the whole security team was made up of one person kind of made me determined not to screw up. The fact that he was another mercenary was a bit distressing though, never could tell what sort of lunatic could have been hired out to a place like that.

Once again, not really the time to worry about that. Warning klaxons started going off and then suddenly the ship lurched forward. Yep, I'd docked inside the station. I checked my armor's systems one last time and made my way for the exit bay. With any luck I'd be on my way out in an hour, and the clan paying me will have a new space station filled with harvested blood...

He was waiting for me outside in the docking bay. A cloaking field would have probably given me the element of surprise, but those things were expensive as hell. Besides, I couldn't just ignore the fact that I was a vampire. Zombies and skeletons might be the bread and butter of the undead mercenary market, but I am capable of things they couldn't even dream of.

With that in mind I stood defiantly on my ship's exit ramp, holding my plasma lance and energy sabre high. Of course when I saw the guy my confidence wavered a little. He was built like a freaking tank, and the only thing I saw him armed with was a huge chain he had wrapped around his right arm. His eyes were glowing with yellow light and black tattoos ran down his uncovered chest.

"What can I do for you, little lady?" He asked in a booming voice.

The sensors in my helmet's visor began

analyzing him. The chain was made from the same alloys used in starship construction, and spectral energy was emanating from his heart. I also couldn't help but notice that his body was covered in huge stitches.

"You're an ethereal riding around in a franken-construct, aren't you?" I asked.

The man laughed. "That I am, and just what the hell are you supposed to be?"

I crouched down, activated my energy sabre, and then flipped my jetpack on with a blink-command. I answered him as I rocketed up into the air. "I'm your end."

As I flew up I fired my plasma lance a few times, sending superheated bolts of blue energy smacking into his body. They left glowing wounds and melting flesh where ever they struck, but he didn't seem that bothered by it. I planned on putting one between his eyes, but unfortunately he wasn't about to go down without a fight. He threw his arm up, sending his chain snaking towards me. It wrapped around my ankle before I could do anything and pretty soon I found myself being yanked downwards.

I hit the floor chest first, leaving a nice imprint of my armored breasts in the metal plating. Man that was embarrassing... Fortunately my opponent didn't think to comment on it.

"Did you really think you could just waltz in here and kill me?" He growled while smashing his boot onto my spine. I'd suffered worse punishment, but I still let out a grunt of pain. The bastard lifted up his foot and was no doubt planning on dropping it down again, but I wasn't about to let that happen.

I pushed myself up with a quick motion of my arm and swung my sabre at him, slicing a deep cut into his foot. He howled and jabbed his fist at my head, but instead it

struck my sabre's blade. I sliced off most of his fingers, and a spray of black blood hit my visor. His eyes flared as he sneered down at me.

"I'll make you pay for that you dirty-" A plasma bolt in the neck flash burned the air in his lungs, effectively shutting him up. I tried to stand up, but his chain was still wrapped around my ankle. I sliced it off with a swipe of my sabre.

The franken-construct fell to its knees, coughing out black blood. I stood before him, ready to finish him off. His eyes locked onto me, and he gripped his throat with his good hand. "W-Who are you?" He wheezed.

I sliced off his head in one fluid motion. "Andria Cross..." I answered just before the light left his eyes.

After that I took off my helmet and let out a long, drawn out sigh. I needed to call Carobry and let him know my employers could move in to secure the station whenever they were ready. The aches and pains in my body made me want to hold off on that though. Instead I walked out of the docking bay and into the station. The first door I opened led to a chamber filled with giant vats of bright red fluid. I licked my lips.

I could really use a drink...

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Matthew Pedersen is a young writer living in Arlington, Texas who has dedicated himself to the study and creation of dark fiction. When not stressing out over exams at college or his ever growing pile of "Works-in-Progress" he spends his time with his friends/editors Cody and Oranda, without whom none of his success would be possible.



# WINDOWS AT NIGHT

by Rick McQuiston



**R**ick sat in his usual spot on the two-piece brown sectional. The television lit the small room aptly, casting a pale glow across every corner it could. Shadows clung to areas untouched by the light. A clock on hung on a nearby wall, its hour hand squarely between the two and the three, its minute hand one click past the seven.

"Two-thirty," Rick moaned as he ran a callused hand through his stringy hair. "Every night the same thing: no sleep."

He never suffered from insomnia before. He had no idea why it afflicted him lately. And he hated it. The only saving grace was that he didn't have to be at work until ten the following morning, so he usually didn't feel too lethargic the next day.

Usually.

Rick let his gaze drift away from the television screen and wander aimlessly across the room until he noticed the window. It peaked out from behind a dusty curtain.

Rick studied the window for a moment or two before looking away. He could feel that there were terrible things on the other side of the glass, even though it only looked out into his unkempt backyard. In fact, he had just stood at it only a few hours earlier, noting how the grass had grown since the last time he cut it.

But now, at night, the window took on a different role. It became a portal to all the darkness behind it. And portals worked both ways.

Rick's thoughts flashed back to an incident he had as a kid. His father had finally given into his mother's nagging and had all the

windows in the house replaced. In half a day there was a whole new set of portals to the outside world.

That first night Rick lay in his bed staring at the window in his room. The glass and frame were shiny and new, but he still felt uneasy about it. Simply replacing the old window with a fresh new one would make no difference. Whatever was on the other side would still be able to peer into his room. Or worse: crawl through.

Sleep eventually overtook him however, and when he woke up the following morning he noticed something disturbing: the window was cracked. Tiny lines spread out from a spot near the center of the glass.

Jumping out of bed, Rick's first thought was worrying that his dad would be upset. But then as he traced his small fingers along the numerous cracks, another more frightening thought wormed its way into his head:

What caused the window to crack?

When he ventured into the kitchen that morning Rick expected to see his parents settled down in front of their usual cup of coffee. Instead, they were both studying the window above the sink. His dad was inspecting the frame; his mom looking over his shoulder in disbelief. The window had been broken just like the one in his bedroom.

That was the last time anything unusual happened in the house, but the fact that every single window was cracked unnerved Rick to no end. He developed an irrational fear of looking out windows at night, making sure that he closed any curtains or blinds as soon as it began to get dark.

Rick looked back up at the window. Most of the glass was obscured by the curtain, but he could still see just enough of it to know that it was there.

Deciding that it would bother him and add to his insomnia, Rick forced himself to get up, and with reservations clinging to his mind like moss on a stone, paced over to

the window. He pulled both sides of the curtain over, bringing them to a central meeting spot in the middle.

As he turned, Rick lost his balance a little and instinctively braced himself against the nearest thing he could: the window. His hand landed squarely against the curtain, but to his amazement, did not shatter the glass. In fact, it felt solid, as if there was no window there at all. With his heart in his throat he parted the curtain.

It was gone. Where there had been a window, there was now only another section of wall. It was painted just like the rest of the wall, leaving no clue as to what it had been before.

And then Rick noticed it. There, on the wall right behind the couch, was a window. And it looked just like the window that had been behind the curtain. Only now it had a large crack radiating out from its center.

A chill shot through Rick's entire body. What he was seeing was impossible, and he would have doubted it himself if he still wasn't holding the curtain in his hand, the curtain that now hung over solid drywall.

As Rick's thoughts jumped between his present situation and the past incident with his father's windows, he desperately tried to make a connection between the two.

What caused the windows to crack? What caused this one to crack?

Rick's attention was focused squarely on the new window in his house. Minutes earlier it wasn't there. Now it was. He stared through the glass at the blackness outside. It seemed like night, but different somehow, darker, thicker, like looking into a can of black paint. And it was cracked at its center, it appeared (as the windows in his father's house had) as if something had hit the glass in an attempt to break it, as if trying to get through it.

Everything in Rick's life then melted into insignificance. Nothing else mattered. His job; his friends; his future. Nothing. All that did matter was a strange little window in his house that seemed to be moving.

Rick thought about running into his bedroom and snatching the gun he kept in the closet, but a quick glance into the kitchen (or more accurately: the window in the kitchen) told him that bullets would be useless. The kitchen window had a crack in it as well, a single crack in the center of the pane that spread out in all directions just like the moving window did.

Rick stumbled out of the family room, across the kitchen, and into the front room. He was looking for his cell phone. Who he would call he didn't know, but he had to try someone, regardless of the fact that it was the middle of the night.

The sound froze around Rick where he stood. It pierced the veil that he had pulled over himself in a futile attempt at protection.

It was the sound of glass cracking.

Instantly, Rick scanned the room for the source of the noise, and within a few seconds determined it was coming from the front bay window. He rushed over to the window and pulled the curtains aside...

and stared at a blank wall.

Now he wanted his gun, so without delay, he ran into his bedroom and yanked the weapon from his closet.

And then he noticed the window above his bed. It was hidden behind yet another set of curtains but he heard the unmistakable sound of glass cracking behind them.

"All right," he shouted to the empty house. "Enough already. I've had it with this crap." The cold barrel of his gun pointed at the curtains. "I'm gonna end this once and for all."

The room was lit from the gun. A brilliant, split-second explosion created a myriad of shadows across the bedroom as a deafening roar shook the walls. The bullet shot forward at blinding speed, tearing through the frail curtains and into the window. Glass shattered in a spray of jagged shards, blowing outward into the pitch-black night.

The single, blood-red tentacle split into a messy pulp when the bullet hit it. It then recoiled its smashed tissue from the opening, and rearing back, was joined by a dozen others like itself. The whole mass then pushed into the house, and after many years, finally reached its prey.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rick is a forty-four year old father of two who loves anything horror related. He has nearly 300 publishing credits and has written two novels, *To See As God Sees* and *Where Things Might Walk*., six anthologies, one novella and edited an anthology of Michigan authors. They are all available through Lulu and Amazon, and on his website @ [many-midnights.web.com](http://many-midnights.web.com).

He is currently working on his third and fourth novels.

# DEAD MEN'S SHOES

by Len Maynard & Mick Sims

This story was initially published in the 2004 Sarob Press limited edition hardcover collection *Falling Into Heaven* where it received an Honorable Mention from Ellen Datlow



**A**t first he thought the soft, papery rustling keeping him awake was the sound of the crisp, white, unsullied linen sheets of the hotel bed. He lay there listening

to the gentle susurrations, watching the night receding, any romantic notions of watching the dawn rise lost in a pounding, wine-induced headache. The Chablis had been excellent, although perhaps the move onto the Merlot less wise.

Melanie lay beside him, still, breathing deeply, not moving at all. The noise wasn't coming from her. Not from his newly betrothed, not from his beloved. Nor was it coming from him. He made sure of that, lying rigid in the bed, not daring to move, even to the extent of controlling his breathing, making it as shallow as possible so he didn't disturb the sheets. But the noise continued, regardless of whether he moved or whether he didn't – a feathery whisper that seemed to fill the room with its intensity.

Finally he could bear it no longer, threw back the bedclothes and climbed out, flexing his toes in the deep-piled carpet. The price for the suite was astronomical, but he hadn't wanted to leave her any room for doubts. Her day, their day,

had to be perfect, and that included the honeymoon.

The sound stopped instantly.

Melanie stirred, mumbled something in her sleep but didn't wake. He stared down at her, at the pool of dark hair on the pillow, her face floating in the middle of it. Asleep she looked little more than a child, innocent and peaceful, and his mind was filled with guilt that he had stayed on the balcony - 'just taking in the sea air, love. I won't be long.' - long enough to ensure she was asleep under the effects of the bottles consumed.

He sighed and went through to the en-suite bathroom, turned on the shower and stepped under the fine spray.

He nearly cried out as the needles of water hit his body. The pain was excruciating and he moved back, grabbing for his towel. As he wiped the water from his skin the pain eased but the sound started again, louder this time, hissing and crackling. He looked down at his chest, alarmed to see wheals rising from his skin, long streaks of red bordered by white-bubble blisters. Even as he watched more wheals were forming, striping down his legs, criss-crossing his feet.

Something close to panic started to swamp him. Staggering back, he collided with the toilet bowl and sat down with a thump. He was finding it difficult to get his breath, and he sucked hungrily at the air in the room, but couldn't get enough to satisfy his lungs. He leant forward, trying to calm himself, trying to breathe steadily.

Gradually the attack passed and he wiped the perspiration from his forehead with the towel. The door opened and Melanie came into the bathroom, rubbing her eyes sleepily, yawning. She barely glanced at him as she went to the sink and poured herself a glass of water.

'What were you doing in here? You

woke me up,' she said accusingly as she sipped the water and switched on the shower.

'It's very hot,' he said. 'Be careful.'

She ran her fingers under the spray. 'Rubbish,' she said. 'It's barely warm.'

'But...' He wanted to scream at her, 'But it is! Look what it did to me,' He glanced down at his body but the wheals had vanished without a trace. His skin was slightly mottled, faintly blotchy, but the pain had gone and he looked more or less normal.

He watched her step under the shower, take the shampoo from the shelf and massage it into her hair. Her nakedness was clean already, the act of washing merely adding to her flawless perfection. Almost, really almost, he considered joining her in the shower and consummating the marriage. He got to his feet and left the room. The whispering sound accompanied him.

The Point Hotel stood at the far reaches of a peninsula that jutted out into the sea and formed one of the more dramatic features of the Cornish coastline. Battered by rain and squalls during the winter months, scorched by wind and sun during the summer, the hotel's white painted walls were cracked and peeling, and, despite the five star rating, looked in need of serious attention in places. Likewise the hotel's gardens were a casualty of the extremes of weather, with all but the hardiest shrubs, perennials and a few twisted, wind-bent trees managing to eke out a modicum of survival.

The day before, when Sean and Melanie Hamilton pulled up on the gravel forecourt, they temporarily failed to notice the hotel's decorative shortcomings. Instead they were immersed in a disagreement that had occupied them for the final quarter of the journey down from their Hertfordshire home. Only an argument for fifty of the three hundred miles, not too bad, Sean rationalised later.

This week was to be her second honeymoon, but his first. That's how they were both referring to it to family and friends, and anyone else who attended the wedding reception at the local hall. Her second because of course, as they all knew, she had been married before. 'No, he died. Poor thing.' Sean was embarking on the experience for the first time, the only time as he insisted to his cynical group of mates at the club.

The argument on the journey down – a petty dispute about map-reading that had failed to escalate, but instead had quietly simmered without ever reaching the boil – did not bode well for the following seven days. Actually, as they both knew but tried to ignore, it was because she had, for the first time ever he had to admit, called him 'Phil.' Of course Phil was dead, but even if he wasn't it couldn't be polite to call your husband of less than twenty four hours by your previous husband's name. Sean was certain it hadn't mentioned the scenario in the How To book he had bought to get speeches and things perfect.

They checked in, were showed to the Honeymoon Suite – very lavish but comfortable – and unpacked in a wary atmosphere of trying too hard to be pleased with everything in the room. The TV controls in the headboard were novel but...and the bath was spectacularly large by normal standards.

That evening over a meal of baked ham and charlotte potatoes Sean enthused about the hotel, and Melanie rallied behind him. They ate quietly, the ambience in the dining room was quite formal, and his mind had too much opportunity for deviation. He was determined to be a good husband, just as he knew Phil had been. He had known Melanie for years, before Phil in fact, although gradually Phil became a friend as well. If Sean had a girlfriend, which he did occasionally, for a while, they would go out on a foursome, perhaps to the Chinese in the town centre, or once, disastrously, to a dinner party at Phil and Melanie's after they married. The girl

Sean took was ill over the sorbet course and had to be taken home in a taxi.

Sean was suddenly aware that Melanie had laid down her knife and fork and was staring at him.

'Why can't you just eat your food instead of dissecting it?' she said.

He stared down at his plate. The food was largely untouched except for the potatoes. These he had carefully peeled with his knife, exposing the creamy white flesh, leaving the skins in a pile at the side of his plate. He never ate like that normally. He hadn't realised he'd been doing it. 'Sorry,' he said. 'I was miles away.'

Her expression softened and she reached out, taking her hand in his. 'I'm sorry too,' she said, smiling slightly. 'I shouldn't have snapped at you. I shouldn't have made that stupid mistake...you know the name thing in the car.'

'Forget it,' he said defensively. 'Could happen to anyone, slip of the tongue. After all you went on honeymoon with Phil – process of association.'

'Oh, for God's sake, Sean! It's not the occasion; it's just...well I suppose sometimes inevitably I'll think about him. Anyway I'm sorry. Come on, we should be talking about us.'

He conceded the point. 'Quite right, it doesn't matter at all.' But of course it did, to him. He was so determined to be a better husband than Phil in every way; because when it came right down to it she hadn't left Phil for him, and Phil hadn't volunteered to leave her. He'd died, and if he hadn't he would still be married to Mel, and Sean wouldn't be. It was a fact, but it wasn't a problem.

The waiter who wheeled the dessert trolley to their table was young, with a good-looking, smooth face. No lines or



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**That night they should have made love with a passion that had been missing from their separate lives for years. Their meeting in marriage should have been symbolised in a union of bodies.**

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wrinkles in his skin. Life hadn't yet had a chance to etch worry and frown reminders into the bland features. He smiled as he ran through the litany of the sweets and gateaux on offer. His false foreign accent making them sound like Karma Sutra positions.

'I'd like to try the tiramisu,' Melanie said. 'But with my waistline I daren't.'

'Spoil yourself,' the waiter said. 'Besides, I wouldn't say you had anything to worry about.'

Melanie's cheeks coloured and she looked down coyly. Bloody hell, Sean thought, she's starting to blush. 'You're very kind. Okay, I'll have some.'

'He fancies you,' Sean said when the waiter went back to the kitchen.

'I'm old enough to be his mother. He can't be more than eighteen.'

'You're only thirty-two. He still fancies you.'

She grinned at him in delight. 'Eat your cheesecake,' she said.

As they finished their coffee and made for the lounge area Sean noticed a table set for one near to their table. The debris of a single meal was strewn over the pale pink cloth but he couldn't remember anyone sitting there. It bothered him for the rest of the evening.

That night they should have made love with a passion that had been missing from their separate lives for years. Their meeting in

marriage should have been symbolised in a union of bodies. Instead Sean went into the bathroom after Mel and had an upset stomach. It wasn't very pleasant, he wasn't used to rich food, or the quantities of wine they drank. He intended to make an effort, at first, but once he was on the balcony getting air, he began to think about how athletic Phil was, compared to him. Sean's exercise routine was strenuous if he used the stairs instead of the lift at work. Phil ran marathons, and probably made love with skill and precision as well. Sean would wait until the moment was more conducive. When he went inside the room she was virtually comatose and didn't even stir when he got in beside her.

At about four in the morning the papery whispering started.

The noise accompanied him on the way down to breakfast next morning. Halfway down the stairs he stopped and said to Melanie, 'Can you hear that?'

She looked at him blankly. 'Hear what?'

To him it sounded like someone very close to his ear was screwing tissue paper into balls. 'I don't know. A kind of rustling sound.'

'I can't hear anything except the rumbling of my stomach. I can't believe I'm still hungry after the meal last night.'

The waiter who had served them at dinner greeted them in the dining room. If anything he was even more attentive to Melanie than the night before. She responded to his attentions by being less coy and more openly flirtatious, a fact that was not lost on

Sean who ate his meal in an expanding morose silence, watching the waiter with hooded eyes. The table for one had already been used.

Sean had dressed for their day at the beach in a light cotton shirt and baggy chinos, but the clothes could have been made of wire wool. They scraped his body mercilessly, making him itch and shift uncomfortably in his seat. When they went back to their room to collect their towels he stripped off and searched through the wardrobe, looking for something more comfortable to wear. He settled for a tee shirt and shorts, but as they walked along the promenade looking for an empty spot on the already crowded beach his clothes were starting to irritate him again.

They eventually found a space, laid out their towels and settled down to enjoy the baking mid-summer sun that poured down from a cloudless sky. Melanie stripped down to a black bikini and handing a bottle of sun cream to Sean said, 'Do my back can you darling?'

The tide was out, the sea a silver strip in the distance. Close to the water's edge children were playing, their whoops and screams of delight reaching his ears, almost drowning out the incessant whispering sound. Almost, but not quite, it was as if someone was standing just behind him rubbing sheets of paper together.

He took the sun cream from her, poured a little into the palm of his hand and started to smooth it over his wife's back. He was conscious it was the first real physical contact of the honeymoon. The itching of his clothes was becoming intolerable, and with hands greasy with lotion he pulled off his tee shirt, dropping it onto the towel next to him.

'You missed a bit,' Melanie said, reaching over her shoulder and pointing to a dry spot on her back with a finely manicured finger. She was so lovely, devoid of any

blemishes; he would try hard every day to ensure he reached her expectations.

'Sorry,' he said and squirted another pool of cream into his hand.

As he massaged her he thought about the boyishly handsome waiter and the fact there was a definite attraction between him and his wife. He knew it was only a hotel flirtation kind of thing, nothing real, but in the wider context how could he compete with such youthful virility? He was forty-six, possessor of a body that, while it might not have gone to seed, was certainly the victim of neglect. The incipient paunch he had noticed around his middle in his late thirties was now an unmistakeable bulge, and his muscle tone was suffering the ravages of age, and lack of use. His skin seemed to hang on his body like an ill-fitting suit. Damn, but it was so uncomfortable today. Whatever was irritating him wasn't letting go.

'Ow! Careful!' Melanie pulled away from him.

He was jerked back to reality and noticed the blood on her back. There was also blood on his fingernails. There were four small half-moon cuts on Melanie's skin, just below the strap of her bikini. His fingernails had done the damage, where he had rubbed too hard, too intensely, and his nails had punctured her. It was as if he had been trying to burrow under her skin. He realised she was crying, and immediately began to comfort her.

'Oh my God!' he said. 'I'm so sorry.' He pulled a tissue from the beach-bag and dabbed the blood away. The damage wasn't serious; the cuts were already closing, the blood clotting in the summer heat.

She kissed him gently on the lips. 'It was an accident. But put your shirt back on. You already look like a lobster.' She looked closer. 'Good God, you've already started to peel!'

He glanced down at his arms. It was true. The skin was separating into papery layers and peeling away. 'I think I'd better get out of the sun,' he said.

Mel lay down on her stomach as he got to his feet. She squinted up at him as he pulled on his tee shirt. 'Where are you going?'

'I'm going to find some shade. You stay here and enjoy the sun. I'll only be over there.' He indicated a beachfront café with shading umbrellas crouching over the white trestle tables.

'I hate to think of you by yourself on our honeymoon,' she said.

'I won't be on my own...' he started to say, but she had already turned back onto her stomach before he could finish his sentence about the dozens of other people already at the café.

He found a small table for one, bought a cold drink and sat with a clear view of the beach. Shielding his eyes from the sun he searched the bodies for Melanie, finally locating her, still lying prone absorbing the rays.

He was worried about the appearance of his arms. The skin was peeling freely and they looked unsightly. He kept them folded, hiding most of the damage, checking to see no one was looking before taking a swig of his drink. He was content to sit there in the shade of the umbrella, letting the day drift by, getting small amusements from some of the antics of the holiday makers and day-trippers, like the fat woman struggling beneath a large multi-coloured towel, trying to don her bathing costume. It reminded him of his family holidays with his mum and dad, and sometimes when they took grandmother, after granddad had died. From time to time he glanced back at Melanie but apart from rolling over onto her back to toast her stomach, or glancing at a few pages of the latest Booker winner, she was unmoving.

Then he noticed the waiter from the hotel walking along the promenade with a couple of friends. They were drinking from beer cans and laughing loudly, making lewd comments about some of the women on the beach. All the women on the beach it seemed. The waiter said something to his colleagues and peeled away from them, hopping down onto the sand and weaving his way through the sunbathers.

Sean drew in his breath as the waiter stopped a yard from where Mel lay and crouched down to speak with her. It could of course be totally innocent – Melanie had never given him any cause before to doubt her fidelity – but there was something about her body language that told him this time was different. They were married now in any case, surely that would make it different.

She sat up and pushed her sunglasses up into her hair, slicking it away from her face. Whatever he was saying to her was obviously very funny as she threw back her head and laughed with the kind of abandon she rarely showed in Sean's company. Not that he could remember anyway. The waiter dropped down into a space on the towel next to her. He was describing something, gesturing towards the sea, making her laugh again. Sean was about to leave the table and go down to where they were sitting when he saw her hand something to the waiter.

What followed was a repeat of his own actions earlier as the waiter poured sun-cream into his hand and started to smooth it over Melanie's back. Sean sat back in his seat, picked up his can of drink and took a long swallow, not caring now who saw his peeling arms. He was filled with a curious mixture of anger and arousal. Watching the handsome young man massaging his wife's back was stirring echoes of a previous evening, memories of the evening he knew he hadn't won the youthful Melanie, but rather Phil had. Younger, funnier, and the one she had let massage her neck and shoulders in the pub

after the baseball match in the park. Self-loathing and disgust swept over him; he hurled the half-finished can into the rubbish bin and walked quickly back to the hotel.

By the time he reached their room at the hotel his flesh was screaming. Hot wires were being drawn across his body, searing and burning; the rustling noise in his head was becoming intolerable. It was now hissing in his ears – furtive whispers, almost fully formed words. He stripped off his shirt and cried out. The skin was hanging in long wispy strips from his chest and the flesh beneath was a livid purplish red. In front of the mirror in the bathroom he examined the damage. It wasn't only confined to his chest – his legs were peeling badly and when he checked his back it was in a similar state. Yet, now he was naked, there was no pain.

He'd had sunburn before. As a child his parents had taken him to Newquay for the week and on the first day there he'd stayed in the sun too long and got horribly burnt. The pain of the raw scorched skin was still etched in his memory; but that had felt nothing like this.

He took a piece of the peeled skin and rubbed it between his finger and thumb; it was dry but felt greasy. The strip of skin was attached to a point just below his breastbone. He tugged it and with a whispering sigh it pulled away from his chest, tearing in a line down to his navel where it finally detached. He tried it again with a strip on his arm. Again the sigh, and he realised with horror the noises that had been haunting him for the past few hours were coming from him – coming from his skin.

Melanie came back from the beach several hours later to find Sean sitting on the balcony of their room, leafing through a pile of magazines, and gazing out over the town. 'I don't know how you can wear all those clothes,' she said. 'It's still scorching out there.'

He was dressed in grey slacks with a white shirt buttoned to the neck and cuffs. He couldn't let her see the state of his skin. His torso resembled a side of beef draped in a ragged and torn net curtain, and his legs and arms fared little better. So far his hands and face were relatively normal – he'd noticed a slight peeling of the skin around his nose, but compared to the rest of his body it was negligible. The rusting, whispering noise was constant now as his skin cracked and rippled under his clothes, and the whispering was no longer a string of amorphous sounds drifting past his ears. Now they had shape, were whispered words, and it was clear to him what was happening. The pain he was enduring as the skin split and tore was nothing compared to the pain of crushed ambitions and shattered dreams. It was a worthwhile sacrifice; if he had to suffer, and there seemed little alternative, then it was at least in a worthy cause.

Later, as he readied himself for dinner, Melanie lay on the bed, a wet flannel on her forehead, pleading a migraine. 'You go on down without me,' she said. 'I must have lain in the sun too long.'

In the dining room he occupied a table in the window so he could look out at the remnants of the day. It also kept him away from the single table, where a man was sitting, his back to Sean, although he knew now who he was.

Sean ordered steak from a pretty waitress with apricot skin and a warm smile. Of the waiter there was no sign, but then Sean wasn't expecting to see him this evening. He guessed he would be otherwise occupied, flaunting his fake foreign phrases, and his practised skin rubbing techniques.

He ate the steak, watched life pass by, as he'd watched it pass him by all his years, then he slipped the steak knife into his pocket and hoped the waitress wouldn't notice when she came to collect his plate. She didn't seem that attentive.

After another sickly dessert and three cups of very strong coffee he said a warm goodnight to the waitress and went back to the room. The man at the table was still there. As Sean reached the exit he turned to look at the man's face, confirming his suspicion that Mel calling him by the wrong name hadn't been accidental, or even a coincidence.

At the top of the stairs he paused, ducking out of sight as the door to his and Melanie's room opened and the handsome young waiter stepped out into the corridor. The young man checked his watch, smiled broadly, punched the air, then trotted down the corridor to the service lift and pressed the call button. Sean waited for him to step inside the lift before he approached the room and slid his key into the lock.

Melanie was sitting up in bed reading a magazine. She barely glanced around as Sean entered the room and took off his jacket. 'What was he doing in our room?' He said to her evenly.

'Who?' Melanie said, still not looking up from her magazine, but he thought her cheeks flushed.

'The waiter. I saw him coming out of our room,' he said. Tell the truth, he was thinking. Just tell the truth. We can start again. You can tell me I am good enough, I can be enough, and we can start afresh, a new beginning with the past stripped away and discarded.

'Oh, him. I called room service. He brought me up a cup of tea.'

Sean glanced across at the cup on the bedside table. The tan liquid had formed a skin and looked cold. He nodded slowly. 'I see. That explains it then.'

But it didn't explain the fading rash on her chest – it was known as a passion rash by the girls in the circle of friends he'd hung around with during his youth. It also didn't explain the pale pink mark at the base of her

throat where lips had attached themselves with hungry passion. But it was her explanation and he would accept it... for now. He wanted to be a good husband, and that meant trusting his wife. He sat on his side of the bed and switched on the TV.

Later, as he turned off the television after the late evening news, he realised he hadn't heard a word of it. His skin was making so much noise now it was drowning out every other sound in the room. Even when Melanie said goodnight to him and switched off her bedside light he'd barely heard her. It was as if she was speaking from another room. All he heard was the ebb and flow of his whispering skin, the dark rustling of detachment as skin parted company with flesh and slipped down inside his clothing in greasy strips

He pushed himself off the bed, quietly shuffled into the bathroom, and shook off his clothes. Some of the skin came away, stuck to the inside of his shirt, and when he pulled off his trousers he almost screamed as the skin around his genitals ripped and tore.

In the glared light from the lamp above the mirror he stared down at his body, listening as another small patch of skin detached itself from his stomach with a sibilant sigh and fell to the floor. There was still so far to go. So much of his skin was intact, still covering the crimson flesh, still providing him with a mask with which to fool the world. It was happening too slowly, much too slowly. How could he change, how could he become new if so much of the old remained?

With faltering steps - the pain was really quite intense - he hobbled across to the bed and stared down at Mel, who was lying with her thumb poised at her lips, enhancing the lie of her innocence. He picked up his pillow and laid it across her face, and when she stirred and tried to push it away he flopped on top of it, using all his weight to bear down, pressing his body to hers in a mockery of the love making they had not yet shared.

It took less than a minute, but he laid there for a further ten while his skin sighed in exaltation. He was so close now, so close to a new beginning, a new start. He took the pillow away from Melanie's face, smiling slightly at the surprised expression in her eyes. With his fingertips he closed the lids, marvelling at how peaceful she looked – how calm. She was as perfect in death, as Phil had been. He had been messier, resisting more energetically as befitted his physical abilities, but eventually greater age and experience, together with the knife, had prevailed. From his comforting of Melanie had grown their love and the marriage, so the sacrifice was worthwhile.

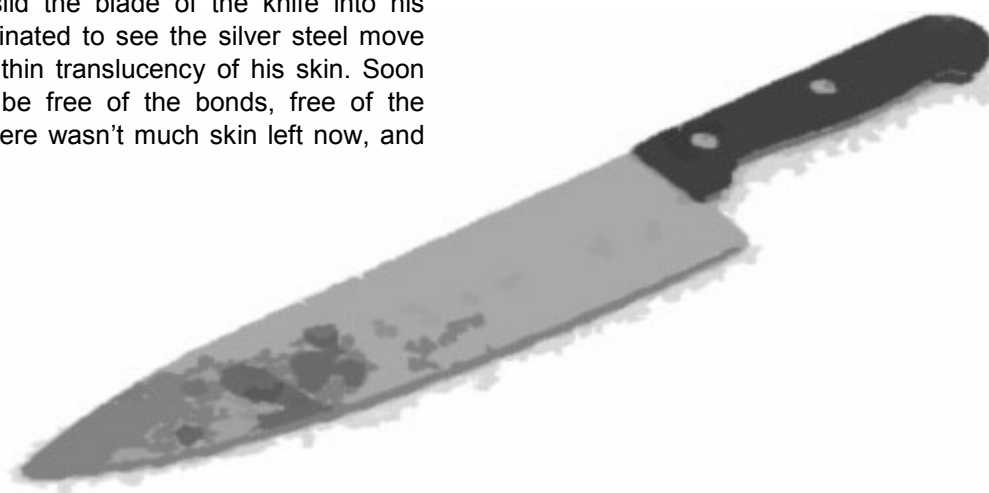
He went across to his jacket lying across a chair where he'd left it, took the steak knife from the pocket, and returned to the bed.

Sitting down next to his wife's serene body he slid the blade of the knife into his thigh, fascinated to see the silver steel move under the thin translucency of his skin. Soon he would be free of the bonds, free of the masks. There wasn't much skin left now, and

what remained was membrane thin, pink and watery, as if it didn't want to be skin any more.

He laid the knife next to the telephone as he dialled room service and asked if the young foreign speaking waiter wouldn't mind bringing him a sandwich.

He was surprised, but not shocked, when the door opened almost immediately, and the man from the dining room entered; unfinished business naturally. Accompanied by the whispered, exultant sighs of his expectant skin he began to stand, knife in hand, for the penultimate act in his resurrection.



## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Len and Mick have been writing together for over forty years – in fact 2014 is the 40th anniversary of our first pro sale. We've had nine novels published, with a further seven scheduled, as well as nine collections, four novellas, various essays, and numerous credits in magazines and anthologies. We were editors on nine Darkness Rising anthologies, and ran a small press that produced over twenty anthology magazines under Enigmatic Press. We have expanded our range to include children's stories, ghost writing projects, romance novellas, and screenplays. Our first screenplay won an award, another is seeking BFI funding and another is in development. [www.maynard-sims.com](http://www.maynard-sims.com)



# FLIGHT 417

*Dedicated to Chris Jacobs*



By Dean Fazzino

**D**ing! “Flight 417 getting ready to depart from gate eight.” The droning female voice echoed throughout the airport, seeming to come from everywhere and nowhere.

It caught one man's attention in particular, and he looked up from his shoes and swore. He had to get to gate eight. He, Phil, had flown from Los Angeles to JFK Airport to get to his connecting flight in New York. He was exhausted from his previous eight-hour flight, and he wasn't going to let some simple airline security get between him and his business. In fact, Phil put his business before many things, sadly including his family. He hadn't wanted to blow off his wife, and it was hard to say no to that toned figure, hair slightly greying, or those pleading emeralds, beacons of verdant colour against the monochromatic tan of their apartment. He'd been meaning to paint it, as Marie wouldn't have the lack of colour or variety in her everyday living facilities. A smile teased his lips, the memory of his Marie, the woman he loved, invading his emotions. But his grin was quickly erased by the tap of the obnoxious security guard.

“Briefcase on the belt, bud,” he sneered, “We ain't got all day!”

Phil let loose a sigh and hefted his briefcase up onto the conveyor belt, anxious to get to his flight. He began to tap his foot impatiently as it

seemed to take forever for his bags to be scanned. As if on cue, the chime signifying an airport announcement sounded, followed by the second call for his plane.

Phil once again muttered an obscenity under his breath. "I swear if I don't make this flight..." he grumbled. Just as he was thinking his bags would never see the light of day again, however, the guard walked up, smirk toned down a notch. "All finished, bud. Looks like you managed to keep yer food to a minimum as well."

He grimaced and decided to ignore the jeer. It didn't really affect him, he was still the same guy. After all, he had a flight to catch. He scooped up his luggage and began to walk briskly towards his terminal.

*Ding!* "Final calls for flight 417, all passengers please report to gate eight for boarding."

His pace doubled and he began to jog towards his destination. After about thirty more seconds of running he found the blue neon eight signifying his terminal and slipped into line with about a minute to spare.

The last stragglers began to fall into place behind him, and he was met with a multitude of grumpy looks as he scoped out his fellow flyers. The 5:30 departure time couldn't have been helping their moods. Feeling a bit groggy himself, Phil put his mind on autopilot and began to space out. After going through the motions with the ticket lady he started boarding the plane. He had only advanced a few paces from there, however, when a thought popped up out of nowhere and hit him like an Olympic boxer. He stopped dead and groaned, face palming at his own lack of thought.

"Why me, why now?" he thought.

Marie had just gone out on a vacation this week, too. She would never forgive him.

"Uh, dude, can you move?" voiced a young

man behind him. Phil hadn't realized he'd been leaning against the terminal wall blocking further passage to the plane.

"Sorry," he mumbled sheepishly, and began to walk back down to the board the plane once more, all the while slightly shaking his head. He still couldn't get over the fact that he had left himself so open to attack, so vulnerable any child could penetrate his defences. As he stepped onto the airplane, though, he decided (unconvincingly) to let it go. What has passed has passed, right? But whatever he told himself, he couldn't shake the reality that Marie would be mad. Who wouldn't be if their husband left the garage open.

---

Adam had been waiting at gate eight for nearly two hours now and was in the process of staring at the newest addition to *The Stand*, a trilogy by Stephen King about some guy escaping a government testing facility and releasing a sickness that kills almost everyone. "It must suck to kill millions trying to do the right thing," he thought. He might read it someday, maybe not. That was a question for another day as his reading observations were abruptly cut short by the blaring announcement. It was the last boarding call for his flight.

"They should give more life to that voice," he thought as he lethargically stood and stretched; his muscles sore from the unforgiving seat he had occupied. It had given him a sore neck, a crime worthy of a death glare. Satisfied with his sentence, Adam grabbed his carry-on and headed toward the terminal to board the flight. He fell in step behind a big, heavy behemoth who was breathing quite heavily and seemed to take up tons of territory by simply twiddling his thumbs. He handed his boarding pass to the flight attendant, earning a "Thank you for flying with us today Mr. Phil Brinton," from the woman. He simply nodded and continued on with no gratuity whatsoever. The flight attendant didn't

seem all that happy to not be tipped, but maybe Phil was a newcomer to JFK and didn't know the custom of tipping the flight attendant. Adam didn't have the money to tip as he was in college, but he would if he could. He received an evil eye from the attendant for being the second frugal passenger in a row and couldn't help but wonder if it was karma for the look he administered to his chair earlier. He stepped forward into the boarding tunnel and, not for the first time, began to wonder if there was food on this plane.

---

"Mommy! I don't want to go on another plane," Evan complained, "It's boring!"

Susan dragged her whining son along behind her, the child complaining constantly.

She bent over on her hands and knees to catch her breath. She was 5 months pregnant. Susan was flying to England to visit her family. She was born and raised in Chicago, but ever since her husband had kicked the bucket in the accident a couple months ago, she finally felt free. He was a drunkard. Periodically he'd come home staggering and broke, digging their family deeper into their own financial hole. Sometimes he hit her, sometimes worse. She'd tried to convince him to quit, and when that didn't work, she threatened him. She had tried everything, hoping one day or another to bring back the old Steven. But nothing worked. Then the arguing started. It was always for things that were so small, too. Things like she didn't get dinner or that Evan stunk and needed to be changed (even though he was eight years old). At times like those she usually tried to leave, but that would make it worse, so she decided to deal with it. She had to, for Evan's sake, for if she wasn't her husband's punching bag, he'd surely turn to his son.

She had a slight fear of men now, always jumpy in public places and very protective of Evan. When she had heard her husband had

died, she took a quite neutral attitude. She didn't care much. He'd been the bane of her existence. It wasn't a great loss for her. She'd moved on quickly and so had Evan. Reaching the end of her fatigue, she got in line to board the plane. She handed their boarding passes to the loquacious attendant, chattering away, and stepped onto the boarding tunnel, ready to board flight 417.

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Adam took his seat, A 31. No one was yet there so he took the window seat and stowed his luggage beneath the seat in front of him.

Adam was a college exchange student traveling to London. He had received a full scholarship to the University of London, for four years, all books supplied. He hoped he'd find some friends at the University. He retrieved his book from his knapsack and resumed reading.

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Phil located his seat and stuffed his exuberant form between the two armrests. He looked at the daunting runway and all of the lines he would never understand. He rummaged through his pack and fished out a stick of gum-peppermint- his favourite. He breathed in a cool breath and exhaled. Two people took a seat behind him, a pregnant woman and a young boy of about 7 or 8. He hoped the boy wouldn't cry too much during the trip.

---

Susan found her seat and let Evan sit by the window.

"When will we leave, mommy I wanna go," Evan pouted.

"Don't worry Evan; we'll be off in no time."

Susan took a deep breath and unexpectedly inhaled a sharp peppermint scent combined

with a sweaty stench. It was the man in front of them, his form spilling out of the seat. Wow, he was big.

She was aroused from her stupor by the cacophony coming from next to her. It was a young boy of about Evan's age, his mother in the other aisle.

"Mommy, when will I get the headache?" he complained.

"When the plane takes off, honey," the patient mother comforted.

Susan was impressed by her charisma.

"Why don't you go play with that nice boy," she suggested. She was met with a grin of delight and reminded her child with explicit instructions he was sure he would not to stray too far and to come back before the plane took off, but her requests met deaf ears; Evan had taken off.

With a sigh, Susan slumped back in her chair and began to focus on the task of rooting through her purse to find gum for Evan.

---

When the plane started to taxi Adam closed his book and stuffed it between his legs.

The attendant was going over emergency procedures (pure speculation, none of that stuff ever really happens) in front where a curtain and restroom separated 3rd class from second.

He resisted the urge to look at their progress on the runway-taking off was his favourite part. It fascinated him how something so effective could have been erected so many years ago and have such a great impact on modern society. I mean, building something so astounding and then automate it so that people had to do so much less to manufacture and fly it? Amazing! Yes, it was a childish fascination but one that kept him thinking for

hours at a time.

The plane was at the point now where it had stopped and was about to take off. He looked intently out the window and watched as the runway raced by beneath them, waiting for the spectacle of flight. It would be so stunning! In a moment of pure grace, beauty, and climax, the plane's nose tilted upwards into the deep blue sky. His ears popped.

Phil's ears popped.

Susan's ears popped and she handed a stick of gum for Evan to chew on.

His ears popped and Mommy handed him a stick of gum to prevent the foul headache. He was pushed back in his seat from the acceleration, his cheeks slightly pulled back because of G-Force. As the plane began its ascent he was pressed down. A smile pulled at the edges of his mouth. This was going to be fun!

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As they ascended, an odd pressure mounted in Phil's head.

"Odd," he thought, "But not out of the ordinary."

He had always had sinus troubles as a kid. He had learned to just ignore them. Being a businessman as he was didn't help though.

He was multilingual, fluent in German, French, Spanish, and English, he had been everywhere. He had been a useful tool to his growing business-computer resale. He had gotten the job from his friend, Steven, who had connections.

The pain in his head broke him from his memories. It really hurt now. It was a sharp, throbbing pain directly above his right eyebrow. It was like mercury, moving, morphing, shattering, spreading and condensing, an ugly subconscious, psychological and physical cycle.

He shut the shade on his window, reclined his seat and closed his eyes, hoping to stumble into a deep slumber.

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Evan chewed his gum furiously, attempting to stave off the creeping pain in his head. For a short time it worked, but after maybe an hour and 5 sticks of gum later, he had to start yawning and swallowing. The gum just wouldn't cut it. It started to die down but came back, stronger. It wasn't sharp, just dull and annoying, but it was in his foremost thoughts.

"Mommy?" he asked patiently.

"Yes sweetie?"

"The headache isn't gone yet."

"Don't worry, Evan, mine's already gone," she paused, "Look at everyone else, they're fine."

He looked around but what he saw didn't comfort him. They all had looks of pain, discomfort, or concern painted across their faces. Even Zee, the lively child he had played with before the plane took off, looked worried.

"They don't look fine," Evan pressed. Fear flashed across her face, but it was so fleeting it could have been imagined.

"Don't worry Evan, you do that too much." She said playfully and ruffled with his hair. Worry. Imagine. Fear....

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Adam tried to concentrate on his book but it was impossible with that nagging pain in the back of his head. He popped an aspirin. Aspirin had always worked for him, but this time nothing happened. He closed his eyes to try and fall asleep. He couldn't so instead he flagged down a flight attendant and asked him how long they had been flying.

"Only about two hours, sir. Why? Would you

like a beverage?" was the reply.

"Uh, yeah, sure. That sounds good, thanks."

"Well sir, what would you like?"

"Oh, yeah, right. Could I have a glass of wine?" Maybe that would help him fall asleep.

"Certainly. Red or white?"

"Red please."

"Sure." The attendant said and strutted back to the galley to prepare the wine.

Adam looked around and realized there was no one sitting next to him. He could easily fold up the armrests and curl up and fall asleep, but just as he was about to do so the attendant came back with his wine on a platter.

"What a pointless action," he thought, "Just for a little sleep and relief from pain? I don't need it. I'm paying him and ultimately the airline for something I will pee out in a couple of hours." Maybe he should have majored in philosophy. He took it anyway. He drank it, threw it on the floor, (it didn't matter) folded up the armrests and curled up to sleep.

---

Phil woke up with a start. The pain was back again, worse than ever. Something was wrong. He knew it. This never happened to him all the other dozens of business related flights he had been on. Suddenly, for the umpteenth time, Phil was interrupted from his thoughts by a scream.

"My wife, she's dead!" shouted a nearby man, frantic.

"Aren't we all, bud?" Phil thought. He cracked a weak smile at his own joke and leaned back in his chair, rubbing his head. It was only when the medics ran in with a defibrillator that he realized the true magnitude of the situation.

He leapt to his feet, only to stumble, nearly

falling back into his chair as the pain hit him like a brick wall. He could barely see through the dense crowd and his staggering headache, but what he saw became burned into his memory forever. The lady twitched demonically as fluid ran down her nose, eyes, and mouth. People screamed and covered their children's eyes. However, his view was blocked by the paramedics as they came into try and help the frantically swirling whirlwind of doom. However, it was over as soon as it started. The attendants were herding people back so they could remove the body. The people didn't need much help moving out of the way. They all seemed like they were in shock. "Random stranger died first, who's gonna get the hearse?" The thought that wasn't his echoed around in Phil's mind. It would have frightened him if it weren't for the agonizing pain in his head.

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Evan didn't notice anything, thankfully. It felt as though he had a head cold and couldn't hear much. He was rifling contentedly through a food magazine.

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Adam heard a stifled scream. His nose and ears were all clogged up and it was hard to hear, but he heard the scream. It woke him up. He looked frantically around. Was it a dream? No, it was all too real. He felt blood rush to his head and a cold sweat break out on his hands, making them clammy and weird. Paramedics rushed over to the woman who screamed two rows down. A crowd gathered and the attendants pushed them back.

This wasn't normal. He didn't want to watch. These things always made him squeamish. Even on the highway when an ambulance goes by he starts shaking, wondering. His mind did that a lot. Worried... Wondered....

---

The captain came over the loudspeaker.

*Ding.* "Hello. As you may have seen or heard there has been a slight emergency." A small uproar of mumbling spread through the plane, foreshadowing a lack of compliance with the pilot's inevitable stay calm line. "Yes, yes, I understand you... you may not be happy with this, neither am I but it has to be taken care of and sh... They are do...in... doing just fine," he stuttered, signalling she may be dead. "Thank you. Just remain calm and enjoy the remainder of your flight."

Ch-k. The loudspeaker hung up.

Phil felt bad for the captain. He had to probably lie to a whole plane full of people. Phil thought that she had died, why else such a fuss? But then again wouldn't they do that anyway? Phil had been on business in Canada, he had flown (he couldn't stand to drive) and an old man had had a heart attack. Luckily he had been fine but they had to have an emergency landing. But here they were flying over the Atlantic Ocean. They couldn't just land and get help or get rid of the body. He was just confusing himself.

The pain was back, but this time he just couldn't fall asleep. It was unbearable. He leaned forward and clutched his head to try to diffuse the pain. If anything it made it worse. He sat back up and colours swam before his eyes and he heard an obscure popping and thudding in his head. It felt as though something was attempting to force its way out.

He thought humorously about the scene in the 1970's sci-fi horror classic, 'Alien,' where the chestbuster was forcing its way out of the guy infected onto the dinner table. The idea was quickly forced out of his head by the pain.

The popping became louder and louder. He screamed, arching his head back clutching the armrests with white knuckles. Someone screamed. The popping continued... continued. Things were a blur. People rushing around, screaming or was it him screaming? He had no room for complex thought. The pain



had consumed his brain. The last thing he remembered was being rushed down the aisle, people turning heads, screams, and then nothing. No “life flashing before your eyes” or seeing god.

Just death.

And maybe it’s better that way.

Just death.

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Adam couldn’t stop worrying now. Couldn’t read, couldn’t write. Just worry. This had to be something more than just coincidence. Coincidence doesn’t exist. There was either a logical explanation or it was random, but no, not to Adam, never coincidence.

This death there was no announcement. It was probably set up by the pilot somehow, had to be. He was guilty, they probably just whisked the bodies into the ocean, but, but...but. “No Adam, only in the movies does that happen,” he thought to himself. Well? Where did the bodies go?

That was when he heard a popping noise and frantic calls for “mommy, mommy” two rows down. Then a gasp and scream. A frantic bubbling scrabbling sound and more screams.

Rushing.

Death.

It really was amazing how fast all three deaths happened, this time he saw the whole body. There were bruises on the dead child’s face and blood and snot coagulating around his dead eyes.

The mother roared her irritation at an attendant, took the attendant’s name tag and shoved it sideways into the attendant’s neck and then her own.

It must have been too much and she lost it. The lady fell sideways onto the floor alongside

the attendant spreading gore on the seats and adding to the growing pool of blood on the floor. Adam couldn’t look anymore. He went back to his thoughts to hide. A massac... masquerade he had used much through high school. He went on thinking. “What if I’m next?” He thought. “What death would be like...death.”

As Adam thought and thought... thoughts straying... thoughts, he was aware of the pain all too well but then a new sensation, a popping that intervened, mingled, and decided to stay in his head, not his thoughts.

This was physical, not just in his thoughts. Was this how he would go? On a plane to college and die because of a headache? Wouldn’t Mom and Dad be so proud?

It got worse and worse, the popping louder and louder, the pain overpowering. All thoughts of death despite the fact he was dying.

He felt blood and snot running down his face from his nose and mouth. He attempted to inhale and swallowed a puree of snot and blood. He gurgled. Drowning. His eyes felt as though they were swelling...swelling. They were making everything a distorted image of what he once knew. People stared at his growing eyes. Vomiting. Everything turned red because of the bursting blood vessels in his retina, the whites of his eyes turning red. They kept swelling and swelling. Then his eyes burst. First the right then the left spraying the shocked onlookers with a fine mist of blood and eye flesh. Blood ran from the holes in his eyes and once the blood finished flowing and began to coagulate you could see a small membrane around the optic nerve. A greyish pulsating thing. Someone vomited. His body was covered with a sheet and taken to the rear of the plane.

*Ding.* “Hello.” The captain paused, cleared his throat and began. “Hello. The events that have ensued tonight are...are...out of our control.

We...we are attempting to contact JFK and Belgium airports. So far we have been unsuccessful. But I ask you to please remain calm. We are currently halfway through our journey. It will not help us to turn around. We must keep going. Th...Thank you." c-tchk. The pilot hung up the loudspeaker.

All that could be heard was the roar of engines. The cheap yellow glow of the reading lights illuminated the plane.

The captain thought about death. How imminent it was. How abundant life was. It really was weird. Weird things work like this.

The weird pain in his head grew but he didn't do anything. To his surprise he felt and heard a popping stuttering noise that alarmed him. The co-pilot had heard and turned to him in horror. "If this is how I die, so be it. I am doing what I love, and all I want to do is die in peace," he thought.

He closed his eyes and waited for death. A cone of light, a god he didn't believe in, or... nothing and it did come. Painfully. He squeezed his eyes shut and clutched his armrests.

He was faintly aware of the co-pilot's beef jerky breath coming at him in hot cycles. He didn't care. The pain was horrifying and the popping sound deafening. It felt like his head would explode. Maybe it did. He doesn't remember. He's dead.

---

During the time the time the pilot was dying the co-pilot was furiously attempting to contact someone. Anyone. Nobody answered.

Then he heard the popping and knew what was coming. He held the radio in his hands, screaming, dying. He went through the same process as the pilot and died.

He still holds the radio...underwater, that is.

After the co-pilot died, the majority of the passengers and employees were picked off by this "thing". Eventually the auto-pilot failed and the plane plunged earthwards, killing everyone that hadn't died already. It sank, as any good hunk of metal does, somewhere in the Pacific. No one knows where. No black box or bodies were found.

The cause of all that death remains unknown. There are always those who speculate, though. Some say aliens and others terrorists and even more preposterous, sea monsters.

This phenomenon occurred on two other flights, both outgoing from JFK airport and travelling over the Atlantic Ocean. No one knows what happened.

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Phil didn't do anything for his business. Adam never went to college. Susan and Evan never saw their family. All because of the mysterious events that occurred on flight 417.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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I am Dean Fazzino of eastern CT USA. I am in high school. My biggest influences are Stephen King, Dennis Etchison and Cat Rambo, amongst others. I haven't been writing for long but I have enjoyed the little I have done. This is my first story to be published and I look forward to being published again in future either somewhere else or within the pages of Fever Dreams again. Keep you literary eyes open.

# THE CONDUCTOR

By Reed Beebe



“**T**his assignment is a strange one. Your strangest yet.”

While Mason enjoyed his Cuban cigar, Bob pondered his words.

“Considering the crazy cases I’ve handled for the Railroad, that’s doubtful. Helping slaves escape Britain’s lunar plantations. Stopping the Confederacy’s agents from discovering lost subterranean kingdoms. Not to mention...”

“Your recent liberation of Martian freedom fighters from the Frankard military prison in Guantanamo. And your liberation of these fine cigars.”

Mason winked at Bob. Tobacco was hard to find in the Republic. The world’s quality tobacco was grown in the dominions of the Confederacy or the Franco-Spanish Empire. The Republic had imposed trading bans on both. The Cuban cigars were illegal in the Republic, and although Bob had broken many laws in many nations, Mason knew that Bob hated to break the laws of his beloved Republic of North America.

“This next assignment will be the first of its kind handled by the Railroad. It will require a Conductor with guts.”

Mason took a long pull on the cigar and blew a thick cloud of smoke into the air. Leaning forward in his chair, the portly Mason drew close to Bob and whispered.

“Not to mention a Conductor with great discretion.”

Mason’s comment explained the meeting location. Bob knew all the Underground Railroad’s safe house locations in New York City, but was unfamiliar with the penthouse

suite of the expensive Lexington Avenue hotel Mason had chosen for the briefing.

It could have been a new location. As a secret society, the Underground Railroad had to keep its locations covert. The Railroad enjoyed popular and political support in the Republic, but the Republic's official policy on the Railroad was that it was a subversive international organization. The less Republican authorities knew about the Railroad, the better, as far as both parties were concerned. The Railroad's secrecy protected the organization and its rescued Passengers from reprisals from the Confederacy or other enemies.

"My gut tells me that this mission is not endorsed by the Railroad's Shareholders."

Mason laughed, tapping the ashes from his cigar into the hotel's ashtray as he leaned back in his plush chair.

"You're right. This mission, if it were known to the Shareholders, would be divisive. Which is why I'm authorizing the mission under my authority as a Station Master."

The Shareholders, the leadership committee for the Railroad, met only on a quarterly or emergency basis, and Mason had the power as a Station Master to authorize missions, so long as they met the Railroad's mandate to rescue people from oppression. Mason was respected within the Railroad, coordinating hundreds of Conductors like Bob as they performed missions of liberation all over the solar system. That Mason was involving him in a mission kept secret from the Shareholders piqued Bob's curiosity.

"Can you tell me why the Shareholders wouldn't support this mission?"

"I'll do even better. I have a guest coming, who will help me explain the situation."

Someone knocked on the door.

Bob was shocked by the appearance of the strange man that walked into the room. The stranger was tall and pallid. His eyes were of two colours, his left green, the other a dark brown. He was seven feet tall, and his height was more intimidating when he wore the grey stove top hat that he now held in his hands. His hair was dark and curly, secured in a long ponytail.

Despite the stranger's appearance, Bob noticed the grace and dignity with which he moved, and the fine but threadbare clothes that he wore. He noticed the subtle scars along the man's face.

Mason guided the stranger towards Bob. "Bob, this is Mr. Victor Zwölf, from the Prussian Empire, who now lives here in New York. Victor, this is Bob Rockett, one of our best Conductors."

Bob understood why secrecy was necessary. Victor Zwölf was a reanimated person. Ever since Victor Frankenstein had reanimated a dead corpse, the treatment and rights of reanimates was a divisive issue. In Prussia, they were created solely for military and labour uses. In the Confederacy, they were banned altogether on religious grounds (and to protect the property values of the slave owners). The Papal States commanded that all reanimates be destroyed, and most of the world's Catholic nations followed this practice.

Although the Republic allowed reanimates to work and labour freely, they lacked political rights. The Railroad was divided on the issue, with some Shareholders believing that reanimates were an oppressed group needing help, while the more religious members thought they were an abomination.

"A pleasure to meet you, Mr. Zwölf. Are you the Victor Zwölf who writes the editorials to the city's papers, advocating rights for reanimates?"

"Yes. Your knowledge of my writing flatters me, sir." Zwölf's voice was deep and elegant.

Bob noticed the slight Prussian accent on some of the syllables.

"Mason was about to tell me about the mission. I assume it involves reanimates."

"Indeed. Let's all sit, and let Victor tell his story."

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Sitting comfortably, Mason offered Victor a cigar, which he politely declined. Victor began his tale.

"I served in the Prussian Army. I received basic military instruction, including a limited education in reading and arithmetic.

"Reanimate soldiers are not given names, only numbers. My unit number was 'zwölf', or 'twelve'. There was some quality in my nature that wanted more than a soldier's life. At great risk, I stole books from my commander's library. I educated myself, and even managed to learn a little English.

"I was caught. The stolen books were discovered in my barracks locker. Prussia strictly limits the education of reanimates. I was put on a prison train, shipped off to be destroyed. Instead I found myself free. The Prussian officer who arranged my transport was secretly a member of the Ingolstadt Group."

Bob nodded. The Ingolstadt Group was an international organization similar to the Underground Railroad. While the Railroad's mission to free the oppressed was broad in scope, the Ingolstadt Group limited their efforts to assisting reanimates. The Railroad had limited information about the organization. Its name came from the city of Ingolstadt in the Prussian Empire, the location of Frankenstein's first reanimation. Its leadership seemed to be headquartered in Prussia.

"The Ingolstadt Group assisted me in relocating to the Republic, and helped me continue my education. I kept my designation

of '12' as a last name, and chose 'Victor' as my first name, to honour the man whose science created me. I've lived in New York, publicly advocating full equality for reanimates. Not so publicly, I'm an agent for the Group."

Bob was moved by Victor's story. Some claimed that reanimates had no souls, but Bob did not doubt Victor's spirit.

"Which is why I approached Mr. Smyth. Despite the Railroad's secrecy, the Group knows that Mason is a high ranking member of the Railroad. There has been some trouble recently, beyond the resources of the Group. We need help."

"Reanimates have been disappearing," Mason continued. "Over twenty reanimates have vanished in the past two weeks, with no witnesses or clues."

Bob considered the logistics involved in making a reanimate disappear. Reanimates were much stronger than any average man, and rarely tired. They were also hard to kill (or destroy, as some would argue). It would take effort to kidnap a reanimate, and the commotion would be noticeable.

"Any suspects?"

"None," said Victor. "Mason suspected the labour unions. The unions don't like reanimates working in the city. We tend to work longer hours for less money. But I've been working with labour leaders to unionize reanimates, with much success, and I doubt that union anger is behind the disappearances."

"Victor needs our help to locate the missing reanimates, or at least find out what is causing the disappearances," said Mason. "The Ingolstadt Group doesn't have the resources in New York that we do, and I'm betting that you already have some ideas on how to proceed."

Bob did indeed.

The best way to catch a rat was with cheese. Bob had been following Victor for a few days, keeping a discreet distance. Victor advised the reanimate community to travel in groups until the disappearances stopped, a practice that Victor ignored. It would have been best to have every available Conductor following as many reanimates as possible, but Mason was already risking much in using even limited Railroad resources to help the reanimates. Bob was the only Conductor that could be involved, and he decided that the best bet was to stick to the most conspicuously solo reanimate in the city and hope someone took an interest.

The hustle and bustle of the street would make it difficult to follow an ordinary man, but a seven foot tall reanimate was easy to pick out in the crowd. The steam exhaust from several passing cars added to the day's heat. Bob wiped sweat from his brow with a handkerchief and returned it to his suit's jacket pocket, careful not to reveal the Webley handgun concealed beneath his jacket. The Webley had served him well on past missions. It was not a weapon manufactured in the Republic. All Conductors were encouraged to carry weapons from foreign countries, to prevent authorities from connecting them with the Railroad and the Republic, should they be captured.

The streets of the "Little Mars" section of lower Manhattan were packed. The Martians had suffered greatly when the Franco-Spanish Empire expanded its colonies on Mars, and many had immigrated to the Republic to escape from the Frankards. Sluggish grey Martians were on the streets selling red weed and other potency enhancements to interested customers, energetically waving tentacles to attract attention to their street booths. A prominent wall poster was advertising Charlie Chaplin's latest movie – a romantic drama set during Napoleon's victory in the Peninsular War – in Martian cuneiform. This year was the 100-year anniversary of Napoleon's 1814 victory, cementing the

foundations of the present day Franco-Spanish Empire, and apparently Chaplin's movie appealed to even the Republic's expatriate Martian community.

Bob pretended to be interested in buying red weed from one of the Martian vendors, careful to keep his eyes on Victor's reflection in the shop window behind the booth. In his own reflection, Bob noticed the toll the years had taken. He had been with the Railroad for twelve years now, since he was twenty-two, and his service had aged him beyond his years. He was proud to serve the Railroad, an organization that had grown from an underground network of abolitionists smuggling slaves to freedom even before the Confederacy's victory, to an interplanetary organization dedicated to freedom and liberation. The Confederacy may have won its independence and the power to hold slaves, and the United States may have re-written its constitution to become the isolationist Republic of North America, but the Railroad endured as a beacon of hope in a strange and dangerous universe.

Bob was lost in his reflection a little too long. He almost failed to notice the three odd men that were approaching Victor from behind. They looked like ordinary pedestrians, but there was something off about them. Their movements were slow and awkward, as if moving their limbs were an act of great will. They were focused on Victor. This was it. Bob began to follow the men discreetly. Victor could handle the three of them if they decided to pounce, so there was no danger to him, and Bob couldn't risk revealing his presence. There might not be another chance to expose the enemy.

The three men continued to follow Victor, even as the street traffic began to thin. If Victor realized that he was being followed, he was expert enough not to show it. But Victor did notice the truck that was heading towards him. Bob saw Victor wince just as the big steam vehicle suddenly swerved and ran into



him. He heard the heavy thuds of Victor hitting first the truck, and then bouncing off it to the street.

The three men moved swiftly – their movements were still rigid, but now fast, at a speed Bob was surprised they were capable of. They picked Victor up and moved him to the back of the truck. Bob reached for his Webley and charged at the abductors. The man closest to him turned, his eyes now staring at Bob, and Bob then realized another subtle oddity that these men possessed – their expressions were blank, emotionless, like a sleepwalker in a daze.

Bob levelled the gun at the man's face, but his foe's swiftness surprised him once more. As did the man's strength. He felt a sharp pain when the man's fist hit his jaw. Bob had boxed with tough opponents before, but this man's punch was punishing. The last thing Bob saw before he fainted was the man's blank stare.

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Bob awoke with a headache. He was inside a bright, orderly room. The smell, though, was awful. The man sitting at the desk in front of him was reading a book, not yet noticing that Bob was awake. Reading the French that he could see on the cover, Bob understood the book to be a journal on Edison's Theory of Anti-Gravity, hardly light reading. Edison's anti-gravity machines. Space travel. Reanimates. Lost kingdoms and hidden worlds in the Earth's core. The science of the 20th Century was incredible and beyond the understanding of most laymen, including Bob, but his host seemed to have an interest and understanding of such things. A scientist, perhaps?

Bob saw that Victor was near him, to his right, sitting on the floor with his hands chained to the wall. Victor was awake, and winked at Bob to let him know that he was alright, despite the bloody bruises he had sustained from the truck's impact. While Victor's arms were bound, Bob's arms were

not. However, the three thugs that had abducted him and Victor were also in the room, their presence obviously considered enough of a deterrent to prevent any hope of Bob's escape.

"You are in a tannery, by the way."

The man behind the desk stood up. His white suit was pristine, his black necktie a match to the dark beard on his face. The man lit a cheroot, and Bob was thankful for the improved smell that the smoke provided.

"You were trying to figure out where you were. We are in a tannery where I provide my services. In exchange, they let me have the office at no cost. But the smell..."

The man had a French accent, and his pale skin suggested someone who liked to keep indoors. From the man's complexion and choice of reading material, Bob surmised that this Frankard was descended more from the Franks than the Spaniards.

"Thanks for the information, Monsieur."

The man blew smoke in the air as he considered Bob.

"Let's get the formalities out of the way. Please, let's be gentlemen. If you don't know already, I'm Etienne Rambert, and while I don't know what your interest in my business is, sir, I'm sure it's not to my advantage."

"And what is your business, if I may ask?"

The man took another pull on his cheroot.

"We live in an amazing age. Anti-gravity machines allow us to conquer other planets. We can even resurrect the dead. When Jesus did that, it was a miracle. When I do it, it's just business."

Rambert waived at the three silent men in the room. "Victor Frankenstein perfected reanimation over a hundred years ago, but he didn't invent it. There is an older science that

can achieve similar results. Science so old that it's labelled superstition or magic. But it works. The natives of Santo Domingo taught it to me, and I'm going to get rich sharing what I know with the world."

Bob had heard about such things. African folklore about soulless victims brought back from the dead by witch doctors to labour unceasingly. Unlike Frankenstein's reanimates, these creatures were myths, with no basis in science. But if Western science had found a way to reanimate the dead, who was to say other cultures had not also done it?

"But first, I have to get rid of the older, obsolete models. Frankenstein knew how to make his monsters tough and strong. And independent. My reanimates can't compete with them on that. My recipe doesn't include free will. But now that the reanimates are unionizing, there's never been a better time to sell my product. A little head busting for some clients, show them what my toys can do, and I get some rich labour contracts. And nobody will miss reanimates. But who is going to miss you?"

Rambert pulled Bob's Webley from a desk drawer.

"You were following the reanimate. That piqued my curiosity, especially after you pulled a gun in its defence."

Rambert held the gun in his right hand, and caressed it with his left.

"The British Empire doesn't give a damn about my activities, and your accent is pure Republic, so your firearm is a false clue. Who are you, and what is your interest in my business?"

Bob was relieved that Rambert did not suspect the Railroad. Nor should he – the Railroad was not active in supporting reanimates. But the fact that Rambert had his gun complicated his escape options.

With a snap of his fingers, Rambert signaled his reanimates. The three of them converged on Bob.

"When my reanimates are finished with you, you are going to beg me to let you confess what you are up to."

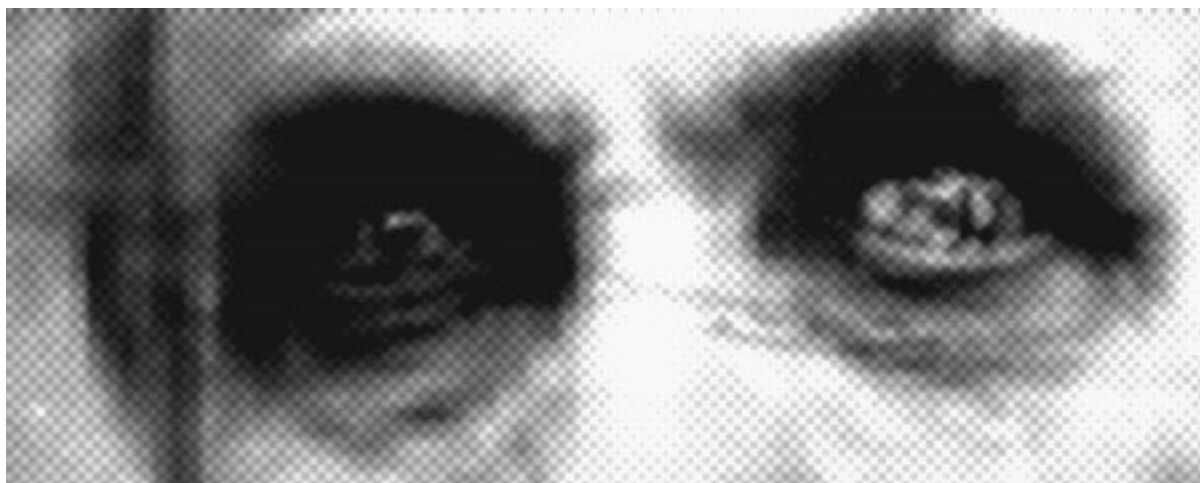
Bob took a deep breath. Just a punch from one of those things was brutal. Attention from three of them was going to be very unpleasant. Bob braced for what was to come. The reanimate on the right was the closest, and was about to strike, when Victor's long leg delivered a kick to the reanimate that sent him flying across the room towards Rambert.

Bob took advantage of the opportunity Victor had given him. He lunged at the knees of the reanimate in front of him, using the reanimate's upper body weight to topple him. The remaining reanimate to Bob's left seemed confused at the situation, unable to process these new events.

Bob heard Rambert cursing in French as he struggled to get the reanimate off of him. Bob looked around the room, trying to find something to free Victor. He ran to his friend, and started to pull fiercely on the chain binding Victor's right hand. Victor lent his great strength to Bob's, and the two men's exertions snapped the chain.

With his free right hand, Victor threw Bob to the side, just in time to avoid the bullet from the Webley. Bob hit the floor hard. He looked up see Rambert holding the gun he had just fired. Rambert turned to aim at Bob, but Bob's reflexes had him up off the floor and charging before Rambert could fire the weapon. The two men fell to the floor, fighting over the gun. Out of the corner of his eye, Bob could see the reanimates heading towards him. They had recovered from their disarray, and were coming to help their master, who was screaming commands at them in French.

The Webley fired, and Bob noticed blood on his shoulder. In the quiet moment after the



gun's roar, Bob could see that the blood on his clothes had come from Rambert, and was not his own. The Frankard's white clothes were stained with blood, as his chest had taken the bullet.

The reanimates moved towards Bob. He grabbed the Webley and fired at the closest one. The reanimate fell on top of him, as the other creatures grabbed his legs. The hand holding the Webley was pinned under the reanimate, and Bob struggled to free it. Suddenly the reanimate on top of him was lifted into the air. Victor, now free of his chains, had saved him.

Victor hurled the reanimate at its brothers. With great force, the three reanimates were on the other side of the room, uncertain and confused. Victor helped Bob up.

"Are you alright?"

"I was going to ask you the same question."

Victor smiled. "I'm a lot tougher than I look. What about him?"

Bob knelt next to Rambert to take his pulse. The Frankard was dead.

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Following Mason's instructions, Bob found himself in front of an abandoned factory in

lower Manhattan. Bob was unfamiliar with the derelict structure, but thought it was suitable for a clandestine meeting. Entering the building, he was happy to see Mason talking with Victor, who showed no signs of discomfort from the wounds that he received from last week's adventure. Bob wished that he had Victor's stamina; he was still very sore.

Mason waved to Bob. "Over here."

"How did you find this place? A Railroad property?"

"No," said Victor. "This is where Rambert made his reanimates."

The anger in Victor's voice was clear.

"It's also where my fellow reanimates were killed."

Mason, sensing Victor's distress, turned to address Bob. "If not for you two, there would have been more deaths. Rambert had over 100 of his reanimates in this place, and dead bodies and materials to presumably make more."

Bob felt a chill. Had last week's events gone a little differently, he likely would have been turned into one of those reanimates.

"What happened to Rambert's reanimates?"

"The Ingolstadt Group has taken responsibility for them," Victor said. "The Group exists to help reanimates, regardless of their origin."

Bob was happy to hear this, as Mason was in no position to use Railroad resources to help Rambert's creations. Perhaps the Group could provide some comfort to them.

"And what about Rambert, Mason?"

"The Railroad confirmed that he was on the run from Frankard authorities, and that he had spent some time in Santo Domingo before arriving in New York. We couldn't find any notes on how his process worked."

That was for the best, Bob thought. The world did not need more of Rambert's creatures. But he was grateful that destiny had introduced him to at least one of Frankenstein's reanimates.

"Victor, it was a pleasure working with you. We did some good together," said Bob as he offered Victor his hand.

Victor nodded as he shook Bob's hand. "We certainly did."

"With all the reanimates in the City, maybe we'll have a chance to work together again."

Mason laughed at hearing this, and Bob winced as Mason patted him on the shoulder.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

After years of hunting monsters and fighting ninjas, globetrotting adventurer Reed Beebe has retired to a quiet Kansas City, Missouri neighbourhood to write fiction and poetry. His stories had been published in *The Were-traveller*, *Schlock!* and *Inner Sins*.



Paul Stewart and Chris Riddell are two of the most loved figures in children's publishing. Writing together for over 20 years, they are behind the phenomenally successful *Edge Chronicles*, *Muddle Earth series* and *Wyrmsweald* – amongst others! Their collaboration began in an unusual way – rather than being put together by a publisher, they first met in Brighton, in the playground of the school that their respective children attended.

The result is one of the most enduring writing partnerships in the children's book world. This month, Macmillan Children's Books are delighted to be publishing Paul and Chris's first ever foray into SF, a genre that has influenced both authors through films and books since childhood. With fast-paced action, unforgettable characters and beautiful illustrations, *Scavenger: Zoid* is the perfect book for any child looking for their first foray into SF – and will be loved by adult SF fans as well.

# I Can Hear Jackdaws

by Dave Ludford

**T**he body of Grace Frances Riordan was found by a concerned neighbour at

approximately 11.20am on a gloomy, freezing cold day in mid-December. Nobody had seen her or heard anything from her in quite a while. She was discovered hanging from a makeshift noose in her garage; the subsequent post-mortem concluded death by asphyxiation. She had been dead for three days. The pathologist performed the PM at the local hospital. He ruled out foul play and so the police didn't look for anyone else in connection with the incident.

At the inquest held shortly afterwards several people who had lived close to her in the neighbourhood - including the man who had found her body - testified with variations on the statement that Grace had "always been slightly crazy" ("She claimed she could hear jackdaws!" was a typical, snickering comment).

The Coroner ruled suicide, being beyond all reasonable doubt, and despite privately hating the non-specific and non-medical term 'crazy'. He was grateful for the expert witness testimony of the pathologist.

Grace had left a suicide note, found near to her body, which had simply read: "I cannot go on with life anymore."

Grace Frances Riordan was sixty-eight years old at the time of her death.



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But she would live on nevertheless.

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Kate Appleby was just one hour into going through her deceased Aunt Grace's belongings when she discovered a set of twenty notebooks in the drawer of her writing bureau. Her aunt had been one untidy lady, and the phrase 'random chaos' entered Kate's mind as she surveyed the wreckage and detritus of her relative's former life. The rather sad little cottage where she'd lived reeked of the thick dust of old age, neglect and decay. Kate had volunteered for this task, nobody else in the family willing to take inventory of the property of this eccentric, lonely, but essentially harmless spinster.

The notebooks didn't appear to be in any particular order (no real surprise there, Kate smiled to herself) but seemed to constitute a series of journals written in Grace's distinctive,

spidery scrawl. The same scrawl as on her suicide note. Or perhaps inky crow's feet dancing across the page, she mused.

Helpfully, Grace had dated all the entries, so Kate was easily able to find the oldest one and thereby put the rest in sequence. "Let's have some method in this process, Grace!" she mumbled, turning to the first notebook and commencing to read. After just a few minutes, Kate's brow furrowed, both in concentration and mounting disbelief.

September 20th, 2008

*"My name is Grace Frances Riordan and for as long as I can remember I've heard the constant chatter of jackdaws in my mind. Some days it's just one bird letting his fussy presence be known, other days it's the constant 'jak jak jak' of a whole clattering of them (I had to look up that collective noun. Clattering. It seems so appropriate when you don't understand what they're telling you).*

*Sometimes I see and hear jackdaws in the woods beyond my house, communicating with the ones inside my head. This must be some sort of telepathic link I now realise. I'm tuned to their wavelength, so to speak.*

*Over the years I've been able to fully learn their language. I swear I am not mad but would understand the scepticism of anyone reading this. Some days I can hardly believe it myself. But it's true. I have been gifted the opportunity of gaining a unique insight into their world. I have decided to write these journals as a permanent record."*

The first entry ended there. Kate placed the journal (still open) face down on the bureau and decided to get herself a drink. Her mind was doing somersaults. She didn't quite know what to make of the narrative; was her aunt indeed insane, a

female Doctor Dolittle talking to...well...birds at least...or was there something in this? She resolved to read on, but first reached into the rucksack she'd brought with her that morning and pulled out the flask of coffee inside.

Ten minutes later, and suitably refreshed, Kate resumed her reading. The next entry was dated a couple of months after the first (and from then onward they became more frequent)

November 10th, 2008

*My neighbours shun me, and call me 'the bird lady'. The jackdaws are my only companions in life. Suits me just fine.*

*Today they're telling me the story of a Corvid princess who was kidnapped long ago by a suitor whose advances she'd rebuffed. She died, heartbroken at being separated from her loved ones and taken so far from home. This is why members of the crow family wear shawls of black feathers to this day, in perpetual mourning for their beloved princess."*

"Oh-My-God!" Kate said aloud as she looked up from the journal and through the grimy windows to the unkempt garden and tangled woods beyond. "How beautiful, sad and poetic." Her words echoed around the eerie silence of the room. Her aunt had spent too much time on her own, surely, hence the overactive imagination. Either that or she really could converse with these birds. Sighing deeply she poured herself more coffee, resisting the urge to skip whole passages and read more recent entries. There was such a lot to get through, so much to get her head around. It would take her a day or two at least; luckily she'd come prepared with enough supplies for that eventuality, and there was still Grace's other stuff to go through, too.

She was also convinced that the clue to

## While it was beyond doubt that Grace had killed herself, no-one had been able to explain why exactly.

her aunt's suicide lay within these pages. While it was beyond doubt that Grace had killed herself, no-one had been able to explain why exactly. That she had killed herself "whilst the balance of her mind was disturbed" as per the Coroner's verdict just didn't resolve anything. But then who cared a damn about one lonely, 'crazy' elderly lady? That evening, after a simple supper of the bread and cheese she'd brought with her, Kate settled down to read once more. Later she would change the sheets on her aunt's bed and sleep there.

November 12th, 2008

*"Tonight the jackdaws have promised to reveal to me more about their language and culture when I visit their colonies deep within the woods just yonder from where I sit writing this. Their culture is fascinating, so many stories; ancient, folkloric, spiritual even. Things to be revered and respected. Their mystical world has never previously been shown to any human being. Until now.*

*More tomorrow!"*

"Oh Grace, such a tease!" Kate thought on reading this. Then:

November 13th, 2008

*"Aeons past, when liquid molten Earth*

*Filled the void, solidified*

*And stars gleamed in shimmering approval*

*The Sun gave life and blessed-*

*The jackdaw flew her first,*

*Riding the virgin breeze;*

*And upon landing, tapped the mist-wreathed*

*Ground, and fed.*

*It felt good.*

*Then: she was joined by frantic family-crow, magpie, rook- but*

*Jackdaw was the mistress of them all; watched the birth of mankind-*

*Feared the serpent-*

*But saw in man a weakness-*

*Bobbed her head, flapped her wings*

*And knew; 'this Earth is Ours'."*

*"Of all the poetry the jackdaws recited to me- and there was much of it- this is the one that sticks in my memory the most. I can recite it myself by heart, they wanted me to learn it; powerful, mystical, and showing that these creatures have flown and strutted the Earth from the dawn of time. Beautiful".*

Kate decided she'd leave it there for the first day. It seemed a good place to stop. Making her way upstairs, she was shaking her head and smiling softly, her mind whirling with jackdaw poetry and stories. "Grace, what more do you have to tell me, I wonder? And what exactly happened to you?"

She noted the tone of gravity that had crept into her innermost thoughts.

Kate's subconscious took her deep within

the woods, the ones at the back of Grace's cottage she presumed; but she couldn't be sure, like you never can be in dreams. Familiar yet unfamiliar. She was being pulled along by a frantic, mesmeric 'jak, jak, jak', repeated over and over, that she knew could be the call of only one bird; the jackdaw, the sound she recognized from girlhood walks with her father where he'd called out the names of all the birds they heard. Her father had been a keen ornithologist.

Eventually she reached a clearing, and the jackdaw's call became less frantic, but persisted, and then stopped after a few minutes. This was obviously her intended destination but her unseen guide had melted away into the all-embracing darkness. The silence didn't feel oppressive; it felt somehow comforting, unthreatening. She stood, alone, waiting... for what exactly?

soon joined by others of its kin, filling the bough; then the whole tree was covered, a clattering, noisy colony, calling her, all screaming to be heard above the others.

Her last thoughts before re-emerging to the waking world were: "I can see jackdaws. I can hear jackdaws. I can understand their language. Oh my goodness, my aunt Grace is alive."

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Kate was sitting, legs crossed, looking through the open bay windows of the cottage at her aunt's unkempt garden, which was now covered in a hard, heavy frost. The cold air she breathed in and exhaled greedily exhilarated her. The journals were stacked in a pile next to her, but she had no inclination at the moment to read further. "Grace is alive" she chanted like a mantra over and over in her mind, a beatific smile spreading

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**This was obviously her intended destination but her  
unseen guide had melted away into the  
all-embracing darkness.**

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"Kate! My darling niece, how wonderful to see you again! Don't be afraid. I'm up here! It's me, your aunt Grace!"

Kate quickly shot a glance upward to the branches of an oak tree that stood twenty feet away, but at first could see nothing through the pall of gloom. Her heart beat faster than if she'd just completed a marathon, her mouth was dry, she'd begun to perspire heavily. Nervously, her voice coming as a harsh croak, she said:

"Grace? Is that you? I can't see you!"

And then she saw a jackdaw bobbing along a low bough of the oak tree, trying to attract her attention; and knew without a doubt that it was Grace. The bird was

over her face. She felt that a great knowledge had been imparted to her via her dream of the night before, knowing amongst many other things that the body of her aunt found hanging in her garage was exactly that; a body, an empty shell, a husk. Her earthly remains were unimportant; her spirit was free, it rode and caressed the breeze deep inside the woods, inhabiting the form of a Corvid. Grace had chosen the quickest death she could think of to depart from her loneliness in this world in order to join what she felt to be her true family.

Kate's contemplations were suddenly disturbed by a fluttering of black wings;



startled, she looked across to the low wall that bordered the garden. A jackdaw was perched there, watching her with keenly intelligent eyes, its silver-grey plumage shimmering in the winter sunshine.

"Hi, Grace. I was wondering when you'd come!"

"Hello again, Kate. I trust you are well; you certainly look it. Apologies for the shock last night, but it seemed by far the best way to make the first contact with you. A little subterfuge on my part. I was struggling to get a word in above the voices of the others though; my new family are still so very excited about receiving me into their colony."

"That's cool, aunt Grace. I wasn't frightened, just a little apprehensive. I've never experienced a crossover between my waking and dream worlds before. The distinction got a little blurry. I'm still not exactly sure which world I'm in now. I'm just glad you're alive and we can talk again."

"Dear girl, always my favourite, even though I never saw you much when you were all grown up. I'll always remember you taking walks in the woods yonder with your father, my brother, and your sheer delight in watching the birds.



I see you found my journals. Read them all, especially the last entries. They explain everything; I felt no pain leaving the human world, it was a blessed release, as they say. I'm where I feel I want to be, not alone any more. Nobody to bully or harass me, calling me names behind my back, calling me crazy, a witch, or just downright blanking me. The world can be such a cruel place. I amend that: some people can be so very cruel."

Slowly the tears came to Kate's eyes; within a few seconds the gentle stream became a torrent. She tried unsuccessfully to wipe them away. After a few minutes they began to subside. Once her vision had cleared, she said:

"Recite to me some more poetry, Grace, or tell me some more jackdaw stories. I want to go on listening to you forever."

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dave Ludford is a 49 year old writer of poetry and speculative fiction living in Nuneaton, Warwickshire. He works for a small company manufacturing luxury soaps for a living. Until recently he wrote fiction entirely as a hobby, but has begun taking his writing more seriously in the past six months.

# Number of the Least

By Fraser Sherman



“**H**ere’s your change, honey.”  
The waitress plunked down \$7.77 and handed Paul Peters his takeout burger.

“Your bill was \$12.23.”

“No!” Paul shook his head and waved the money away. “It was \$13.34, I checked it on my cell-phone calculator—the change should be \$6.66!”

“We have a discount, today.” She tapped the sign next to the check-out counter, which he hadn’t noticed. “You should be glad—don’t you know 6-6-6 is the number of the beast?”

“Yes!” It came out almost a sob which he hated, but—dammit! Paul snatched up the money and fled, flushing, back to the studio apartment he called home.

Ensnconced there a few minutes later, he bit glumly into his burger. It was cold. He set it down, ignoring the cockroach scurrying toward it. If he *were* the Antichrist, he wouldn’t have to settle for cold burgers from crappy diners. He’d have filet mignon every night. Served up to him by *Maxim* cover girls. Naked. *And that jerk counter guy at McDonalds this morning? I could have him dismembered.*

*But if I were the Antichrist, he wouldn’t talk trash about me. He’d worship me. Everyone would.* Paul ran a hand through his stringy,

mousy hair, glanced down at his flaccid fish-belly skin. *Worship.* He wasn't sure anyone had ever even liked him.

A tear trickled down his face as he thought about how much he'd wanted to be the Antichrist, ever since he'd first heard about him in one of his few church visits. The man who would make the whole world kneel before him and worship him as a god. *Seven years of being a god. Everything I could possibly want: A cool car, getting laid every night, a mansion instead of this roach motel. Respect. Love. Power. That's totally worth being cast into a lake of hellfire afterwards, isn't it?*

*Only I'm just not the Beast of the Apocalypse, am I?*

He'd tried. The universe, like everyone else, had laughed. Locker 666 at work refused to open, so he wound up with 555. He'd broken five phone contracts and never once been able to get a number with three sixes in it.

"Greetings, Paul." Instead of the opening of *Incestuous Lesbian Cheerleaders*, the screen was an image of fire, with a shadowy figure in front of it. And the voice—he'd never thought a voice could really sound evil, but ... "So you want to be my chosen agent on Earth, do you?"

"Your—" Paul swallowed. "Who are—you can't be—I mea—?"

"Well I'm obviously not a horny young cheerleader with big implants, so who do you think I am?"

Paul shook his head; it wasn't possible, he must be dreaming. The voice went on: "Do I have to give you three guesses?"

"You're—you're Satan!" Paul knew perfectly well it couldn't be, but he flung himself down in front of the TV just in case. "How can I serve you, lord?"

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### A tear trickled down his face as he thought about how much he'd wanted to be the Antichrist, ever since he'd first heard about him in one of his few church visits.

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And then there was the tattoo. He unbuttoned his shirt and stared at the SEX SEX SEX on his left breast. The drunken tattooist had been such a steroid case, Paul hadn't found the nerve to point out the error. And it hurt way too much to go back again.

He picked up the remotes and turned on the TV and DVD player. He'd had an illegal cable hookup until he turned on Channel 666, then he'd been found out, disconnected and fined.

*It isn't fair! I'd be a great Antichrist—the best person for the job is the one who loves his work, right?* He clicked the DVD to play. *Don't think about it. What's one more failure in your life?*

"You want to serve me? Really?" Satan jabbed a finger in his direction. "Then stop!"

"Stop what?"

"Stop trying to be Antichrist!"

"But, but—I want to be your agent on Earth, sir," Paul said. "To do your bidding—"

"No you don't! You want power, sex, a little gratuitous revenge—admittedly admirable goals—and you don't mind being damned for all time to get them."

"Why would I mind?" Paul sat back up and reached out a hand to the screen. "There's a good chance I'll get laid off next week. Nobody lays off the Antichrist!"

"Paul, Paul, Paul ...how shall I put this?" Satan paused for a second before continuing. "The Antichrist has to have balls. Big brass ones. He has to compel the worship of the entire world—"

"I could do that! I mean, if I were Antichrist, I could!"

"You can't even compel restaurants to heat your food right."

"That's because they spit in it if you send it back!"

"Oh, give me strength."

"Look, if I were Antichrist—" Satan. If this was Satan, it must be possible. All Paul had to do was sell himself. "I'd *have* to accomplish all those things, right? They're in the Bible."

"That doesn't prove anything," Satan replied. "Just because Revelation says the Antichrist will rule for seven years, then be overthrown."

"It doesn't have to be that way? I could keep on ruling the world?" Paul had never felt so excited, ever.

"You can't, because you're not going to be the Antichrist. Changing that outcome would require changing the collective belief system of the Christian world. Do you really think you're man enough for that?"

"I'd—" *Wait, the Antichrist wouldn't say 'try hard, would he?* "Yes! I'm totally committed! And—and why are we having this conversation, anyway?" Paul's heart began beating with hope. "I mean, if you don't mind my asking—are you saying my application for employment as Antichrist is still under review?"

"Application?" Satan groaned. "You're talk about a role in the apocalypse as if you were hoping to work at the Post Office."

"But is that what you're saying?"

The shadowy figure hung its head. "There is, shall we say ... an imbalance in the Force—"

"You're a Star Wars fan? Awesome dude—I mean, master!" Paul glanced over at his action figures. "Palpatine, he's probably a lot like the Antichrist, right?"

"Actually, no. If that's how far your concept of evil stretches, I think you proved my point."

"Which was?" Paul wondered if he shouldn't be more scared about Satan appearing on his TV, but this was the most amazing thing to happen to him, ever. The *only* amazing thing. "Wait, your point was I could become the Antichrist, right?"

"No! No, no, no! You've got to understand, Paul, Revelation was written as an allegory for Rome under Nero, it's not a literal prophecy."

"But it's in the Bible!"

"So is Genesis!" Satan's fist smacked audibly into his shadowy palm. "Do you seriously believe the world was created in six days in contradiction of all scientific evidence?" Paul wasn't sure which answer would land him the job, so he stayed silent. "But because millions of people believe Revelation is a prophecy—even secularists who've seen the *Omen* films—that belief is rippling through humanity's collective unconscious, demanding that it come to pass."

"So the world needs me to be the Antichrist?"

"The world doesn't know you exist, Paul—but the trouble is, I can't find anyone else who's interested. Most people don't think seven years of power is a fair trade for an eternity of hellfire, or they're too arrogant and ambitious to swear to obey me in all things. Or they can't bring themselves to do the evil the job requires."

"Are they insane? To not want—do you know what I'd do if I ran the world?"

"Yes, I'm fully aware of your puerile power fantasies. But because your yearning coincides with what the collective unconscious demands—"

"I can have the job?"

"NO!" Satan lunged forward as he were going to burst out of the screen, and Paul shrank back. "If you become Antichrist, Revelation becomes complete reality. A reality in which Jesus returns in seven years and puts an end to my own kingdom. If you had the strength of will and character to prevent that, I might—but any fool can see that you don't. So it must not come to pass." The shadowy image drew back. "I've been thwarting your attempts for a while now, but resisting the collective unconscious is increasingly ... challenging. So stop your wishing. Stop your attempting. Or pay the consequences."

The screen flickered. One of the cheerleaders was putting moves on her sister, but Paul hardly noticed. *If I don't back off, what will he do?*

*Can he do anything? I mean, if he could strike me dead, why wouldn't he have done it already?*

*Maybe even Satan can't defeat humanity's collective unconscious.* Whatever that is. Paul jumped to his feet and grabbed his wallet. It was time to go shopping.

"\$6.66 cents." The salesclerk chuckled. "You must be the Antichrist!"

"I guess so." It was the fifth time he'd gotten that much in change since leaving his apartment. And he hadn't even used a calculator.

"Don't!" He heard Satan whisper as he stepped out of the store, saw what might have been the devil's image in a shop window. "Do you really want eternal damnation for seven years? Trust me, it's not worth it!"

"It's better to reign in hell than—" He couldn't remember the rest of it, but it didn't matter. "I'm going to be somebody, Satan. Like that movie, I'm gonna have class, I'm gonna be a contender! The collective unconscious rules!"

He strode down the street, feeling better than he had in years. And too lost in daydreams to pay attention to traffic signals.

To the rest of the world, the fact that five minutes later, a senator's car hit him, leading to the friendship that made him the new Secretary General of the UN was an amusing anecdote.

To Paul, it felt like destiny.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Born in England, Fraser spent most of his life in Florida. Then he fell in love, moved to North Carolina, got married and began freelancing full-time. He's had stories published in *Realms of Fantasy*, *Drabblecast*, *Every Day Fiction*, *New Myths* and in his self-published collection, *Philosophy and Fairy Tales*. He's also the author of three film reference books. You can find him online at <http://frasersherman.wordpress.com/>, and on Twitter as Fraser Sherman

# THE WHITE PIANO

by Eleanor Adams Hale

**T**he grand piano sat in the middle of the floor and glowed a pure, milky white in the summer sunlight streaming in from the French windows. Amelia-Jane Edwards circled it once, trailing her fingers over the flawless surface, and then looked at her mother.

"I don't play piano."

Her mother smiled in the way mothers do when they are not intending to let reality get in the way of their dreams for their children.

"Your father has already hired a tutor. Didn't you say you wished you played an instrument?"

Amelia-Jane looked at the piano. It did not look back.

"Why is it white?" she asked, avoiding the question.

"It was very expensive," returned her mother, doing the same. "It is an antique."

Amelia-Jane heard the faint tones of reproach.

"Yes, mother."

Amelia-Jane sat down on the creamy white leather piano stool and pressed a few keys at random. The piano sang clear and true; the notes vibrated in the air like soap bubbles before fading away. Amelia-Jane fancied she could see them, thin and transparent like ice.



Her mother's high heels click-clacked on the parquet floor and broke the illusion. One exquisitely-manicured hand came to rest on her daughter's shoulder.

"Please try, Millie-Jay. Your father-"

"Yes, mother."

Amelia-Jane knew what her father wanted. Her father wanted the perfect daughter.

She pressed one of the black notes, watched it depress under the pressure of her finger then rise again, slowly, once the pressure was removed.

"I will learn piano."

The tutor her father had engaged was pleased with her progress. Amelia-Jane was a dutiful student who practiced as she was told, even if she was a strangely silent child. And the piano was a beauty, a true diamond despite its age.

Amelia-Jane watched the notes rise like glass as she played, and patiently endured the tutor's fussiness and the way his fingers constantly stroked the instrument as though it were a cat.

If it were a cat, reflected Amelia-Jane, it would surely have scored his intruding hand with its claws by now. To her, it seemed the instrument wished only for gentle touches upon the keys and naught else; his pats and strokes smeared its virgin whiteness. But she said nothing; what could she say?

She hoped the piano knew she understood.

The night was very, very still. The branches of the cherry tree visible outside Amelia-Jane's window were not moving, not so much as quivering. The sky was a swathe of velvet strewn with diamonds, and the moon a swollen disc, tinged with gold.

Amelia-Jane lay under her quilt and stared out at the world, wide awake.

Downstairs, the piano sat in its own pool of silvered moonlight. There was something oddly...expectant about it. Under the lid, the wires trembled minutely with anticipation.

The first note, a crashing low A, echoed throughout the whole house, setting up answering vibrations in the walls and floor. It was followed by several others apparently at random, before the notes resolved themselves into a recognisable tune, a rollicking waltz.

Amelia-Jane sat up in bed.

The music made her want to dance. Swinging her legs out from under the covers, ignoring the swift nip of the chilly night air, she shuffled her bare feet into the slippers resting below and darted into the hallway and down the stairs.

She stopped in the door to the piano room. The piano sat waiting, the music fading as though aware of her presence, the keys stilling themselves until finally there was silence.

Amelia-Jane stepped forwards. The piano stool squeaked faintly as it turned towards her, inviting.

She sat, and thought for a moment she felt cold fingers brush her arm, a faint whisper in her ear.

Play.

So she played.

Her parents, woken by a sound they had never expected to hear in the depths of the night-time, found their daughter seated serenely at the instrument, her fingers coaxing the strains of something that was in no music book they had given her from the keys. She did not turn to look at them; her face was calm, faraway as she played.

"Millie-Jay!" cried her mother, rushing forwards. "Millie-Jay, what are you doing?"

Her daughter flinched visibly at the sound of her mother's voice, and a sudden wrong note marred the flow. The music slowed, lurched, stopped, and Amelia-Jane blinked.

"Mother?"

"What are you doing, Millie-Jay?" repeated her mother, putting an arm around the girl's shoulders. "Why are you playing the piano in the middle of the night?"

Amelia-Jane looked over her mother's shoulder at her father, who had remained in the doorway. The man's face was flinty.

"I won't do it again, mother."

"I should think not, Millie-Jay!" exclaimed the woman, taking her daughter's hand and leading her to the door. "Back to bed with you."

Amelia-Jane went quietly. But as she left, she thought once again she felt that icy-cold touch on her arm.

Play, Amelia-Jane. Play.

For several weeks, there was silence.

Her piano teacher simply could not account for Amelia-Jane's sudden lack of enthusiasm for practicing. The spark seemed to have gone; she touched the keys only with the greatest of reluctance, as though she half-expected the instrument to bite.

She would not say why. Her mother watched her with worried eyes.

And then one night the sheer stillness returned. Amelia-Jane, curled beneath her blanket, watched the cherry-tree branches slowly still themselves and the clouds drift into immobility, leaving the once-again full moon clear and unobstructed.

She knew what was coming.

This time the music was softer. It sounded sad, flowing, gentle. The piano was apologising.

Amelia-Jane lay rigid under her blanket, and tried not to listen. But the music played on, a terrible melancholy weaving through the notes, until despite herself she felt tears welling up, and she felt she could not possibly let the instrument cry to itself much longer. So once again she quit her bed and padded, soft-footed as a kitten in her slippers, down to the piano room.

The playing ceased as she entered, and once again the stool swung out to welcome her. She sat, but she did not touch the keys; she waited.

The room held its breath.

"Why do you want me to play?" asked Amelia-Jane.

A freezing touch upon her arm set the hairs on the back of her neck to tingling. A voice, just on the cusp of hearing, sighed,

No-one has yet played like you.

The girl drew her arm away, suspicious still. The voice spoke again, saddened.

I did not mean to frighten you...

"But you did," said Amelia-Jane.

I am sorry.

Amelia-Jane shifted on the piano stool and rubbed at one thin arm.

"Who are you?"

I? I am Alexander Honeywood, composer! The whispered voice swelled, puffed with pride. My music is played at the highest court in the land, and beautiful ladies whisper my name into their pillows!

"I have never heard of you," said Amelia-Jane, matter-of-factly.

The voice was silenced. Then, a tickle on the ear, a thin, sad thread of sound...

Really? I am forgotten?

"I have never heard anything of yours played on the radio," said Amelia-Jane, who felt sorry for the voice. "But that does not mean very much. I am sure your memory is preserved in other ways."

Ah, said Alexander Honeywood, mournfully. It has been such a long time...And it is true my masterpiece was never shown to the world. That is why I called to you! You played my piano with such a masterful touch, as though you were born to it, I knew at once you were the one!

The whisper had grown no more audible, but progressively more excited; a chill breeze sprang up from nowhere, wrapping tendrils of cold around the girl's arms, raising the downy hairs to



attention. Amelia-Jane shivered.

"I have only just begun," she said. "I cannot play much—"

With practice you will shine! Enthused the shade of Alexander Honeywood. And you will play my masterpiece-and we together shall bring glory to the world of music. I know it!

Amelia-Jane hugged her knees, huddled against the cold the spirit brought with it. Outside the wind had picked up once again and tossing shadows flickered across the bare tiles and minimalist walls, casting looming shapes that lunged for the little figure at the piano before as suddenly turning to flee her. The moon smiled above it all, unconcerned.

"Have you written your masterpiece?" asked Amelia-Jane, slowly.

In answer, invisible fingers at once began to play, picking up the thread of the joyful melody that had drawn her out of her bed and made her dance. Amelia-Jane smiled, and rested her fingers against the cool ivory of the keys, and joined in-until the music stopped, with a suddenness that made her jump.

That is all there is, said the ghost of Alexander Honeywood.

"It is not finished."

There was a pause.

I became distracted. A woman...

"And you forgot your masterpiece," said Amelia-Jane, who knew that affairs of the heart were distracting things despite her youth.

I forgot my masterpiece, admitted Alexander Honeywood. And when I remembered it, it was too late.

"You were dead."

Another pause, and then the soft sad sigh.

I was dead. The dead...we cannot create.

"We must finish it," declared the girl, firmly. "I will

aid you."

The chill breeze that was the shade of the composer swirled about her, lifting the delicate strands of her hair, and his voice sounded joyously in her ears.

Thank you, Amelia-Jane!

"Mother," said Amelia-Jane.

Her mother buttered a croissant with elegant delicacy. "Yes, Millie-Jay?"

"Mother, I would like you to remove my piano tutor."

"But Millie-Jay!" objected her mother, opening her long-lashed eyes to their fullest extent. "You have been doing so well at your music studies! You mustn't give up now!"

Amelia-Jane looked at her mother.

"I do not wish to give up the piano," she explained, patiently. "I just do not wish to be taught by that man."

"Why not, Millie-Jay?"

Amelia-Jane looked down at her plate, her brows creased with mild displeasure at this questioning of her motives.

"I do not wish to be taught by that man," she said again, simply. Her mother's face was a picture of anxiety.

"I will talk to your father," she said.

The next time Amelia-Jane approached the music room, there was a different teacher waiting for her. This one was a woman, who smiled and spoke nicely, but intimidation was written in every movement, in the quick, darting glances she cast about at the shining walls, the spotless floor.

Amelia-Jane questioned Alexander Honeywood about her, afterwards.

"Is she a good teacher?"

She is too quiet, too cautious to teach you what you need to know, said the ghost, his whispering

voice dismissive.

"She seemed sad," said Amelia-Jane, thoughtfully.

She is not good enough, said the composer, and that was it.

In the end, six tutors came, taught as best they could, and one by one were rejected. Amelia-Jane's mother fluttered and objected at each rebuff of her selected maestros, but her daughter insisted with a quiet certainty that each one be sent away, and a new one engaged. Her mother found herself wilting beneath Amelia-Jane's unwavering gaze, and agreeing.

Her father scowled at each fresh dismissal, but did not object. So long as Amelia-Jane continued to study, he did not care who she studied under.

In the end, there was a young man with honey-coloured hair, who spoke confidently and called Amelia-Jane a prodigy. Alexander Honeywood rhapsodized about his musical ability, and demanded that Amelia-Jane learn all she could from him. Amelia-Jane, who liked the tutor's smile, obeyed.

Her mother breathed a sigh of relief that here, at last was a man her daughter could stand to be taught by. The tutor himself liked his charge, and liked her pure-toned piano, and very much liked the generous wage he was paid.

And so the household settled. Amelia-Jane worked with a will, and learned. Alexander Honeywood's insubstantial form glowed with pride at her advances, and bade her learn more and more...

...Until one night he summoned her from the warmth of her bed with music, as he always did, and drew her down to the music room as he always did, and whispered in her ear,

We must work.

"I am good enough?" asked Amelia-Jane, softly, without anxiety. The breeze that was the ghost lifted the fine strands of her hair and wrapped its chill about her in a freezing embrace.

You are good enough. We must work.

Amelia-Jane set her fingers upon the keys, and watched the notes rise in the moonlit darkness.

"I am ready," she said.

Her parents fretted.

Their daughter seemed withdrawn, quieter than usual. Great black rings were drawn beneath her eyes, and her movements were slow, lethargic, tired.

"She is sickening for something," said her mother anxiously. "She is ill!"

"Nonsense," said her father, coldly. "She is bored. See that her tutors spend longer with her. They evidently are not teaching sufficiently."

Her tutors complained that their pupil, usually so diligent, showed less and less interest in their lessons as the days went by, and an increase in hours did naught but make the problem worse. Even her piano teacher protested of inattention, faraway gazes, the way the girl often seemed to be listening to someone who most definitely was not him. He complained that her playing had become slow, and she did not fully learn the pieces he set.

And in the end, her father bade her attend to him in his office.

Amelia-Jane had never been in her father's office before. Before, the thought of it had made sick fear roil in the pit of her stomach.

But as she opened the door and stepped through, her thin face was serene, and her step sure and steady.

Her father looked at her.

"Amelia-Jane," he said, his voice like the tolling of funeral bells. "You are not attending to your studies."

Amelia-Jane stood up straight and smiled at him.

"I am not," she said.

"Why is this?" asked her father, his voice like the

cracking of thin ice on a frozen lake.

"I have another thing to do," said Amelia-Jane.

"And that is?" spoke her father, his voice like the slamming of a coffin lid.

"I am working on the masterpiece of Alexander Honeywood," answered his daughter, and she smiled.

"This will cease."

"It will not."

The denial was calm and as certain as the rising of the sun, as certain as both death and taxes. And her father could say nothing in the face of the soft, certain smile.

For the first time in his life, he shouted. For the first time in his life, he screamed and beat upon the desk for emphasis, and Amelia-Jane did not stop smiling.

"Goodbye, father," she said, and she turned and she left.

The white piano was already being loaded upon a lorry outside, the workers continuing with phlegmatic unflappability despite her mother's shrill demands that they cease their robbery, that they return her property to the house, that they explain themselves at once.

"They are acting on my orders, mother," said Amelia-Jane, padding from the house on gentle feet, suitcase in hand. Her mother turned, face twisted in distress, and reached out imploringly to her daughter.



"Millie-Jay, what are you doing? Where are you going? Do not leave me, Millie-Jay, my Millie-Jay!"

Amelia-Jane put down her suitcase and caught her mother in a tight embrace.

"I am sorry, mother," said Amelia-Jane. "I will return."

And then she stepped away, and stepped into the cab of the lorry, and smiled.

Play, Amelia-Jane, play, whispered Alexander Honeywood.

"I will play," she whispered in return.



## THE VERY BEST OF FANTASY & SCIENCE FICTION, VOLUME 2

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# THIS IS EDEN

by Stuart McClean

**V**ines whipped the air around the tree of Eden.

The leaves and vines shown with a glorious golden light, the source of which was unknown even to the high priests, bathing the worshipers in light.

From all corners of Eden the worshipers came; from the floating cities of the Eversea to the port of Rondais, they came. Day after day they came, some never leaving others seeing it only once. From the highest lord and richest merchant to the lowest criminal and the poorest beggar, they all came as equals to kneel before the only tree on the planet of Eden. And never would any forget.

\*\*\*

The shift drive hummed quietly as Peter killed its engine. *The Lost Haul* settled in place above the massive planet below. The scanners pulsed showing only two other ships in orbit; one preparing to descend, the other starting up its shift drive. Peter fell back in his chair and switched on the view screen. The screen flickered into life as the gold-blue planet below came into view. Peter nearly cracked a smile at the site.

The com buzzed suddenly. Peter hit it on and the view screen switched to a woman with porcelain coloured skin in a green and gold speckled dress with a cap and eye scanner. "Hello and welcome to Eden," the woman spoke in a soothing voice that could calm with a single word. "Can I ask are you here for



business, pleasure, or to see the one tree of Eden?" she smiled as she awaited his answer as she was no doubt told to.

"Business, but I may pay a visit to the tree if I have time." He answered. Peter tapped his console bringing up his cargo list in anticipation.

"I would highly recommend seeing the tree before you leave sir. Now if you could just send down a list of your cargo and your ship's specifications I can finalize your request." Peter sent the cargo list and specifications, omitting the pulse circuits from his list. "Well sir, everything seems to be in order here. A dock has been opened for you on the port of Rondais. Please enjoy your stay." With that the view screen switched back to the image of Eden.

"I'll try." Peter told himself as he programmed in the location and set the ship to auto. Peter took out his pad and headed for his den.

As he walked, Peter glanced over the client's details on the pad. The client was head of an underground crime syndicate. The group dealt with all manner of things; drugs, slaves, even bribery of officials. Recently the group had decided to move into arms dealing, and that's where Peter came in.

The upper atmosphere gave little resistance to Peter's ship as it descended. *The Lost Haul* settled into the dock, the shields closed above it. The locking clamps closed down onto the ship. Peter slipped his portable connector into his coat pocket and holstered his blaster as he stepped down the ship's walk way and onto the platform below.

Stepping into the artificial light of port Rondais, it wasn't hard to tell why Eden was considered one of the richest planets in the sector. The ground was white metal with adapting gravity panels covering the floor. At the end of the platform corridor a service droid with a silvery-white cover surrounding it and a holographic display projector stood beside the sliding doors. "Welcome to Eden, sir. Do you have any questions I might answer?" it asked

with the same soothing voice of the woman Peter had spoken to earlier. Peter looked the machine up and down, and then headed for the exit without a word. "And might I suggest paying a visit to the only tree on Eden." The droid quickly added as the automatic doors slid open for Peter. He gave it a final look, staring into the blue lights that gave the appearance of eyes, and headed through the exit and into the port.

"Rondais welcomes you." Came the loud call from hidden speakers. The noise vibrated through the port reaching the ears of every uninterested person gathered there. The port itself was filled with people, some boarding ships while others were preparing to depart, and service droids, all silvery-white with blue lights for eyes. Unlike the docks, the port had an open ceiling letting sunlight be cast down on the people.

"Mr Cleric I presume?" a small man, with slight wrinkles on his face, in an ancient brown suit, like the ones from old Earth, called to Peter from a bench.

"It's Clearic, and you are?" Peter asked.

"I work for Mr Dundroff. He sent me here to be your guide on this," the small man smirked. "Glorious world." He stood. "You may call me Hollander." The small man said as he bowed.

"Hollander?" Peter looked the small man over, trying to get a feel of him. "Fine, take me to your boss."

"Fine, fine. But first how about we visit the tree?" his voice changed, only slightly, but Peter noticed.

"Later, maybe. To be honest I have business on other worlds, so..."

"Right, right. You're a busy man. If you'll follow me I will take you right to Mr Dundroff." Peter nodded and followed as Hollander led him from the port.

Hollander had a slight skip in his step, with him hopping with every couple of steps. Peter

followed him silently, his large coat closed firmly around him hiding the small blaster he kept just in case.

Hollander led him out into the open air of Rondais valley, more a parking structure than a valley, and headed to one of the silvery-white service droids. Peter stayed back by the sliding doors of the port, his eyes were fixed on the sky as he watched familiar white clouds flow through an unfamiliar blue sky. "Mr Clearic, over here." Hollander called to him from beside a black hovercar, top of the line, with a silver trim along it.

Peter approached, ran a hand across the bonnet, and turned to Hollander. "I assumed we would be using teleporters?"

Hollander laughed as he opened the driver side door. "Teleporters, in this economy. It's a rich planet, but we're criminals Mr Clearic, and we're not rich." He slid into the hovercar. Peter hopped into the passenger seat next to Hollander, making sure to keep his blaster covered. Hollander pushed down on the centre of the panel before him and the hovercar came to life. The hovercar rose into the air, just above the ground, and hummed as the rejectors came online.

The ride was smooth accompanied by the hum that always came with a hovercar. Hollander was chatty, asking about this and that, always questioning. "So tell me," he would go. "Have you been to many worlds where men can use teleporters as they please?"

"Yes." Peter tried to keep his answers short.

"Really like where? Anywhere famous?" he persisted.

"Porlos, Titan five, and Earth." He listed off.

"Wow, Earth. You really been to the mother world?" he prattled on. Peter chose to ignore him as best he could, with only a word or two given as an answer.

Below them the white of the port turned to gold and green as they passed over the vast fields

of grass and flowers, but no trees. The grass quickly gave way to the red of the planet's sands and then to the blue of the sea. The greatest of the great aquatic cities lay ahead. Rondais it was called, like so many other things on this world, and great it was.

A tall beacon of everflame burnt atop a black and gold spiral tower stabbing higher than the hovercar could reach. Skyscrapers circled the tower, each unique to itself, and all shining as bright as the everflame. As the buildings moved closer to the sea they became stranger still, twisting into monuments of people and trees blending into the brightly coloured homes and the misshapen factories built around the edge of the city. It was one of the stranger and more unique sites of human construction in the sector, but Peter had seen weirder and crueller.

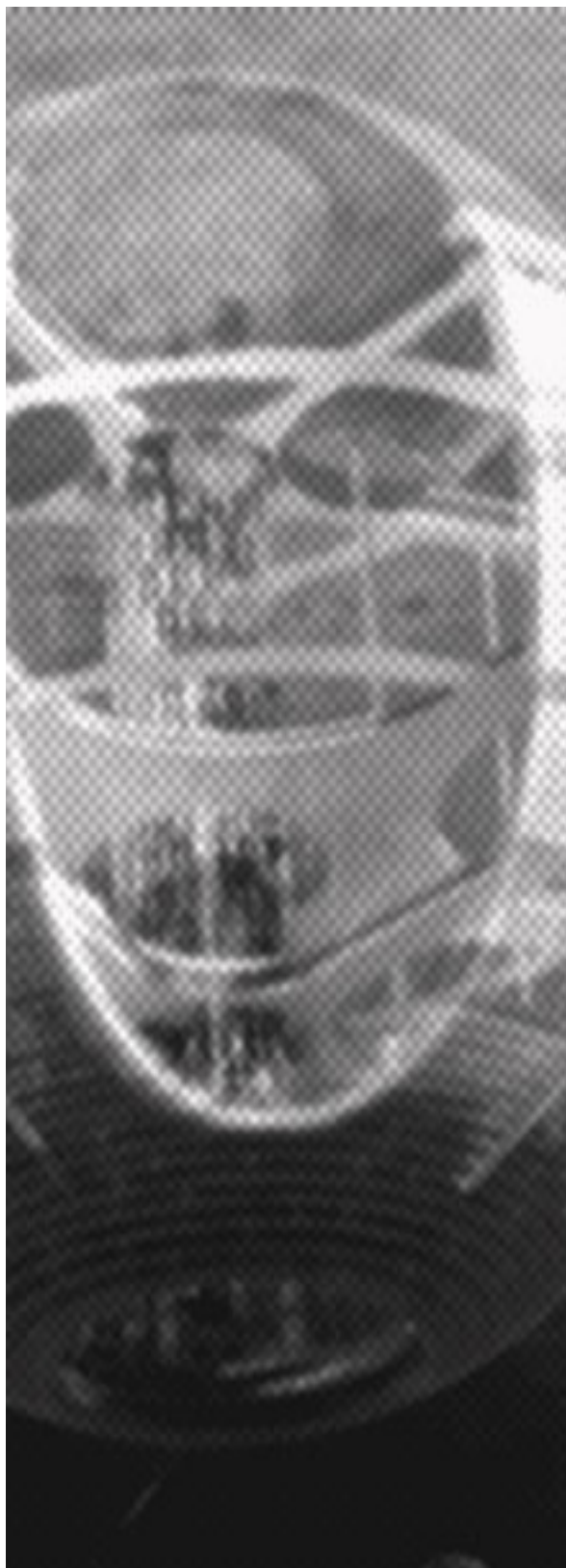
The city of bones crossed Peter's mind, but Hollander snapped him from it. "I'll be taking us down just outside the city limits. Mr Dundroff has a small welcome set up for us."

The hovercar floated just above sea level to a small, almost invisible, platform that rocked gently with the sea's current. Setting down on the platform, the hum of the rejectors turned to silence when Hollander knocked off the engine. A shield buzzed around the platform, one thicker than the others Peter had seen on Eden, blocking a portion of the sun's light. Peter gave Hollander a questioning glance, the small man just smiled back.

A thundering drum sounded as the platform shook. The water around the platform swayed wildly and smashed harmlessly against the shield. The waters rose and rose as the platform shook, but the waters didn't rise it was the platform that sank.

"Where are we...?" Peter tried to ask.

"Dundroff castle." Hollander replied to the unasked question. And then Peter saw it, the castle. Not really a castle, but a large oval shaped construct dug into the ocean floor. A single opening could be seen at the top of the construct, directly in line with the platform they currently descended on.



Deeper and deeper the platform sank, closer and closer to the construct below. All fish moved from the platform's path, darting and diving to avoid the shield, all but a mighty whale-like creature, with two large probing feelers, that just floated right by without paying the platform any attention.

The soft shaking of the platform ceased as it fell into place on the construct and the shields joined as one. The platform slid down slowly, pulled by weak tractor leash that must have been locked on the platform from the start.

As the platform slid down the inside of the construct lights came on suddenly, showing the room in full. It was a small room with a single panel and single door at the far end of the room. A tall broad shouldered man, dressed in the same ancient suit worn by Hollander, with a dark complexion sat by the panel working the controls. With a slight flick of his wrist, the man shut off the tractor leash and let the platform come to rest on the room's floor.

The shield disappeared as Hollander and Peter stepped out of the hovercar. Hollander headed across the room without a word, Peter followed ignoring the lingering eyes of the other man. The large duro-plastic door opened automatically for Hollander, sliding just above the ground as it swung slowly round.

From the small room they had left behind them, Hollander led Peter through a series of twists and turns, through duro-plastic doors and down auto-lifts, across large dark green corridors and small brighter rooms. The end seemed far off, but in sight.

For every room or corridor the pair passed, there seemed to be only a single person assigned to that area and always they wore those same ancient suits; some brown, some black, and here and there a grey one. Only the people in the suits seemed different; men, women, short, tall, young, old, it didn't seem to matter, so long as they wore a suit.

"We're here." Hollander said without warning with a tune in his voice. Two sliding doors parted and the pair walked through into a pale

white room with a set of chairs at one end and a service droid standing at the other. "Please wait here, Mr Clearic." Hollander signalled to the chairs. Peter sat and watched as Hollander walked through the open door at the other end of the room. The door slid shut behind him.

Peter waited and waited and waited. The droid across the room was staring at him, or just facing his direction, with those fake blue eyes. "Have you visited the only tree of Eden yet, sir?" the droid asked unexpectedly.

"What?" Peter asked.

"The tree sir, have you seen it yet?" the droid spoke with the same soothing voice as that woman from the com.

"No." Peter answered bluntly.

"I would not recommend it, sir."

Peter thought for a moment. "Silence." Peter ordered, not caring to listen to the droid any longer. The droid was becoming a pest, but it got Peter thinking. No matter whom he spoke to on this world and those who had visited it, every single one said the same thing and each said it in the same way, forceful but delicate, all but this droid. Perhaps this tree was worth a look... later.

"Mr Dundroff will see you now." The droid called to him. The door slid open again, Peter walked through.

This room was like the last, white and scarcely decorated. Only a single table with a console built on it and two chairs lay right in the centre of the room. Hollander stood with his back to the far wall, standing straight, and a young man sat in front of him in one of the chairs. The man had on a suit similar to that of Hollander's, but with crimson as the base and gold for a trim. A crimson and gold fedora lay atop his head, tilted slightly to one side. Peter took the seat across from the young man and threw open his coat, showing the small blaster by his side. "Mr Dundroff I presume?" Peter asked already knowing the answer.

"Who else." The young man looked up, showing his face. It was lean, his chin stood out slightly and nose formed a slight hook. Dundroff laid his ice coloured eyes on the blaster and grinned. "You won't need that, but as you can see I have my own." With that he threw open his suit to reveal six small blasters strapped across his chest.

"Indeed." Was all Peter could bring himself to say. "Business then?" Peter asked as he took the portable connector from his pocket and slid it across the table.

"Yes, business." Dundroff snatched the connector up and tossed it behind him. Hollander caught it between his fingers. "And your payment." Dundroff slid a small credit disk across to Peter.

"This was surprisingly quick." Peter said as he took the disk and twirled it in his hands.

"Your reputation precedes you, Mr Clearic. I know you won't cheat me and you know I won't cheat you, so why waste time?" Dundroff lay back in his chair, his blasters shifting slightly as he moved.

Peter grinned. "Such a long way for such a quick trade." Peter said leaning back.

"And enough credits to keep a man happy and healthy for all his days." Dundroff finished.

"Well that too." Peter pocketed the disk and started to stand. "Any final words then, perhaps something about a tree?" Peter asked as he settled back into his seat.

Dundroff's smile faded. "Careful, Clearic. Don't want to be asking about things you shouldn't."

"Shouldn't?" Peter sat up. "What do you mean?"

The smile returned to Dundroff's lips. "I'll give you a bit of advice, don't see that tree." His cold eyes stabbed at Peter. "Trust me."

Peter looked past the young man at the one behind him. Hollander's face was solid and



giving no emotion. "Why not? I haven't heard a bad thing about that tree before, except from your droid out there."

"That's because you've only been speaking to ones who have already seen it."

\*\*\*

Taking the hovercar back with Hollander was quiet. The sun had already set when they left, leaving only the everflame to light their way across the open sky.

Peter was thinking on what he had heard. See the tree, don't see the tree. Dundroff's warning was cryptic at best. They were two completely different choices, but with one obvious solution. Work comes first. Time to get off planet, he concluded.

"Peter, um, Mr Clearic..." Hollander spoke up suddenly as the port came into sight.

"What?" Peter asked, half listening.

"Please, go see the tree." Hollander's voice had turned hard, more forceful without the delicacy.

"I have work elsewhere, on other worlds."

Hollander stayed quiet as he brought the hovercar down outside the port. Peter left the hovercar, saying only a polite goodbye, and headed into the port.

The doors slid open into the large white building. "Rondais welcomes you, why not visit the tree." Peter froze. The message was different and the port was empty. Peter's eyes scanned the area, not a single person or service droid was in sight. Peter rushed to his dock.

The dock doors slid open, but slammed shut when Peter entered. "Going so soon, Mr Clearic?" asked a tall robe wearing man standing in the middle of the dock. "You haven't even seen our tree yet."

Peter turned slightly and put his hand to the blaster. "Move." He ordered. But the man

remained. "Mov..." Peter tried to speak again, but something stopped him. The gravity panels, Peter realized as he tried to fight against the increasing pressure pulling him down. He couldn't even draw his blaster.

"Please don't struggle." The man asked in a soothing tone. Not that Peter could struggle; the gravity was too much for him. As his mind went blank, Peter only heard. "Rondais welcomes you, Peter Clearic."

\*\*\*

The pulse weapons were in full production. Soon each man in Felix Dundroff's little army would be equipped with the most advanced weapons on the planet.

"Sir." Felix looked up from the console on his desk. Ethan stood in the doorway, tall and slender in his black suit. "Hollander is requesting permission to speak with you." The tall man said in a cold tone.

Ethan stood still, awaiting an answer. Felix turned back to his console, finished his checks, and looked back to Ethan. "Send him in, check his eyes."

Ethan nodded and left. The white door slid shut behind him. Felix shut off the console and took his fedora from the desk. Laying it on his head he covered the ever-present scar.

A minute passed before the door slid open again. Hollander walked through, surprisingly without his usual smile across his face, while Ethan stayed behind with his eyes focused on Hollander. The door slid closed again, leaving Felix and Hollander alone.

"So what do you need?" Felix asked, motioning to the chair before him. Hollander took the chair.

"It's about Clearic sir, the smuggler." Hollander seemed distracted. "He's been dealt with."

"Good, very good." Felix forced a half smile, but it faded quick. "I warned him about the tree."

"You did sir." Hollander agreed.

"There is something that has been bothering me though." Felix shifted his hat around his head, keeping the scar covered.

"What is it sir?"

"How did Rondais know the smuggler would be here?" Felix felt his icy eyes focus on the short man before him. "Things were smooth and secret. Only me, you and Ethan knew about this. Only us three."

A sly smile, that Felix knew all too well, grew on Hollander's face as a gold flash appeared in his eyes. "I would think you would already know the answer to that, Felix."

Felix cursed himself when he saw the gold in Hollander's eyes. His teeth grit hard against each other. "How long?" Felix loosed the buttons on his jacket.

"Come now Felix. You know that."

This was not Hollander sitting before him. "Rondais." His hand crept for a blaster.

"Not quite." Hollander crossed his legs and leant back against the chair. "You might want to warn Ethan before you put a hole through this body."

"Go to hell." Felix drew and fired, blasting intense energy towards the man that was once Hollander. The man fell back with a steaming hole burnt through his chest and that sick smile that everyone in Rondais seemed to like. The body hit the ground right as the door slid open and Ethan burst in with his new acquired pulse blaster in hand. The tall man froze at the sight of Hollander's smirking corpse. "Clean that up." Felix ordered as he put away his blaster.

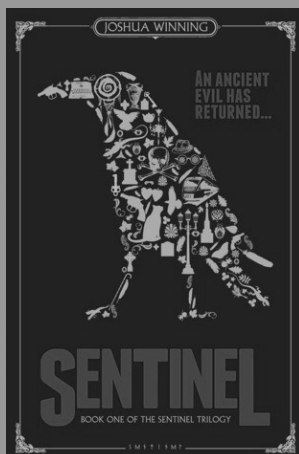
Felix took the fedora from his head, cursed again, and threw it aside. The scar burned as he scratched at it. "Does it hurt?" Ethan asked, the body still lay before him.

"What?" Felix asked, distracted and angry.

"Does it hurt where you cut out my root?" Ethan's eyes flashed gold. Felix leapt to his feet, reached for a blaster, only to have his body knocked back and his arm torn off by the pulse of Ethan's blaster.

Felix screamed and wailed, clutching at his wound, as Ethan walked calmly over to him. "I'll kill you Rondais. I swear... I will... kill you." Felix managed to stammer out before the pulse was fired at him again.

The last image, burned forever into Felix's soul, an all too familiar smile on an unfamiliar face.



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# EARTHBOUND ANGELS RETURN

by N.O.A. Rawle

**D**ream Boy woke up with the terrible certainty that he had very little time left in the world called Life.

"For a kid I'm not taking this too badly." He mused as he stretched, warming his limbs in the dawn light breaking through the shutters.

Thirteen years had felt like an awfully long time in the living, but time, he supposed, was infinite and so his lifetime was insignificant really. Staring up at the ceiling, the portent of his demise heralded comfortable objectivity.

It was short-lived.

"Ain't gonna see the folks again! Can't squeeze a lifetime's dreams int'a few days or perhaps a few hours? Don' even know how long I've got?" Panic washed him in icy tremors, accompanied by a ferocious itching across his back. In an attempt to hold it at bay he scrolled a list through his mind deleting as he did so;

~~Meldsoma home dock,~~

~~Gap year: climb Kilimanjaro,~~

~~Visit Machu Picchu.~~

"Damn mosies!" Dream Boy raked a trembling hand across his shoulder blades, his fear metamorphosing into frustration.

"Guess I can write off Ethereality too." He mumbled rather sadly even though he'd blown three allowances on a fake digID. Spending

his last moments in a cyber parallel would be a pitiful end. But what did he know? Perhaps he was destined to snuff it catching some microbial infection after being locked up in a squalid prison cell for unrestricted juvenile use?

That set him thinking about how death would take him? Mangled in an accident, caught up in a dramatic prime news incident, blown to shreds by terrorists or the like? Most likely, peacefully in his sleep.

Arching his back so that he could rub his shoulder blades against the bed was futile so he headed for the bathroom hoping a scalding shower would ease the irritation. As Dream Boy studied his distorted reflection in the steamed-up mirror, he tried to visualise what he could have looked like with a beard and moustache or even white hair and wrinkles. The impossibility set his heart thundering.

Remorse gripped him once more when his mother tentatively adjusted the straps on his school pack; she was expecting him to lash out, spit a declaration of teen angst. Instead he kissed her goodbye; it could be the last time. He lumbered into the elevator, shaking off the guilt by allowing the motif in the wood grain laminate panel mesmerise him as he dropped the fifteen storeys to street level. The dully lit foyer with its creepy cob-webbed corners and his first scrawled attempts at graffiti sparked a thousand memories. How precious the banal was really.

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**A unique privilege had been granted him, over and above all the other mortals on the earth, he had been honoured with divine insight; a moment freed of the burden of the uncertain yet inevitable future.**

---

Murky shadows slouched in the street as the sun clawed its way up the scrapers. Dream Boy allowed the limbo to cushion him, as he floated along. With the sun rise so a deep warm pride surged within him. A unique privilege had been granted him, over and above all the other mortals on the earth, he had been honoured with divine insight; a moment freed of the burden of the uncertain yet inevitable future.

“But it ain’t truly free, is it?”

He stopped short, dust and detritus swirling around him, the anxiety stalling him before being struck by another revelation.

“No. Shan’t bother with ambitions or deadlines and living men’s burdens - better just live each moment distinctly, pleasurably, relishing each second. Gotta spend time with friends and family teach’em how to cherish the ordinary; make them really see what it means to be consciously alive.”

A yearning to give as much of himself as he could to all of those whose lives he would not be able to share, consumed him, he had to touch them in some way, give them a reason to carry on, to believe.

Dream Boy was overtly attentive at school; there was no wish for academic gain just a need to show the teachers they weren’t wasting time. He played football and flirted with the girls who’d been egging him on, but made no commitments he couldn’t keep. Back at home, over lunch with his parents, he stayed in the moment, reciprocating their love and warmth. When they’d retired, he surfed the Net and then tried to sleep but couldn’t. He

paced around his room like a nervous prisoner. His back was itching again.

“Is everything ok?” His mother smiled as she popped her head round the door.

“Look, I think I’ve been bitten, can you check my back?” He pulled his T-shirt up over his scrawny shoulder blades.

She peered at his back. “Have you been scratching it? It looks terribly sore.”

“Yeah, I’ve got this infernal itching - it’s driving me crazy.”

“I’ll put some after-bite ointment on it.” A few moments later she returned and began to rub in the cream.

“Mum?” He turned to look her in the eye.

“Yes?”

“Look, you know I love you don’t you?”

“Of course, darling.” She smiled and kissed his forehead. “That’s why you’re my Dream Boy. Now try to rest.”

Sleep was a waste of his precious time – he didn’t have enough. He wanted to be immersed in Life, to see and to do. So Dream Boy got up and pulled on his shorts and quickly laced his trainers. Quietly closing the bedroom door behind him he snuck through the flat. His mum would have slept being one of the few still employed but there was a dull light from under the door of his father’s study. He slipped his key from the hook and let the door click before he summoned the lift.

All around him the city throbbed. The pounding slow-motion of drudgery; traffic fumed in the narrow streets, infiltrated by pedestrians, languidly hauling baskets of fruit, plastic carriers, the perpetual the chatter of scandal and desolation. The only difference between night and day was the source of light; now shafts of neon light cut through the shadows creating eerie flickering refuges for anyone without purpose or possession. His initial pride had been superseded.

"This is life, glowing, sweating, both dark and beautiful. They must learn that this life is to be savoured and treasured before I return."

There it was again; that certainty about his fate. But return where? Was he coming back here or going somewhere that he'd been before? He shook his head and moved on down the street.

Ironic that his parents had nick-named him Dream Boy right from the very beginning. He was to be and do all they were not and could not. Funny then that he would be gone before they would. His school friends too had taken up 'Dream Boy', he'd come up with some ingenious cheats and supplements for the best software Onereal Games had, before they had come up with Ethereality, that was.

"Living dead." Dreamboy smiled grimly. He liked the sound of this phrase, pilfered from some antique flicker box. Old type software, badly made and not really accessible; No kick included, no interaction. The arcade lights sparkled alluringly above him.

Maybe he could play just once? One last blast! A little time just for himself and it would be shameful to let a superior counterfeit digID go to waste.

In the arcade he stopped at a contact booth and sent a hologram so his mother wouldn't worry when she found his bed empty.

"Chasing some dreams for a while."

He felt it imprudent to add that these would be his last but he had blown her a kiss.

Finally encased in one of the white leather upholstered booth seats he'd been eyeing eagerly for weeks now, he let out a deep breath. The Meldsoma hugged him snug and safe as he slipped the screen helmet on and keyed in the digID code and requested a new account.

#### RETINA SCAN REQUIRED

"Damn it!" His heart started a tribal drumming. An eye is supposed to have matured by the time one reaches ten or eleven but was a retina scan able to detect age? Perhaps he should have registered in a data base before hand? He had no idea. Would his scam be revealed? He held his breath and kept still as if he'd done this a thousand times before. The automatic reader whirled and clicked into place in the helmet. A bright light momentarily blinded him but he resisted the temptation to blink.

#### WELCOME.

"Phew!" Dream Boy relaxed, letting the Meldsoma reaccommodate him and waited for a games menu but the screen remained blank.

"Just my damned luck! Can't call a technician with these access codes either. What the...?" Without warning, the screen washed green and a message appeared.

QUITO PERSONALLY INVITES YOU TO  
TRIAL RUN CUSTOM-MADE SOFTWARE,

EXPERIENCE THE IMPOSSIBLE.

I KNOW YOU BETTER THAN YOU KNOW  
YOURSELF.

"Wait a minute, I've seen this before," Dream Boy had dismissed the message as junk, syndicated to every user and charges at premium rate per voxel. (More than even his monthly allowance could master.) "But if it's

appearing in the Ethereality software, perhaps there's more to it?" He stabbed ENTER.

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*So you exist, that's a definite. Where you come from is not important (in the sense that no one need know should it be something you wish to hide). It's where you are or appear to be that matters.*

*Are you a climber? At the beginning and knowing all too well where you wish to go, but wondering if you'll make it?*

*Are you already where it's at – The Scene? Worrying if you fit in or if you are just a sheep? Do others see you like you want to be seen or are they merely tolerating you for their own entertainment? Or worse still, are you just looking the part but not making any statement?*

*That all these things bother you has become the centre of your existence.*

*But there's still that indefinable part which bugs the hell out of you, that little bitching, itching, nagging for real fulfilment that either gives you reason to go on or cuts you down.*

*Me? I'm just up here watching. It's the best view, a beast of a ride! Don't fight it! Just let it happen to you! Go with the flow! It's My will.*

\*\*\*

Makepeace rubbed his temples in frustration.

"What other evidence do you have?" He asked, his impatience rising with the humidity. Since the aircon had packed up there was only an ancient ceiling fan to stir the muggy pre-monsoon air.

"I know Quito's there!" Vathkrougjias discarded the transparencies he'd been fingering onto the light-table. If only these two illuminated data images had indicated an untoward reaction.

A fat, rust coloured roach waddled its way across the table, made bold by their stillness. Every few centimetres it stopped and explored the air with its antennae, wary of the light. Vathkrougjias flicked it away with a bony finger. It landed on its back, kicking its spindly legs furiously, trying to right itself. Stalling, he felt as hopeless as the wretched insect, needing an argument that would persuade Makepeace of the validity of his gut feeling. He slid the data image slices slowly towards him once more. Voxel pics could not be seen as 100% accurate but there was always a slim chance of revelation, a strong hemodynamic response or synapse excitation in the brain area in question which might just be that vital clue.

"No luck with those. We can't use them." Makepeace resented such proofs, simply because they were never solid enough to handle in a way that he really understood. Sure he could see the science in it but the interpretation was still unverified, who could read the complexity of mankind's mind? He didn't blame Vathkrougjias, they'd been searching for a handhold on this one for a week and still nothing.

"They're clean. The responses are standard." He added, in part grateful there was nothing to substantiate Vathkrougjias' crazy idea about what he'd dubbed Quito, Carita de Dios, after the city where the first victim had been found. Vathkrougjias didn't react except to turn away to the open window where he could gaze out onto the darkening city. After fumbling in his pockets for a light, his cigarette glowed, a single orange cat's eye in a shroud of smoke.

"What do you suggest?" He spoke before the sounds of the city at night enveloped them in melancholy. The smoke hung in thin layers in the thick air like dust on glass shelves.

Makepeace shrugged as he wafted the strata with his hand. Perhaps he'd been a Death Writer for too long. It used to be simple dissatisfaction with life, suicide or murder,

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## Then there had come Ethereality, providing occupation and purpose for the dispossessed, in virtual worlds. Life suddenly had definition and clarity for the plebeian population again.

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accident or abduction which prevented people from returning home but then life had become less focused as unemployment had risen. With so many suicides and deaths in the riots that he had been inundated with work, ceaselessly filing reports determining cause of death or disappearance for insurance claims and client verification, justice became a lost concept. It was as if a whole generation had just faded until it no longer cared if it existed.

Then there had come Ethereality, providing occupation and purpose for the dispossessed, in virtual worlds. Life suddenly had definition and clarity for the plebeian population again. It was soon the international drug of choice. When the death rate and the violence subsided to virtually zero, bar natural causes, no one could deny the positive effects of Onereal's software. Makepeace was suddenly lacking in work.

He was secretly pleased by the precarious nature of a cyber engendered balance.

"Let's look again at the facts: The first one went fifteen months ago." Makepeace had been utterly spooked by the report. Like all the kids of his generation he'd read the stories and seen the films. But this was reality. Snuffed out like a light.

"The victim is found in an arcade, the Meldsoma dock soiled and reeking. No one notices for days as the victim is a regular user, little more than a teen, and the alarms do not sound as the brain is still active and undamaged but only because of the software.

"Locked-in syndrome is ruled out and the user, still attached to the dock, is hidden in some

vacuous medical facility paid for by Onereal. They had hushed up the case, paid off relatives with a considerable compensation package and dismissed it as a freak incident. That was until the next one."

That was when Makepeace had been glad to be brought out of redundancy.

"The second is older, different city, same brain state, the same Ethereality programme, but he has never played before. There's been nine more internationally since then and still no more *tangible* clues."

He toyed with Vathkrugjias' cigarette packet as he spoke. "Our victims only have two things in common: They all used Ethereality technology and,"

"They all wind up 'missing'." Vathkrougjias finished for him.

"Onereal's going to have to go public at some point."

"Although Onereal covertly acknowledge the possibility of a link, directly or indirectly with Ethereality, they can't withdraw the software now, it would cause outright social unrest. No one can face that again. We've got close to 75% of the world's population hooked onto this and there's no way it can be withdrawn for a paltry eleven victims! They've double checked the escape mechanism, and cheats. It's sound, fail-safe, fool proof!"

"Only it obviously isn't!" Makepeace hated to leave things hanging but this one was looking as if it was going that way.

"What can I say? I've been through the programmes and they're perfectly formed. Onereal's done its business!"

"You would say that, don't forget I know you were once under contract to Onereal."

"That's the reason I was chosen for this case." Vathkrougjias had been waiting for this insinuation.

"What about a virus?" Makepeace placated.

"There are no connections. I can't see how it would work this arbitrarily. Viruses require logical connections; they form chain reactions of which none exist here." He reiterated.

"So you've invented your mythical Quito! How can this blending you're on about be possible? You're just obsessed with some half baked theory that you want to prove for personal gratification!"

Vathkrougjias had had enough of Makepeace's digs at his professionalism; John was too old to understand the possibilities. Hell he wasn't sure. He'd heard rumours of something like this as an undergraduate, two of the top post grads - rich kids from the Outreaches had fulfilled some kind of cyber suicide pact, 'cyber slicing' - Russian roulette,



one had been killed and the other reduced to a vegetative state.

There was only one thing left to do.

"I'll have to go in."

"Sorry?" Makepeace blinked uncertain of what he thought he'd just heard. Vathkrougjias looked almost as surprised. He'd been so deep in thought that he'd not realised he'd spoken aloud.

"I'll have to go in." he spoke with conviction this time.

"I thought that's what you said." Makepeace tapped a cigarette and inhaled it for quality as if mulling over the proposition which was as stupid as the fake, scentless cigarette he held.

Vathkrougjias seated himself opposite Makepeace and defiantly puffing harmless smoke rings between them.

"If I immerse myself I can really see what's happening - get a user's perspective - it should've been our first move."

Makepeace shook his head.

"Players use Ethereality every day. It's been on the market for eighteen months now, only eleven people out of billions are 'missing'. There seems to be no logical connection between any of them. How can you guarantee you are going to get on the same trail, for one



thing? Secondly, how are you going to do it without losing yourself? That is, should you find the right path, so to speak?"

Vathkrougjias shrugged, he knew Makepeace wouldn't understand; this was instinctual. He inspected his hand over the light table, the veins and bones so obvious.

"John, you've been writing up stuff like this for years and you're the best. They just brought me in for the technical side; I know that. But you've taught me a lot. One of those things is to trust a hunch however out on a limb it might be, follow it up. Isn't that what you say? A leap of faith." He paused and looked at Makepeace. No flicker of emotion in the face he'd grown to respect in the last few days. Not even a blink.

"It's like we've interviewed all the witnesses but not visited the crime scene. I need to get a feel for it."

"I've learned from you too. Didn't you tell me that programmes are logical not emotional. Ethereality isn't real! What's to 'feel'? What clues do you expect to find there?"

"I think it's grown bigger than the programme! It's fuelled by the world's unfulfilled dreams; our imaginations."

"So you think it's a person now? We've checked Onereal's employees and known competitors. What about another player? Perhaps someone writes your Quito into the script as a murderer, a mind thief or something?" Makepeace snapped the filter off the cigarette he'd been fiddling with.

"No, even if they had, why wouldn't the players see it coming? I said the escape mechanisms are failsafe. No, Quito is so much more than that. It is something we all want, like tapping desire."

"That's nuts and you know it!"

"Forget computers and programmes! Forget Onereal and escape mechanisms for one moment! You can even forget the sad gits and numbskull kids you have the tenacity to call players! These are not the things or the people we should be looking for! Like I said, it's bigger than that!"

Vathkrougjias slammed his fist down on the light table so hard that the roach was righted and scuttled into the depths of the flickering electronics. Makepeace, teasing a wire free from the casing of the fake cigarette, reserved comment until the light stabilised.

"I suppose you're going to tell me that 'Quito' is a mind without a body, some kind of virtual world reaper and that if we get to him, we clear the glitch and have someone eleven families can hold responsible for their 'lost' relatives? You're telling me that I've to detain someone or thing that doesn't exist?"

"Quito exists!"

"Really? Look I know you've sent reports to Onereal without my approbation. No one there's got excited about your fusion hypothesis, or whatever you've called it, why should I? It's all just badly fitted jigsaw pieces of half truths and speculation. I once had an archaeologist friend who said that just because you find two stones it doesn't necessarily mean that you've found a wall!"

"Do you have any better ideas? The process is speeding up. Rumours will snowball and unrest will set in then there will be total panic and discontent. We're looking at the beginnings of a worldwide revolt in the making, don't you see that?"

"All fuelled by theories like yours no doubt. Who knows, perhaps you could disseminate them to incite the violence just for the sheer hell of it? Maybe I should investigate you?"

Sweat beaded Vathkrougjias' brow and he wiped it away with his shirted forearm. Maybe he'd just not been explaining it clearly.

"Isn't it possible that, for whatever reason, Ethereality has gone beyond the bounds of what it was created to do?"

"Everything is possible but I still have no hard evidence and no answers to give."

"Perhaps it works like a parasite, a computerised, endoparasitic anomaly." The phrase rolled off his tongue so nicely he had to smile.

"Feeding on what? The neural nets of players? What's the vector? A parasite like a virus needs a carrier. Wouldn't we be able to trace it back to the source?"

Vathkrougjias shrugged. All he knew for certain was that he could find Quito.

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The night was fluorescent, cicadas chattered amongst the rustling leaves. Evening drinks - café society that refused to die. Ava tottered through the night sensing everything but allowing herself to feel nothing. Street vendors thrust their wares at her: silk, plastic, nick-knacks, drugs, fakes. It was all available if she only wanted it. Her forced indifference would not deter them dressed as she was in expensive clothes with intricate silver rings adorning her fingers and toes. But if they'd looked into her face they would see the shadow of doubt in her eyes which led to the self imposed void inside; vacuum-packed emotions, carefully tucked behind a mask of serenity.

The first huge drops of the monsoon rains thrummed the dust underfoot.

"Not home yet, rat-a-tat-tat, not home yet, rat-a-tat-tat. Not home yet, rat-a-tat-tat." She mumbled the mantra in her mind, the only

thing enabling her to put one foot in front of the other.

A gaggle of adolescents, drawn by the rain, came spilling and tripping out onto the pavement from the cybercafé along the street. Ava felt their longing for the kind of dreams that wouldn't fade with the sweet light of morning. Flinching as if their laughter assaulted her she mumbled her mantra with more determination.

"Mustn't let the paranoia get a strangle hold. Not home yet..."

When would this stop? She couldn't bare the sensory overload much longer.

Ahead Ava could see the vast shadowy hole of Number 32. It seemed to crawl towards her at an aching slow pace. She eventually stumbled against the door; it clicked open with the weight of her body. Her heart quickened. Slinking into the half lit foyer, the smell of urine became overwhelming as she neared the cramped lift. Her body convulsed trying to empty her stomach. She drew her jacket tightly about her to protect herself from the inconsistent stream of bile that was finally expelled. Choking on the acidic mucus, she forced her way into the lift and as she was wiping her face on her sleeve she became aware of a voice, someone talking.

*Security breach, stage one: Please identify yourself. Security breach stage one, please identify yourself.*

"I...I've a..." Even one's own name was an effort when there was no certainty where one existed, if one's experiences were real. She leaned against the mirror away from the walls that were sliding smoothly down and away.

*Security breach; stage two. Please identify yourself. Security breech; stage two, please identify yourself.*

"I...I...Ava!" Release! "It's Ava you bastard!" The mirror behind her shattered as she threw all her shoulder into it and then turned clawing at the shards of glass scratching at the camera eye beyond, trying to pick it from its socket.

As the lift slowed and she reached for the door, a million tiny bloody Avas crunched under her sandaled feet. Thankfully the partly opened packet in her pocket was still secure, her hand, slick with blood, stuck to the wrapping. Flushed and breathing deeply, she hobbled towards the door at the end of the corridor.

"Come on key, help me out here!" She muttered as she fumbled with the plastic card that would allow her entry to her sanctuary.

Her door clicked open and a familiar murkiness engulfed her. Ava released the packet onto the table and retreated to the bedroom.

*You were once happy my love. Ignorance is bliss.*

Were these fleeting thoughts hers, shared or part of some inner or outer dialogue that mingled with the shadows as she groped for comprehension in the gloom?

*You lie so still I might think you had already returned.*

Ava stared at the smooth body curled on her bed. "Your eyes are closed but I see your lashes flickering as you chase dreams more elusive than ether. What brought you to this house? What brought you to me?"

Had she said that out loud? He stirred, blinked and rolled onto his back, flinching and then smiling, his eyes swallowed her up. What would it matter to bury him in her embrace? Say 'Let me hold you tight and not worry about tomorrow.'? For the greater good she had forbidden it in their Love, Death and Religion

trip. She'd loved him as her father and child, he'd faced death and it was becoming their religion.

"My dear sweet Dream Boy, you are so beautiful, so real and untouchable; the son I'll never have; the father you'll never be. What makes you think you can help me? How can you when I can no longer distinguish between the real and the virtual, when I feel everyone else's emotions as if they were my own?"

*I know the way, trust me. Get the package.*

In the half life between waking and sleeping, she stumbled fumbling, groping her way out of slick twists of sheeting in the stench of the monsoon drenched dawn to retrieve the packet. The blood had dulled to russet on the brown paper. Inside was perhaps the answer. In her agitation, she couldn't extract the contents from the bubble wrap.

*This is what you seek. This moment, right now, doesn't it feel real? Hold onto this moment forever.*

The secure weight of his hands on her shoulders, the brush of his lips on her hair, a father's reassurance all shrouded in sweat, and filtered through with sunlight.

"Well?"

Ava held the Styrofoam block in her hand watching it turn over and over as she pulled the bubble wrap off. Within it was suspended a tiny glass dropper; the test results. Dislodging it, she hurriedly picked off the seal with her nail and then stopped.

Dream Boy nodded and she tilted her head back and squeezed the contents into her eye and read.

*It's Ethereality. A beast of a ride. It's My will.*

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*Did you ever wonder why you have desires? Did you ever go beyond that? Why do you desire the virtually unobtainable? Trust me. I can give you everything your heart desires and more. Come to me and I can make your dreams reality. I have the desire to give. I have the power to give. More than that: I give. But do you really want it? Are you really ready for what you really desire? Can you handle it?*

*It's My will.*

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Vathkrougjias opened his eyes to the floor of the temple. Under his belly the granite was cold, worn smooth though centuries of worship. He hardly dared to look up for fear that his beating heart was fooling him.

*Welcome.* The voice was resonant, filling the temple with glorious sound. *Stand at ease. Tell Me what you desire.*

He did as bidden. The temple was vast, ashlar stonework, the walls imposing upon him. He stared in awe at the expanse of nature that was afforded him from the windows; lush emerald steps, colossal mountain peaks and wild jungles all shrouded in mists that billowed up from the thundering river below.

"I want to know the truth." His voice felt insignificant but he knew he would be heard.

Vathkrougjias felt the supreme energy smile benevolently. He recognised the faces of the thirteen acolytes, a rainbow of humanity. The

two most recent recruitments spoke directly to him. First Ava rose up from her seat on the right hand side.

"I am Consciousness. I feel your need to believe. Take my hand and be aware."

On the left, Dream Boy turned his back on Vathkrougjias. Screaming in unadulterated agony, his shoulder blades split in two vertical lines to allow huge wings to unfurl from the wounds, blood beading and rolling off the snowy feathers, leaving no trace. He turned and spoke,

"I am the Guardian. I will guide you to the path of faith and lead you once you leap. Are you ready?"

Vathkrougjias reached up in supplication and felt an earth rending jolt as he was sucked into the vast and unexplored world of nature at her keenest. Ever-evolving circuits of energy surging and ebbing the flux and flow of Life.

*I am God. You have reached the fusion of civilisation, technology and nature. Ethereality. It's a beast of a ride. It is My will.*

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

N.O.A. Rawle, mother, writer, teacher and translator, regularly burns the midnight oil to get the world in her head in print. Inspired by perfection in art and nature, fuelled by passion and enthusiasm, she is addicted to writing and believes life is too precious to be wasted.

A British national located in Greece, her work has been long-listed for the AEON Award and appears in the anthology 'Girl at the End of the World' (Fox Spirit, 2014). [www.noarawle.blogspot.gr](http://www.noarawle.blogspot.gr)

# THE ASYLUM MINES

by H. Y. HILL

**H**ow in hell did he kill you?" Lil stared at the photograph of her late commanding officer.

Colonel Maria Azzuri was found dead aboard the ship two days ago. Next to her picture was the photograph of Carla Rickman. Her body was found dead thirty hours ago. There was also one more: John Sloane. His time of death was seventeen hours ago.

All three victims had their photographs hanging on Lil's wall. All three of them had two bullets lodged in their chests.

"It must've been him." Lil's eyes stared at the three photographs. Her teeth chewed the nail of her right thumb. Her left arm hugged her torso. "But how did he do it?"

Currently, he was locked in the brig. Lil had checked the footage ten minutes ago and he was still there. Cameras don't lie and the recording showed that he had remained in the brig since the beginning of the journey, wrapped in a straightjacket. But no one else on this ship could have committed murder. They had all been profiled and examined and were deemed safe. He was the only one with a criminal record.

His name was Marco Neski. He was a smuggler, notorious for being the

slipperiest of all wanted criminals. He had been caught. He was in the brig. Three people had been killed.

Marco Neski was being transported to Fincake City on Mars. However, he was not supposed to be on this ship. This was a mining ship belonging to Royal Star Mining Ltd (better known as 'RSML'), which was used to transport the mineral, Sorossium, and the employees of RSML from Asteroid-13 in the Asteroid Belt to Fincake City. But three space cops had crashed their ship onto Asteroid-13. As a result, a low security mining ship was used to transport a dangerous criminal.

They had left Asteroid-13 three days ago. Three people had been killed. "And why these three?" Lil's right fingers scratched her chin.

Colonel Maria Azzuri was the Head of Security for this operation to Asteroid-13. Carla Rickman was a geologist. John Sloane was a miner. There were no reasons for them to ever cross paths professionally.

Their personal histories suggested no connections whatsoever. Lil had examined them. Carla Rickman and John Sloane were born and raised on Mars but in different cities. Colonel Azzuri hailed from Milan, Earth. Carla Rickman attended Whedon University in Tokyo,

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## One-third of the human population of Mars were survivors of the Cort Plague. Lil herself belonged to that group.

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Earth at a time when Major Azzuri, as she was then, was assigned to Venus. During the same period, John Sloane was mining titanium in Diacard, Mars. This operation was the first time all three of them were in the same place and shared the same circumstances.

Other than their employment with RSML and their involvement in the operation to Asteroid-13, another similarity that they shared was that they were all survivors of the Cort Plague that struck northern Mars ten years ago. But Lil had discounted that similarity. One-third of the human population of Mars were survivors of the Cort Plague. Lil herself belonged to that group. An inhibitor microchip had been planted in the left side of her brain to counter the Cort Plague virus. All survivors had it.

Lil also couldn't find a common link between the three victims and anyone else on the ship. She had interrogated, or read transcripts of interrogations, of all three hundred RSML employees. She had also interrogated the three space cops who had arrested Marco Neski. Some of them had ties to one or two of the victims but none had a connection to all three.

Lil scratched her head.

RING! It was the doorbell to her room. Lil looked at the small monitor at the side of the door. It showed three men. They were the three space cops. Lil stared at the small monitor. Two of the space cops

were engaging in an animated conversation. The other one, who was standing in front of the other two, simply waited.

Lil knew this particular space cop. His name was Officer Carl Summers of the Aberclom City Police Depart. Lil was attached to the ACPD a few years back before she became an employee of RSML. Officer Carl Summers was her partner then. They worked well together. Lil had some good experiences with the ACPD.

But she wanted to forget everything about Aberclom City.

RING!

Lil reached into her pocket and pulled out a small remote. She pressed a button and the door opened.

"Why would the military build a research facility where archaeologists were digging?" One of the space cops' voice darted into Lil's room.

"I don't care what the reason is," the other space cop replied, "but it is not to research Ancient Martian Tech!"

"Fellas," Officer Carl Summers snapped. "Shut it!"

They entered her room. Carl was holding a tray and on it was a plate of spaghetti and meatballs. "Hey Lil," he greeted. "Didn't see you at dinner. Thought you

might be hungry.”

Lil nodded. “Thanks. Just put it on the table.”

Carl did as Lil requested. “So, um, how’s the investigation going?”

Lil returned to staring at the photographs of the three victims. She shook her head.

Carl was looking at the photographs too. “Listen, Lil,” he began. “We feel a little bad about this whole murder spree thing. We were the ones who brought Neski here. Let us help.”

“You finally realize that bringing that bastard on board was a stupid idea?”

“Hey!” One of the space cops, Officer Ben Abramovich, stepped forward. “We -”

Carl had his hand up to stop Abramovich from acting any further. He returned to Lil. “Look, we’ve explained. Neski is a big time smuggler, wanted by many nations on Earth and on Mars. He’s slippery as a snake and we caught him. What the hell do you expect us to do after we crashed on Asteroid-13? Just leave him there? We need to bring him back to Mars for trial.”

“Or kill him. None of this would have happened if you did that.”

“Vigilante justice is not true justice, Lil.”

“Yeah,” Abramovich interjected. “I wouldn’t expect a mercenary for a mining company to understand that.”

Lil turned her body to face the space cop. She was ready to hit him had Carl not been standing between them. “You want to bring that big time smuggler back for justice?” Lil shook her head. “I know Marco Neski. I’ve interrogated him before.

But that’s not Marco Neski in there. Not anymore. Something messed up his mind. Something turned him psycho. He claims to have five persons’ memories implanted into his brain and from the way he’s acting, he seems like five different people. That’s a real psycho and somehow, that psycho is killing people on this ship without getting out of the brig, without getting out of his straightjacket!”

“Lil,” Carl tried to calm her down.

“Look,” Lil said, “if you want to help me, just stay out of my way. You were a lousy detective, Carl. That’s why Aberclom City PD demoted you.”

The look on Carl’s face made Lil regret her outburst. She looked at the spaghetti and meatballs Carl had brought for her. It was more comfortable to look at it than to look at him.

“You used to be a nice girl, Lil,” Carl said. “I came here to offer some help, to take some of the burden off of you and you told me to screw off? What the heck happened to you?”

Lil glared at him. “You know damn well what happened to me. Looking at you reminds me of it.”

“Oh, screw you! I’ve not wronged you at all! Back when you were a space cop -”

“Aberclom,” Lil interjected. “Back when I was a space cop, I experienced Aberclom.”

Carl’s angry mouth turned into a frown. His eyes became filled with pity. “Lil...” He tried to sound comforting. It wasn’t working. “That was seven years ago. Move on. Mars has.” Carl turned around. “Come on boys. Let’s be useful

somewhere else.” He turned to leave. Abramovich showed Lil his middle finger before following Carl out of her room.

Lil walked to the table and stared at the spaghetti and meatballs. “Aberclom...,” she whispered to herself. Her memory opened its floodgates. Innocent screams of terror echoed in her mind’s ears. Gunshots and explosions were like swarms of locusts and they were too frequent and too deafening. Mountains of corpses were piled up in the streets. Their blood formed countless puddles. Blood tributaries flowed into crimson pools. The blood looked like the bolognaise sauce on the spaghetti. The stink of burnt gunpowder and roasted corpses smelled like burnt meatballs.

Lil left her room. Her memory of the Aberclom tragedy flooded her thoughts. She needed to close the floodgate within her mind but the current of memory was too strong. The screams, the gunshots, the explosions, the blood... the more Lil tried to avert them, the more prominently they played in her mind.

She was a space cop back then, attached to the ACPD. Her assignment was straightforward: to track and arrest a psychopathic mass-murderer known as Crowe.

And Crowe was indeed in Aberclom City.

Seismic explosions caused an earthquake that sank Aberclom City fifty feet into the ground. It was Crowe’s doing. But that wasn’t all. Crowe had also taken control of Aberclom City’s power centre. From there, he controlled the energy supply of the entire city. Worse still, Crowe had complete control of the force-field that enveloped the city, the very thing that

separated breathable air from Martian air. Consequently, this gave Crowe control over all air travel in and out of Aberclom City.

But that was just the beginning of the catastrophe. The explosions that caused the earthquake opened up the doors out of Tartarus Maximum Security Prison, allowing all the murderers, the terrorists and the rapists to go free. Crowe had planned that. He had a plan for them. He announced to them a contest. The prize was all the money in the Aberclom City treasury. To add to the incentive, he had also promised the winner complete control of Aberclom City. All they had to do was fulfil the contest’s objective: the person who kills the most people wins.

There were screams. There were so many screams.

“Lt. Conroy,” a voice interrupted Lil’s nightmare.

Lil stopped in her tracks. She found herself at the entrance to the brig. She didn’t remember the walk here, or even wanting to come here. Lil had just wanted to get out of her room, to go for a walk. Maybe, she had thought, she could have taken a break from the case. But here she was.

The ship’s Chief Medical Officer stood before Lil. The door into the brig behind him was being closed by one of the guards.

“Dr Busola,” Lil acknowledged him. “You just met with the prisoner?”

“I have, yes.” His eyes looked beyond Lil. “But I am no closer to discovering anything about his mental condition. It is



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**He's a Cort Plague survivor. It should have shown when we ran the first check-up but his inhibitor microchip isn't of the standard issue. It's planted deeper within the brain and at first glance, seems highly customized.**

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anomalous. I have never encountered such a brain, mentally or physically. There are no ways to verify his claims."

"Keep working on it, doctor. Anything else?"

"He's a Cort Plague survivor. It should have shown when we ran the first check-up but his inhibitor microchip isn't of the standard issue. It's planted deeper within the brain and at first glance, seems highly customized. If I can have the microchip for study, perhaps I can verify his memory implant/ memory sharing claim but extracting it could be fatal."

"Agreed, but no one on this ship has the authority to make that call. Keep me updated, doctor."

Lil entered the brig. Inside, there were six cells. One of them was guarded. Lil motioned for the guard to open the cell door. Lil stepped into it.

The cell looked more like one belonging to an asylum cell than to a prison. There were no windows. The walls were padded with white cushions. Bright white light emanated from the bulbs that were built into the ceiling.

Sitting in the far right corner was a man wrapped in a white straightjacket. Marco Neski. Smuggler. Criminal.

Murderer.

"I've missed you so much, Lillian dear," he

said. He was grinning. His tone was one of a long-lost lover. It sounded like a mocking.

"Who are you today, Neski?" Lil asked. "A technical engineer? A colonel in the USAF?" Those were the previous 'personalities' that Neski had portrayed. Lil had noticed that his manner of speaking was different on both occasions. Adding to the fact that Neski seemed to have all the knowledge relevant to those two professions added some credibility to his claim that someone had tempered with his mind and implanted other people's memories within it. But it also made it difficult for Lil to obtain any useful information from Neski's mind. "Which one are you?"

"I am me, my love. Who else could I be?" He chuckled. "And today's a very special day, you know." He grinned from ear to ear. His eyes stared at her, seemingly full of love, as if she was the only person who ever mattered. "Happy Ordinary Day, babe. It's ordinary days like this with you that I treasure the most. It's these kind of days where you are yourself the most and I get to love the truly, genuinely, every day you."

"You're an actor today?"

"Ugh, you take my expression of love as just an act? How could you? I truly do love you and you question my love?" His eyes gazed at her, seemingly hurt. But there

was something odd about his eyes. Neski had mismatched eyes: right side blue and left side green. Usually, Lil recalled, his left eye was dark brown.

"Let's cut to the chase, Neski. I'm in no mood for jokes. I know you killed Colonel Azzuri, Carla Rickman and John Sloane. No one -"

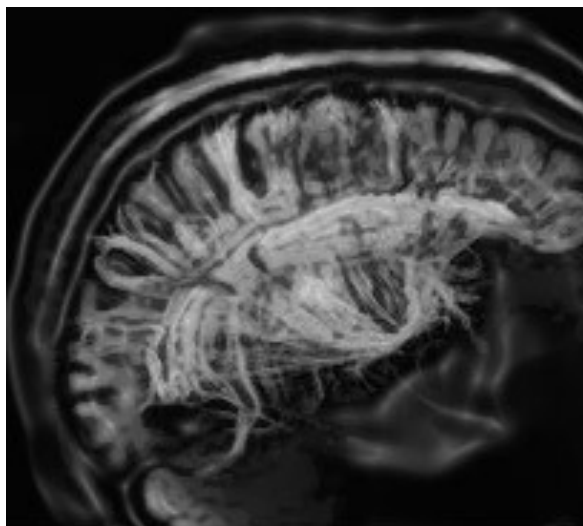
"Aren't you tired of asking me that? I've been in here the whole time. In a straight-jacket. Two guards and two doors between me and outside."

"You still haven't answered the charges. Did you kill them?"

"Sweetheart, come on." Neski chuckled. "If I said 'yes,' then I'm going to have to come up with a story of how I did it." He shook his head. "I don't think I have that great an imagination. This host is a smuggler, not a writer."

"This host?"

"Ugh, I keep telling you, darling. Someone implanted other people's memories into this head. Do you know how confusing



things get up there? One's memories define his or her personality. I have at least five other people's memories in my noggin, some of them very different from each other that my personality can't make up its mind on which person to be! I'm in Marco Neski's body, but am I really him? Or am I Harriet Tang, a technical engineer working for Pineapple Software plc., or am I Lewis Alvarez, a colonel in the USAF who goes on intergalactic exploration missions through a circular device that creates wormholes from one world to another? Or am -"

"I don't care," Lil snapped, "who you are or who you're supposed to be. Have your identity crisis when I'm not here but whenever I'm here, you will cooperate with our -"

The door behind Lil opened. A sergeant entered. He was panting, looking pale and ghastly. "Lieutenant..." He was out of breath. "Dr Busola... he's... he's dead. In the in... infirmary. Two bullets... chest."

Instinctively, Lil looked at Neski. The criminal shrugged. "I've been here with you the whole time." But something was odd about Neski. It was his mismatched eyes. The left eye wasn't green. It was dark brown.

"Sergeant," Lil said. "Take me to the infirmary."

"Yes, sir. But there's... there's more. The... the bodies... Colonel Azzuri's and the others... their bodies are... are missing."

Lil's thoughts burst into shock.

"Ooh, missing corpses," Neski mocked. "Maybe they reanimated themselves, killed the good doctor and are about to go on a killing spree." He laughed maniacally. Or more aptly, he shrieked maniacally.

Lil stormed out of the cell and made her way to the infirmary. She saw Dr. Busola's corpse on the infirmary floor. Just like the sergeant said, there were two bullet wounds in his chest. Two members of her investigation team were already there. They briefed Lil on what they saw but the shock in Lil's mind barely digested them.

She then hurried to the makeshift morgue. A member of her team was there. He showed Lil where the three corpses were supposed to be. With her own eyes, she could see that they were not there.

"Find the bodies. I'll be in my room," Lil informed her subordinate. "No one is to disturb me unless it is extremely urgent."

Before going to her quarters, Lil made a quick stop at the ships' human resources office and requested Dr Busola's file. Then, in her room, she studied the doctor's file. She spent hours reading it, cross-referencing it with the other victim's files, hoping to find a connection. She had cross-checked them before. She found nothing then. Lil hoped to find something now.

But she found nothing.

Lil threw the papers in rage. She roared an anguished scream. "What are you trying to do? How are you doing it?" she shouted at an imagined figure of Neski.

Her breathing was heavy. "It has to be you, right? It can't be anyone else on this ship. Can it? And the killings can't be random. Can it?"

Lil walked to her bed and sunk herself onto it. She stared at the ceiling and exhaled loudly. "What is going on here? No one else on this ship is capable of murder. They've been profiled by RSML as sane and low-risk. Most of them have confirmed alibis. The ones who don't have confirmed alibis are vouched for. But Neski has an alibi too."

She got up and walked to the desk. She grabbed the coffeepot but it felt empty. Lil opened her desk for sachets but just like her luck, they had run out. She groaned before exiting her room to go to the mess hall.

The corridor was quiet and empty. Lil hoped that she won't run into anyone she knew, especially Major Visser, the current commanding officer. That man would ask for a status update and when Lil tells him that she was nowhere near solving the case, he would give her a good scolding. The major was convinced that he would be the next victim.

The corridor was empty, so far.

Lil stopped in her tracks. There was a turn a few feet ahead of her. Her eyes spotted something out of place on the floor. A chill crawled up her spine.

It was a puddle of blood. It extended to around the corner.

Lil reached for her gun but her holster was empty. She cursed her luck. With slow, cautious steps, she approached the turn. Lil hoped that there was no one there. At least, no murderer was pointing a gun at her direction. But Lil expected someone to be there. She could picture Neski waiting there, holding a gun, pointing it at her. Through his sadistic clown grin he would say a punch line and put two bullets in her chest.

The turn was approaching. Lil peeked.

There was no one there.

No one alive, but there were three bleeding corpses. One of them was a guard. Lil searched him and grabbed his gun. "Neski," she uttered and headed for the brig. She pointed her gun forward, on alert, ready to shoot Neski should he ambush her.

The door to the brig was wide open. No one was guarding it. However, there were bloodstains on the wall and the floor. The bloodstains appeared to be consistent with gunshots but there were no stains on the floor to indicate that any corpses had been dragged away.

Lil entered the brig.

But there were no corpses there.

Lil tightened her grip on the gun. She swallowed her spit through the knot in her throat.

The door to Neski's cell was open.

"Oh, great hell," she cursed. Lil went in.

Neski was missing. The cell was no longer of pure white colour. There were bloodstains aplenty smeared on its

cushioned walls and floor. But the bloodstains on the wall opposite the door caught Lil's attention. In blood, Neski had left her a message.

#### CARGO HOLD, MY LOVELY LIEUTENANT

"You're setting a trap for me. Is that it?" Lil thought aloud. But she knew she had to go to the cargo hold regardless of whether she wanted to or not. They were in a mining ship in space. Mars was eleven days away. If she ignored his demand, Neski would come to her anyway. "Best get this over with..." Lil exhaled.

She made a detour on her way to the cargo hold, making a stop at the armoury. Along the way, Lil saw more puddles of blood and bloodstains. There were a few corpses, but some were obviously missing. The blood puddles and bloodstains indicated that corpses should be lying around but they were not there. Even outside the armoury, blood puddles and bloodstains were present but the corpses were missing.

Within the armoury, weapons were missing too.

"Goddamn it!" Reluctantly, Lil turned around and made her way to the cargo hold.

There, she discovered what became of the missing corpses.

They were standing. Some stood guard. Most of them were walking around. They were working, carrying things. Some of the corpses were handling the Sorossium that was mined on Asteroid-13. They were zombie labourers of an operation.

Lil's hands trembled. She could hardly

believe her eyes. She took steps forward, staring at everything and everyone around her, stupefied and terror-stricken. The zombies were paying her no attention. Their eyes were lifeless. Their skins were pale. Their jaws hung by their skull. Saliva drooled out of their mouths. They walked slowly, dragging their feet every step of the way.

Lil recognized some of them. She saw Colonel Azzuri working as part of a group, lifting something very heavy. Lil also recognized Officer Abramovich and John Sloane. Lil turned her head to look elsewhere. She spotted two members of her investigation team, dead and working.

Suddenly, someone grabbed her from behind. Lil dropped her gun. By the time her reflexes kicked in, her attacker had his arms around her neck. He had also neutralized her arms and legs. Her body had been twisted in a way that she couldn't move at all. Lil couldn't even see her attacker.

"My lovely lieutenant!" whispered an eerily happy, familiar voice. "It's so, so, soooooo, good that you got my message!" Neski walked passed Lil and turned to face her. "I love that beautiful face of yours." He caressed her cheeks. "I'm extremely surprised that a woman of your beauty is a security worker for a mining company. With your looks and your curves, you could be a very highly paid and desirable glamour model whom those sportsmen and celebrities love to date, spoil and use."

Lil wanted to say something, but her attacker's arm around her neck made it difficult for her jaw to move.

"Anyway," Neski continued, "since you've

been so persistent in your investigation, it's extremely unfair if I don't tell you how all this happened!" He spread his arms theatrically. His tone and posture carried an air of triumph. "Time for a cliché: I'll give you my big villain speech. Once I'm done, if you're capable, feel free to escape and prevent my genius plan from doing what it's supposed to do.

"These slaves you see around you..." Neski looked around and pointed at his 'labour force' with his eyes. Lil couldn't help notice his mismatched eyes. The left eye was green this time. "They're very dead indeed. I killed them. Then, I, as the puppeteer, turned them into puppets to do all this work for me.

"But how are you controlling them?" he questioned sarcastically. "Oh my, that is a complicated issue. Let's start with how I killed them.

"You see, darling, I only had to kill one." He showed one finger for emphasis. "I killed Colonel Azzuri. It was simple enough. She didn't die on this ship. Well, she did, but it was before the journey began. Back on Asteroid-13, she came to my cell, before I was put into that sparkling white one. I didn't know why she sent the guards away but that gave me a golden opportunity. I took her gun and shot her. Twice. In the chest. Then, I brought her back to life.

"But how did you do that? Dead people can't come alive?"

"She's not alive, sweetheart. She's dead. I just control her like a puppet.

"But how?"

"Ancient Martian technology. They're real,

not just urban legends. Archaeologists found them somewhere outside of Aberclom City. There was this one machine that allowed people to transfer their memories to another person's mind. I have to confess, my love, that I abused that machine. I transferred five or so memories, including my own, into Marco Neski's mind. That many memories in only one mind is just... terrible. So much overloading. It makes you go all psycho." He made a swirling motion with his right forefinger next to his right temple.

"Anyway, back to my villain speech. The Drillian government on Mars, you know that one small but powerful country there, they modified one of those ancient Martian machines during the Cort Plague to create that little microchip that keeps at bay whatever virus it is that caused the pandemic. Because of its success, ancient Martian tech became so, so, sooo valuable that I just have to get my hands on those toys! But sadly, the Drillian military was hiding them in their research facility just outside of Aberclom City. So, to distract the Drillian military and the ACPD, I arranged the Aberclom City tragedy. Sure, people died, a whole city destroyed, a whole government crippled, but hey, I got my ancient Martian tech!" Neski's smile was overflowing with self-appreciation.

"And after getting my hands on those techs, guess what I found? A microchip that allowed its wearer to control minds! And guess what? The microchip that the Drillian government thought was suppressing the Cort disease? It was actually the receiver chip for that mind control device! So lucky!

"But where's that device now, the one emitting the mind control waves?"

Neski tapped his cranium. His smirk gained a triumphant cockiness. "Such good fortune! So many Cort plague survivors on this ship! And what luck that it's carrying so much unrefined Sorossium. Could you imagine what I can do with this much unrefined Sorossium? Endless possibilities!

"God, I wished I had planned all of this from the very beginning!"

The psychopathic murderer took in a deep breath, taking in the sweet scent of the moment. Then, he pulled out a gun and aimed it at Lil's chest. "You're a Cort plague survivor, aren't you, sweetie?"

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

"H.Y. Hill is a budding storyteller currently trapped in the body of a budding lawyer. He is in his mid-twenties and he is trying his hardest to fulfil his quest to overcome his lawyer self in order for the trapped storyteller within can rise and achieve his true destiny and spread stories to readers worldwide."

# THE COMMISSION

by Richard Farren Barber



I stared up at the ceiling as the man walked onto the stage. Above my head the plaster roiled and bubbled, cracking away where the damp had worked under the surface. I shuffled and stretched my hands to try and exorcise the cramp that grew amongst my thumb and forefinger.

"If you could take your place on the mark," Frederick said, his voice echoing through the theatre.

The man walked up to the silver cross taped on the floor and then looked at us. He was probably in his early forties, but had the rough-hewn look of someone who had spent most of their life working outdoors. His hair was brown, shading to grey at the edges. His chin was covered with day-old stubble.

"Here?"

"That's fine," Frederick said. "Please begin as soon as you feel comfortable."

The man stared down the trestle table towards me. "You taking this down? Keeping a record of what I say?"

I nodded. That just about summed up my role.

"Mind you take note, because I don't intend to repeat myself." He looked around the old theatre, at its patched crimson drapes and the screen with flaps of canvas hanging like an open mouth. "Why'd you choose this place anyway?"

I had been wondering the same thing. Maybe it had been chosen for the atmosphere, maybe it had been cheap;

with Frederick it was sometimes hard to tell. Over the last six months he'd dragged us from dump to fleapit and back again. When I'd read about The Commission it had seemed exciting, perhaps even glamorous. I'd quickly realised the truth was a lot more mundane.

"You have a tale for us, Mr Pearce?" Frederick asked.

"Yeah." The man moved forward, closer to the desk.

"If you could remain on the mark it would be most helpful."

The man looked surprised, but returned to the silver cross. I think Frederick did it deliberately to keep them off balance. I think he believed it made them more receptive.

I made a brief flurry of notes on the form in front of me, background stuff.

Witness: Phil Pearce.

Description: Late forties. Unshaven. Deep scars across his hands.

Category: Dead girl.

He began to speak and I picked up the Dictaphone and clicked it on. I watched through the plastic window as the wheels turned, pushing magnetic tape round and round.

"This happened about two years ago. I'm in the removals business and we was called to this house over the back of the Arboretum – one of those three storey affairs they usually turn into flats. Well this bloke had died and we was called in to clear it out. The place was crammed with stuff – chipboard bookshelves and MFI cupboards. But it's what people want to buy so it's what we collect.

"Most of the crap went straight into the skip. I've been doing this job nearly ten years and it still amazes me what some people

keep: Newspapers going back donkeys years, rooms piled high with old furniture, three legged chairs and drawers with the handles missing. This guy had a drawer full of used matches. What was the point in that?

"Anyway the interesting stuff, what little there was of it, we quickly stuck in the van. While Pete emptied the bathroom I agreed to check out the cellar. Usually just a load of rusting paint cans and toothless hacksaws. But you gotta check.

"The light wasn't working because the leccy had been turned off. I went down the first few steps. It was cold and damp down there, you could taste it at the back of your throat. An earthy smell."

He took a step forward and Frederick cleared his throat. Phil Pearce stepped back onto his mark.

I nodded at his description. I could breathe the air in that cellar just as the man described it. Wet and cloying.

"Those houses aren't far from the cemetery. Pete said they were built on part of the graveyard, but I didn't believe that. At the bottom of the steps the stone gave way to soil; black and rich, like the house was plumbed into the dirt. I took out my lighter and figured I'd take a quick shuffy. The ground seemed to swallow the light, suck it in and give nothing back. And I ain't scared of the dark or nothing but..."

The witness looked directly at me.

"You cold in here?" He shivered. He looked up to the high ceiling with its faded decorations. "Anyway the lighter became too hot to hold and I dropped it. I hunkered down, more or less blind, trying to find it.

"My fingers brushed loose soil. That close to the ground the smell was even stronger, like the earth had recently been



turned over. I scrabbled around in the dirt. Maybe I should of gone back to the van to get another torch, but that took time and we had another job to go to.

"My fingers touched something soft and fleshy. I jerked my hand away, but it was too late because I could feel it on my skin. The tips of my fingers were slick and greasy."

The man shivered again.

The little red eye on the tape recorder winked to black. Through the small plastic window I could see the length of tape snarl up around the spools. I began to make notes. I turned over the page and carried on writing as the man spoke.

It seemed darker in the theatre. I wondered how many of the others noticed. All of them probably. Even though the man was only ten feet in front of me it was hard to see him. His face was covered in shadows despite the brash fluorescent strips that shone onto the stage. One of those strips, directly overhead, momentarily grew brighter – pouring light over the whole theatre floor and picking out patched-up seats and the dust-heavy air. It burnt out with a loud clink, leaving a dark pool in the middle of the room. I looked up at the lozenge of shadows amongst the folds of the theatre's ceiling.

The witness looked up and shuffled on his mark. There was a long silence before he spoke next. "Anyway," the man continued, "I was still looking for my lighter when the door at the top of the stairs opened. Grey light slipped down each step until it reached me. I saw my lighter and picked it up. The plastic casing was still hot, but I stuffed it into the pocket of my jeans and hurried for the steps. I could see a figure at the top and I called out, "Thanks, Pete." When there was no reply I raised my head.

"Standing in the open door was a little

girl."

Stuck at the end of the table with the darkness crowding in, I felt alone. I stared out into the theatre and in that darkness I saw a shadow, the gauzy outline of a girl. Maybe it was just the man's story. But it was midday in August and despite the lights above our heads the room was as cold and as dark as December.

"I was scared, I tell you now and I ain't ashamed to admit it." The man's voice came out of the darkness and I stopped trying to find him. I watched the girl, her shape becoming stronger. Solid. She moved closer to the table, didn't walk or float, she was just closer. I was trembling, by then my body had the shakes running through it.

"Hell, I was scared," the man said. "I called out, 'That you, Pete?' and my voice fell flat against the walls, no echo, nothing. And after a second I wasn't even sure that I'd shouted. She came closer, moving down the steps. There were twelve steps and each one brought her a little closer to me. When she was three steps from the bottom I could of reached out and touched her."

And if he turned around, I thought, what would he think, because this girl, his ghost, was standing just beyond his shoulder. Instead he shivered and carried on with his tale.

"I asked her, 'Where are your parents?' She opened her mouth and I figured, she's going to tell me something, prove she ain't really a ghost. Instead she screamed, her voice filling the small area, bouncing around within the stairwell so that there was layer upon layer of her screaming.

"And nothing normal, nothing human. Her voice was like death. It was like hearing death."

The man was silent. The group behind

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## I watched as the young girl stood behind the Witness, clearer than the man himself. Her white body was lit by an inner light.

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the table waited. I set down my pen beside the pad of scribbled notes and the plastic click was the loudest sound in the theatre.

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I watched as the young girl stood behind the Witness, clearer than the man himself. Her white body was lit by an inner light. She looked up at the man in front of us and reached out to touch him.

Frederick asked the question.

"What did you do next?"

I could sense Frederick sitting on my left and I wondered what he was thinking. What he was feeling. How many years of his life had he given over to the search? How many towns had we slogged through, listening to hour after hour of tepid ghost stories, each as ethereal and vague as the creatures they tried to describe. And now the proof was here in front of us.

"Wait!" Frederick said.

The man looked up. His face seemed to float out from the darkness and I was struck by the image of a dead body floating up from the depths of a frozen ocean. There was nothing in his eyes. Nothing alive anyway.

Nobody in the room took a breath.

"Don't leave us," Frederick said.

I saw confusion seep into the witnesses' eyes.

The young girl paused, her hand stretched out to touch the witness. She looked at Frederick and then down the line to the panel, stopping at me. The air in the theatre dropped ten degrees.

I was supposed to remember. I was there to record, but when she looked at me she didn't stop at the surface. She looked into me. Into my soul.

Her eyes were discs of spun silver. I wanted to scream, but I was too afraid to make any sound.

Overhead another string of lights grew momentarily brighter and then winked out. Another pool of blackness poured down onto the theatre's stage.

And then another and another. The only sound in the theatre was the soft metallic clink as each light failed.

Until the only light in the theatre came from the little girl. She glowed with a milk-white flame. Cold as frost.

"What do you want?" Frederick asked. I thought I heard a tremor in his voice.

The girl did not reply, but she came closer to the table. I felt my body shiver with cold and fear. I wanted to flee from that place. We had caused this. We had sought out this girl and now she had found us.

"How can we help?" Frederick asked.

The girl reached forward. "Cold."

I noticed a second figure behind her. Another spectre dressed in flecks of pale light.

What have we done?

Did Frederick know? Did he see the figures creeping towards us? Not just one or two now, but a crowd. A gang. A mob.

What have we done?

The girl was standing just beyond the edge of the table now and the others gathered

behind her. A chair scraped against the wooden floor.

The girl stretched forwards, reaching for Frederick's face.

And I ran. I pushed my chair back and I ran.

I raced for the fire doors at the back of the hall, not daring to look over my shoulder. Sounds broke over me like a wave; screaming, the crash of chairs and tables cast aside. I reached the fire doors, slammed down the lever, and threw them open.

Sunlight slashed into the theatre.

I didn't look behind me. I ran.

And I haven't stopped running since.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Richard Farren Barber was born in Nottingham in July 1970. After studying in London he returned to the East Midlands. He lives with his wife and son and works as a Development Services Manager for a local university.

He has written over 200 short stories and has had short stories published in *Alt-Dead*, *Alt-Zombie*, *Blood Oranges*, *Derby Scribes Anthology*, *Derby Telegraph*, *ePocalypse – Tales from the End*, *Gentle Reader*, *Murky Depths*, *Midnight Echo*, *Midnight Street*, *Morpheus Tales*, *MT Biopunk Special*, *MT Urban Horror Special*, *Night Terrors II*, *Siblings*, *The House of Horror*, *Trembles*, and broadcast on BBC Radio Derby and Erewash Sound.

Richard was sponsored by Writing East Midlands to undertake a mentoring scheme in which he was supported in the development of his novel "*Bloodie Bones*." His novella "*The Power of Nothing*" was published by Damnation Books in September 2013 and his next novella "*The Sleeping Dead*" will be published in August 2014 by DarkFuse.

His website can be found here [www.richardfarrenbarber.co.uk](http://www.richardfarrenbarber.co.uk)

## SUBMISSIONS

That is all the fiction for Issue Four. Thank you to all the authors who submitted their work and we hope you enjoyed it. If you have a story that you would like to see appear in a future issue then please have a look at the submissions guidelines on the web site:

[fdezine.fever-dreams.co.uk/Submissions.html](http://fdezine.fever-dreams.co.uk/Submissions.html)

# AND THE NAME OF THE GAME IS...

## HOW GAMIFICATION CHANGED THE WORLD

by Al Thomas

**Y**ou have probably heard the term 'gamification' being thrown about

online and wondered about this new concept. The truth of the matter is that gamification is not new, it has merely re-entered the spotlight. Its like human's getting excited about the invention of flight but birds have been capable of flight for a long, long time.

So just how long has gamification been going on? What is it? Why is it so important? Gamification is about playing games and integrating that into your work and home life. In 2009, Rob Carter, chief information officer at FedEx, told *Time Magazine* that the best thing young people can do to prepare themselves for future the business workplace of the future was to place MMO, *World of Warcraft*. In a TED talk on gaming the very next year, Jane McGonigal of The Institute of the Future took this argument even further by arguing that the survival of the human species depends on this kind of gamification. Her argument centred around the premise that in real life we become bored, anxious, stressed and overwhelmed too easily. In games, by contrast, we are focused on 'Epic' wins and are driven to achieve them.

These skills could create a far better life experience and increase our problem solving skills when translated to real world situations.

In his book *Outliers*, Malcolm Gladwell claims that it takes 10,000 hours of practice to become an expert in something. When she gave her talk in 2010, 5.93 million years of collective time had been spent on resolving the problems and issues of the fictional world of Azeroth (the universe in which *World of Warcraft* is set). She estimated that in a country with a strong gaming culture, such as the United States or the United Kingdom, the average person will spend 10,000 hours playing online games by the age of 21. That approximates to the amount of time spent in school, excluding further and higher education. In other words, our culture is now creating young adults equipped with two types of education. One is personal academic achievement, the other is an expertise in collaborative online gaming. What does that mean? What are we becoming as a species if we spend all our time in the gaming world?

McGonigal listed four key areas that gamification has changed and is changing us as individuals.:

### 1. Urgent Optimism

Extreme personal motivation and the desire to tackle obstacles under the belief

that we have a reasonable chance of success.

## 2. Social Fabric

Collaborative gaming leads to shared beliefs, co-operation and trust.

## 3. Blissful Productivity

The average gamer spends as much time gaming as others would spend on a part time job. That is around 20 hours. Gaming is not, as some people believe, a laid back and easy exercise. It is a hard and applied endeavour.

## 4. Epic Meaning

Gamers love to be involved in epic stories. The *World of Warcraft* wiki is huge. Five million people visit the site every month and it is the largest wiki in the world apart from Wikipedia itself.

McGonigal argues that these four abilities or 'super-powers' help to create 'super empowered hopeful individuals'. Gamers believe that they are capable of changing the world—so long as the world they inhabit it a virtual one. How does that translate in real terms though?

This is where the talk got really interesting. The rise of online gaming is important to this argument but you have to go back a lot further than the last twenty years in order to find the roots of gamification. McGonigal uses the works of Herodotus to claim that dice games were invented almost 2000 years ago during a famine in a part of the world that is now called Turkey. You may be thinking you know where this is going, but this isn't *The Hunger Games*. A kingdom wide policy stated that people could eat on one day of the week and on the next day they were required to play games. The engaging nature of the dice games distracted the population from the fact that they were slowly starving to death. She argues that many gamers do this today, taking to games to escape the realities of life over which we sense we

have no sense of control. After eighteen years, the famine hadn't ended and so the country decided to play one last game. The country was divided in half with the winners going on an epic adventure and the losers staying behind to survive as best they could.

This may seem like a bizarre way to decide the future of a country and its people, but if you pick it apart then it makes sense. Over eighteen years of collaborative, intense focus and fun, the social fabric had strengthened. The ideas of adventure, trust and teamwork had been woven into the culture. They were ready for an epic adventure and playing games with dice made from sheep's bones had prepared them for this. The people who went on the adventure did very well, and their descendants did even better. In fact, out of this culture based on games developed an even greater civilisation: Rome.

*World of Warcraft* was created nine years ago, and it is far more complex than any dice game. McGonigal argues that people who have played collaborative games over this time are now equipped to do something similar to this ancient people. She argues that if half of us were to spend an hour a day in the world of games that had real life applications, we could solve many of our current global problems. At the Institute of the Future, McGonigal has created a number of games. One is called *World without Oil* and it places players in a virtual realty world of oil shortage. It is presented to the players as if it was real. They are given real-time information about the lack of oil in their area and must decide for themselves how to handle the consequences. They piloted the game in 2007 and have tracked the players since then. The strategies in the game taught the players how to live without oil and became part of the daily lives of many of the players. Theoretically if we all played this game then we could reduce our reliance on oil significantly.

How does this all relate to you? Well, if a simple game can save a civilisation and help with an energy crisis, it should be able to help you achieve your life goals. The chances are that you have already succumbed to the draw of gamification. In simple terms every time you buy a game, book or DVD on a 'buy one get one free' offer then you are indulging this urge. You buy one item that you want and gamble on the second item. Occasionally you will find two items you really want and feel like you have 'won' but on other occasions you settle for an item that you are less certain about in the hope that you will 'win'.

Social Media is another example of gamification. First came the 'if we can get 100 followers then...' groups. Simple contests that test for popular ideas and common beliefs. These were then followed by the shares and retweets competition, and then latterly by the hashtag, in an attempt to hit the trending topics.

Crowdsourcing devices such as Kickstarter.com and Unbound.co.uk, where you can get start-up capital for your

business by asking for pledges, are another way that gamification has infiltrated our lives. These pledges can be for different amounts, ranging from t-shirts and e-books all the way up to super-limited edition items. The top pledges are often so expensive that nobody buys it and so a trend has risen in creating really unusual pledges: a romantic dinner for two at an Edinburgh flat with my pet pig, Rodney. Once you have determined your pledges all you have to do is set a date by which you want to raise the money. If you raise the money in time then you will go ahead with your business. If not then the money is refunded. When you consider the state of the economy and the likelihood of borrowing start-up capital from a bank, this can be an appealing option. Even big names like Ellen Datlow and Seth Godwin are doing it. They raised money for their projects in mere hours using Kickstarter.

Are you ready to play?

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Al is the second in command at Fever Dreams, if you don't include the Editor's wife, and a lover of the silver screen. He recently gave up his lifelong career at the cinema to study Creative Writing at university which he hopes will lead to a career in films.

He is a lover of science fiction and fantasy, his favourite films are Kubrick's *The Shining* and *2001*, which he claims are masterpieces in their respective genres.

## SUBMISSIONS

We are always on the look out for articles pertaining to all manner of speculative fiction so if you have an article that you would like to see appear in a future issue then please have a look at the submissions guidelines on the web site:

[fdezine.fever-dreams.co.uk/Submissions.html](http://fdezine.fever-dreams.co.uk/Submissions.html)

# REVIEWS

I said it last issue and I'll say it again: you can always count on Ellen Datlow to put together a good anthology. This collection of stories pays homage to the monsters of Lovecraft's Cthulhu Mythos and includes stories by some of the best authors in the business, past and present.

I know that H.P. Lovecraft is one of those writers where some people are more interested in the works they inspired rather than their own writings. I think that is the equivalent of saying you prefer a

## Lovecraft's Monsters

Ellen Datlow

Tachyon Publications

remake over the original but I also appreciate that Lovecraft's prose can be hard to digest for some readers and plenty has been written about his lack of characterisation. However, his Cthulhu Mythos has inspired a whole generation of writers.

Like all books of this type, the stories vary in quality and enjoyment level. The stories by Laird Barron and Joe Lansdale were both really good. However the first story is a Neil Gaiman one I've seen in at least four other books but this is definitely recommended: not just for Lovecraft fans, but for any reader of horror and dark fantasy.

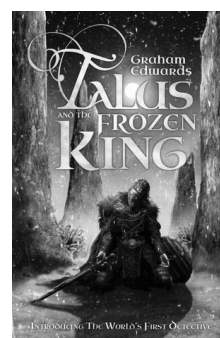
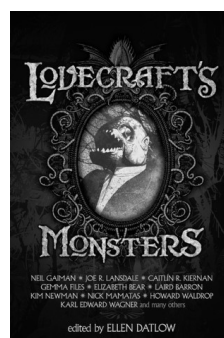
## Talus and the Frozen King

Graham Edwards

Solaris

Imagine Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson are transported to a fantastical setting, that in many ways resembles Stone Age Norway, and you'll have an idea of what you're in for with Talus and the Frozen King.

Written in the tradition of the classics by Arthur Conan Doyle or Agatha Christie, I found Talus and the Frozen King to be a very enjoyable whodunit complete with all the ingredients that makes a good mystery. As the reader, I was given the chance to engage in the process of deduction as Talus conducts his investigation. Edwards avoids the trap of making Bran into a simple vehicle by which Talus reveals his thought processes and, as a reader, I got to learn more about Talus and Bran individually, discovering the motivations that drive them as well as the details behind their unique



## REVIEWS by Martin Williams

relationship. This added an extra layer to this story, rendering the situation more than just another mystery to be solved.

There aren't a lot of books like this out there, that's for sure. There is a strong element of fantasy in the novel but, at its heart, it is really a spin on the good old Sherlock Holmes detective story. A pretty fast, intense mystery which comes highly recommended to fans of crime, detective and fantasy novels.

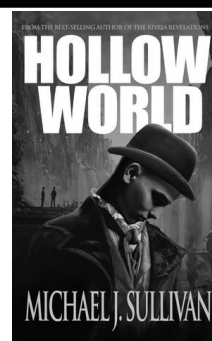
## HOLLOW WORLD

Michael J. Sullivan

Tachyon

Ellis Rogers has a terminal illness which will kill him in about half a year. He does not care about it as he also has a time machine in his garage. It only works if one goes to the future, but he hopes they will develop the cure in about 200 years where he intends to go. With nothing to hold him back he uses the machine, but due to an unknown problem he ends up in quite different time from what he expected.

Written in the classic style of H.G. Wells' *The Time Machine*, *Hollow World* is a modern story just as enjoyable, if not more so, than its predecessor. Despite the air of classical science-fiction, Sullivan follows in the tradition of Heinlein and Vonnegut, using time travel to explore interesting ideas about people, and tells an



engaging story with compelling characters in the process. What would happen if we really achieved world peace, ended hunger, and all those other great dreams that seem so out of reach? Every unique person today craves a place to fit in, but what if the situation were reversed? How does one find fulfilment when there's no important work to be done? What is love, really, and is there any such thing when everyone's needs are already met?

Highly recommended.

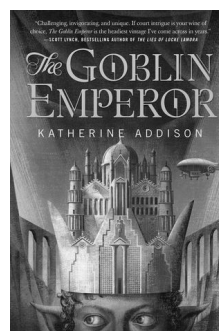
## THE GOBLIN EMPORER

Katherine Addison

TOR

Often when you read lost heir stories, the lost heir is a peasant who can't read and doesn't even know who the current king is, much less understands how a constitutional monarchy works? And then two weeks later, he's been crowned king! And the only problem is some moustache-twirling usurper who could easily be handled by killing him or throwing him in a dungeon. This is not that kind of book.

Maia, fourth son of the Elflands' emperor and born from his fourth and purely political marriage with a goblin princess, was raised in seclusion far away from court. In a country dominated by pure elves, his existence had always been considered an abomination, and he only set foot in court on one occasion: his mother's funeral. Fourth sons are never



expected to raise the throne, but accidents can and do happen.

The Goblin Emperor is a unique debut that challenges expectations for modern fantasy fiction. This novel seems to be the opposite of the "grim and dark" movement that has flooded the genre with stories that are dark and gritty, and where the protagonist is an antihero and the plot is filled with violence. I thoroughly enjoyed this book with its distinctly 80s fantasy feel.

**REVIEWS by Martin Williams**



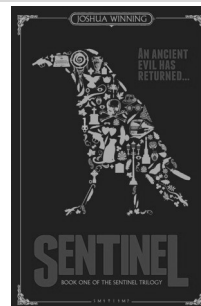
## SENTINEL

Joshua Winning

Peridot Press

Nicholas lived an ordinary life in Cambridge – until the fateful day his parents died. After which Sam, his parents' oldest friend, swoops in to try and get him out of Cambridge. He takes him to stay with a godmother, that he's never heard of, in a large house in the countryside. What should be a simple trip is made harrowing by attacks and the revelation that his parents did not die by accident – they were killed by demons. Which is what Sam, as a Sentinel, needs to learn to fight.

The book did take a little while to get going but, once it did, it didn't let go till the end. The sense of menace never lets up. Even when Nicholas finds refuge, the danger is still out there waiting for him. The depictions of a world where evil is gaining power are as chilling as the antagonists themselves. Winning's characters are vividly drawn, and I found



myself loving the heroes and loving to hate the baddies. Nicholas Hallow is a fantastic character. I found him likeable and felt extremely sorry for him, as he dealt with a tragedy that destroyed his world.

If I have criticisms then they are that the mythology is a little too weak and reminiscent of other series. It also has a tendency to loose pace at times but quickly regains it once the action begins. All in all, this is a fantastic start to what looks like an exciting trilogy!

**REVIEW by Al Thomas**

## ZOMBIE, INDIANA

Scott Kenemore

Talos

In the third book of his *Zombie* series, Scott Kenemore brings the explosive horror of another undead outbreak in the city of Indianapolis. *Zombie, Indiana* takes place during the events depicted in his books *Zombie, Ohio* and *Zombie, Illinois*.

*Zombie, Indiana* follows a trio of Hoosier protagonists each of whom have a dark secret to keep. The basic plot revolves around the disappearance of the governor's daughter on a field trip. As a result IMPD Special Sergeant James Nolan, scholarship student Kesha Washington, and Governor Hank Burleson must all come together to find the governor's daughter, while under constant attack from the living dead.

As with his previous novels, Kenemore creates humorous and memorable characters, tense action sequences, and the zombie violence is



brutal, but this jaunt through America's heartland is still a zombie novel.

Bookstore shelves are groaning under the weight of zombie novels and their numbers swell daily. Its almost as if the desire to write zombie fiction is as infectious as the bite of the creature itself. In short the genre is massively overwritten and Kenemore adds nothing new to the genre in this book. In fact, I would venture to say he adds nothing new since his last outing.

Worth buying if you enjoyed his last book or are a diehard zombie fiction fan!

**REVIEW by Peter Bennett**

# UPCOMING RELEASES

A Guide to upcoming book releases for the second quarter of 2014

This guide was compiled with the assistance of several authors and publishing houses, who have our thanks.

	TITLE	AUTHOR	PUBLISHER
APRIL	Lovecraft's Monsters (Anthology)	Ellen Datlow	Tachyon
	Like a Dead Man Walking and other Shadow Tales	William F. Nolan	Centipede Press
	Peacemaker (SF)	C. J. Cherryh	DAW
	Baltic Gambit (SF)	E. E. Night	Roc
	The Revolutions (SF)	Felix Gilman	Tor
	Hollow World (SF)	Michael J. Sullivan	Tachyon
	The Goblin Emporer (Fantasy)	Katherine Addison	Tor
	Shards of Time (Fantasy)	Lynn Flewelling	Del Ray
	Reign of Ash (Fantasy)	Gail Z. Martin	Orbit
	The Ophelia Prophecy (SF)	Sharon Lynn Fisher	Tor
	Irenicon	Aidan Harte	Jo Fletcher Books
	Upon a Sea of Stars (SF)	A. Bertram Chandler	Baen

	TITLE	AUTHOR	PUBLISHER
APRIL	Dark Eden (SF)	Chris Beckett	Broadway
	Deadroads (Horror)	Robin Riopelle	Night Shade
	Circle of Blood (Urban Fantasy)	Debbie Viguie	Signet
	Games Creatures Play (Anthology)	Charlaine Harris	Ace
	The King (Urban Fantasy)	J. R. Ward	NAL
	Covenant (Urban Fantasy)	Sabrina Benulis	Harper Voyager
	Stone Cold (Urban Fantasy)	Devon Monk	Roc
	Turned (Urban Fantasy)	Virna DePaul	Bantam
	Marked (Urban Fantasy)	Alex Hughes	Roc
	Space Opera (Anthology)	Rich Horton	Prime Books
	The Empire of Time (Fantasy)	David Wingrove	Del Ray
	Turtle Recall: The Discworld Companion	Terry Pratchett & Stephen Briggs	Harper
	Robot Uprisings (Anthology)	Daniel H. Wilson & John Joseph Adams	Vintage
	Cauldron of Ghosts (SF)	David Weber & Eric Flint	Baen
	Shipstar (SF)	Gregory Benford & Larry Niven	Tor
	Steles of the Sky (Fantasy)	Elizabeth Bear	Tor
	Operation Shield (SF)	Joel Shepherd	Pyr
	Coldbrook (Horror)	Tim Lebbon	Titan Books
	Unwrapped Sky (Fantasy)	Rjurik Davidson	Tor
	The Eye of Winter's Fury (Fantasy)	Michael J. Ward	Harper Collins
	Tithe of the Saviours (Fantasy)	A.J. Dalton	Gollancz
	Heaven's Orbit (SF)	Rachel Bach	Orbit
	Son of the Morning (Fantasy)	Mark Alder	Gollancz
	A World Without Princes	Soman Chainani	Harper Collins

	TITLE	AUTHOR	PUBLISHER
APRIL	Valour and Vanity (Fantasy)	Mary Robinette Kowal	Tor
	Shanghai Sparrow (Steampunk)	Gaie Sebold	Solaris
	Silver Mirrors (Steampunk)	A.A. Aguirre	Ace
	Grunt Life (SF)	Weston Ochse	Solaris
	The Book of Silverberg (Anthology)	Gardner Dozois & William Schafer	Subterranean Press
MAY	Righteous Fury (Fantasy)	Markus Heitz	Fletcher Books
	The Summoning (Horror)	F. G. Cottam	Severn House
	Mirror Sight (Fantasy)	Kristen Britain	DAW
	The Sea Without a Shore (SF)	David Drake	Baen
	Authority (SF)	Jeff VanderMeer	Straus & Giroux
	Sworn In Steel (Fantasy)	Douglas Hulick	Roc
	The Crimson Campaign (Fantasy)	Brian McClellan	Orbit
	The Enceladus Crisis (SF)	Michael J. Martinez	Night Shade
	The Silk Map (Fantasy)	Chris Willrich	Pyr
	Witches In Red (Fantasy)	Barb Hendee	Roc
	Sentinel (Fantasy)	Joshua Winning	Peridot Press
	Deadly Shores (SF)	Taylor Anderson	Roc
	Fire Kin (Fantasy)	M. J. Scott	Roc
	American Craftsmen (Fantasy)	Tom Doyle	Tor
	Jupiter War (SF)	Neal Asher	Night Shade
	Gemsigns (SF)	Stephanie Saulter	Jo Fletcher Books
	Science Fiction 101: Exploring the Craft of Science Fiction	Robert K. Silverberg	Baen
	Dead Man's Hand: An Anthology of the Weird West (Anthology)	John Joseph Adams	Titan Books

	TITLE	AUTHOR	PUBLISHER
JUNE	The River of Souls	Robert McCammon	Subterranean Press
	The Sharp Bite of Ritual (Fantasy)	Suzanne McLeod	Gollancz
	The Merchant Emperor (Fantasy)	Elizabeth Haydon	Tor
	Shadows & Tall Trees: Volume 6 (Anthology)	Michael Kelly	ChiZine Publications
	The Best Horror of the Year: Volume 6 (Anthology)	Ellen Datlow	Night Shade
	Mr. Mercedes	Stephen King	Scribner
	A Shiver of Light (Fantasy)	Laurell K. Hamilton	Berkley
	The Galaxy Game (SF)	Karen Lord	Jo Fletcher Books
	Robogenesis (SF)	Daniel H. Wilson	Doubleday
	Head Full of Mountains	Brent Hayward	ChiZine Publications
	The Splintered Gods (Fantasy)	Stephen Deas	Gollancz
	Barricade (SF)	Jon Wallace	Gollancz

## BOOK NEWS AND REVIEWS

We are now looking for articles about fiction for Issue 5. If you are a writer with a book launch just over the horizon, or an avid reader who wants to share a book review, then we want to hear from you. If you have an article about the literary industry, some writing news or a book review then please check our submissions guidelines on the web site.

[fdezine.fever-dreams.co.uk/Submissions.html](http://fdezine.fever-dreams.co.uk/Submissions.html)

We are also keen to establish links within the publishing industry. If you are a publishing house and want your books included in next issues releases or a book reviewed then please get in touch.

# WHAT TO WATCH

## A Quick Look At Upcoming Cinema Releases by Al Thomas

April kicks off with the release of the latest comic book movie as Captain America takes on the Winter Soldier. The film is sure to please fans of Marvel, and should build on the success of the recent Marvel films.

The rest of April is consumed by Horror with the occasional dash of science fiction. Under the Skin features cannibalistic aliens who come to earth in search of hitchhikers to abduct. If you'd rather just have a simple alien abduction movie then you could do worse than catch Alien Abduction. This film is followed later in the month by Blair Witch style holiday horror, Afflicted. The film follows two holiday makers in their quest to discover the source of an infection that is ravaging their bodies.

Dead Sea is a tongue in cheek Zombie film about undead released from their undersea prison. It hits screens alongside Oculus and Only Lovers Left Alive. While I'm certain that Only Lovers Left Alive will not be to everyone's tastes I certainly enjoyed the film when I caught a preview earlier this month. Its worth watching just to see John Hurt playing the great playwright Christopher Marlowe.

The month continues with Till Death Do Us Part and Proxy. Psychological horror can be hit and miss but both of these films show promise in tackling the issues around love and acceptance.

If you haven't been saturated by Horror films then make sure to catch Hammer's The Quiet Ones at the end of April. The film centres around the concept of creating a poltergeist from negative human emotion and promises to be a chilling movie.

Following the pattern set out in April, May begins with The Amazing Spiderman 2. Another treat for fans of the comics though,

personally I've had more than enough Spiderman movies to last me for a decade.

If you'd rather avoid the comic book caper and sate a taste for video nasties then Blood Glacier shouldn't disappoint. If you'd like something a little lighter then you could do worse than check out Bad Johnson, a film about an evil penis that's free to terrorize womankind.

Jesse Eisenberg takes on the doppelganger formula later in May. The Double promises to be a clever psychological horror. If you'd prefer something less cerebral then check out Stage Fright and/or The Farm.

May rounds off with Wolf Creek 2. The follow up to the successful Australian horror from 2005. If you want to get away from the gore then you could do worse than check out Legendary Pictures' Godzilla or 20th Century's latest X-Men offering. A great way to end May.

June sees Tom Cruise taking on the role of Lt. Col. William Cage in sci-fi movie Edge of Tomorrow. This futuristic war meets Groundhog Day film promises to be entertaining but, as any fan of science fiction knows, messing with time can have serious consequences on your box office records.

The slew of horror releases has abated by June, probably because of the impending summer holidays. If you are needing a film to entertain the little ones then Maleficent offers a biopic of one of the most iconic evil queens in Disney history. While Angelina Jolie's Maleficent is certainly a sight to behold I doubt she will have the pulling appeal of Dreamworks' How To Train Your Dragon 2.

# FILM REVIEW



## THE QUIET ONES

11th APRIL 2014

by Al Thomas

The Quiet Ones pays homage to the style and theme of the 1970s vintage horror from Hammer. Commercial expectations are running high because of the success of unprecedented hit *The Woman In Black* two years ago. Jared Harris, of *Mad Men* fame, and Sam Claflin, *Hunger Games* regular, are on board to ensure a repeat success when the film arrives in April.

The Quiet Ones boasts being based on actual events, and by that it means that it is inspired heavily by the Philips Experiment in 1972. If you aren't familiar then a group of Toronto researchers tried to prove that poltergeists are constructs of the human mind. The original experiment did not include satanic cults, high body counts or paranormal love triangles, fortunately for us the movie does.

The Quiet Ones is set in 1974, Jared Harris plays an Oxford professor who conducts a series of experiments on a disturbed young

woman (Olivia Cooke), whilst keeping her locked up and trying to understand whether her emotional torment has given her paranormal powers.

The visual effects are impressive, particularly the hand-held footage which is authentically retro. Sound design is striking and compliments the films visual shocks. I was also delighted with the washed-out tobacco browns and bell bottom fashion of the post hippie-era and a soundtrack that features *Slade*, *T-Rex* and *Hawkwind*. Erin Richards wears hot pants and mini skirts which, in true Hammer fashion, ties the film into the era and provides something to titillate male viewers during the slower parts of the film.

Creaky, and often predictable, this film is the equivalent of comfort food for fans of old-school horror. Very stylish

# FILM REVIEW



**ONLY LOVERS LEFT ALIVE**

**MAY 2014**

**by Peter Bennett**

Only Lovers Left Alive is a supernatural film about two vampires, Adam and Eve, played by Tilda Swinton and Tom Hiddleston. As the film begins they are on opposite sides of the globe separated but still connected. Adam is living in a crumbling mansion on the outskirts of Detroit, which he has filled with vintage guitars and analogue recording equipment. Eve drifts ghost-like through Tangier, where she indulges her love of books. The choice of cities and the way they are portrayed is perfect. These empty husks appear as if their lifeblood has been drained by “zombies”, Adam’s affection term for you and I. The remaining comfort they have is blood, which they sip daintily from sherry glasses and which appears to have the potency of opium.

The problem with this film is that nothing really happens in it. Eve travels to Detroit and the couple are happily reunited. Their relationship is threatened by Eve’s younger sister played by the wide-smiling Mia Wasikowska. The

humour in this film is often a little too highbrow and very deadpan. In my favourite sequence the camera pans over a gallery of other famous vampires which include Franz Kafka, Mark Twain, Edgar Allen Poe and H.P Lovecraft. There is also a joke about quantum entanglement which will go over the heads of most viewers. The joke revolves around the fact that Einstein called the phenomenon “spooky action at a distance” and is, in my opinion, the subtext for the whole film.

The best reason to see this film, apart from John Hurt’s role as Christopher Marlowe, is Swinton and Hiddleston’s sexy double-act. These two old and distinctly cold souls are struggling steadfastly to keep the spark of their love alive as the world around them tries slowly to snuff itself out. This film will not be to everyone’s tastes but those who love it will really love it. A cult classic of the future.



## ON DVD

Torture porn director Eli Roth said of Hemlock Grove that his series would "Fuck up an entire generation". A bold claim but not a surprising one from a man who is renown for pushing the boundaries of film. Sadly however he was wrong.

Somewhere between Twin Peaks and True Blood, this sexed up 13 part werewolf drama tries desperately to be eerie and esoteric.

The drama takes place in a decaying Pennsylvania steeltown now dominated by a nearby biotechnology complex. The vicious murder of a teenage girl sets the narrative in

## HEMLOCK GROVE: SEASON 1

motion, spewing forth a supernatural whodunit that takes in werewolves, vampires, gypsies, incest and Famke Janssen affecting a terrible accent. She plays Olivia Godley, the alluring but clearly nefarious matriarch of a wealthy family. "What are you?" Olivia is asked at one point, and it's a good question.

So why would I want to recommend this series? In one of the best scenes from the opening episodes there is a homage to the 1981 horror flick The Howling. It sees one character transform into a werewolf in gory detail. It's impressively done: well imagined and not for the faint-hearted.

Horror fans will enjoy this but don't expect anything new or terrifying.

## TRUE BLOOD: SEASON 6

True Blood Season 6 was the first year without the show's creator, Alan Ball. And it turned out to be the best run since Eric got amnesia in Season 3. Brian Buckner seems to realise that you can't give equal screen time to every member of the huge cast and this has led to a more enjoyable and less convoluted plot.

The main storyline focus is on humans declaring war on vampires, returning the show's focus to the fanged population while also shepherding our favourite characters into one place – a concentration camp for bloodsuckers. Sookie continues her vagina warfare, seducing Warlow before conjuring a fairy ball of light and declaring: "Get the fuck off me or die, Warlow" was applause worthy and the one-liners kept coming, usually as part of some pithy dialogue with Billith...

*Bill: "We made a deal Sookie." Sookie: "I know we did Bill, but Eric took our deal and fucked it*



## REVIEW by Al Thomas

*in the ass." Finally it seems that romance is off the cards.*

It's Eric that stole some of the best moments of the series. Whether he was angry and ripping off a bloke's gonads, or upset and crying rivers of blood over the gruesome death of his sister Nora.

True Blood is definitely back to its campy best, with all the gore and social commentary that had us hooked to begin with. If you ever loved True Blood then check out season 6.

# UPCOMING RELEASES

## A look at second quarter DVD releases

Ms.45 takes to the streets in her little black dress to punish men at the start of April. This little known horror is worth looking into but compared to the other blockbusters out this month it may disappear into obscurity.

Blockbusters 47 Ronin and The Hobbit: The Desolation of Smaug will appeal to fans of sword and sorcery. If you are a fan of Peter Jackson's Lord of the Rings films then you probably don't need me to remind you, and if you aren't a fan then you probably don't care. American Netflix Series Hemlock Grove arrives on DVD alongside Sci-fi hit Orphan Black. Orphan Black was an interesting idea about clones and Eli Roth's Hemlock Grove more than adequately filled the void left by Breaking Bad.

The latest Paranormal Activity film wasn't everything I had hoped it to be, more sidebar than sequel, this interesting fifth film in the found-footage fright franchise. Many of the core elements of the earlier movies are retained here, including the found-footage which has been relocated to a low-income but vibrant Hispanic neighbourhood. The best scares will be familiar to anyone who has seen the previous films.

I, Frankenstein, with its monster reinvented as a superhero, is a fairly predictable action movie. Eckhart plays Frankenstein's monster in a monotonous, teeth-gritting mode which Strahovski's performance fails to lift. Shelley would not have approved.

Haunt arrives at the beginning of June. There is virtually nothing in Mac Carter's horror flick that deviates from the standard haunted house plot, which is not necessarily a bad thing, by the time the final act unleashes its revelations and peril, "Haunt" felt more like an exercise in formal spookiness than a full-blooded story of lingering malevolence. Still one that will find its way onto my DVD shelf.

This Robo-reboot tries fiercely to update the satirical punch and stylistic perversity of Paul Verhoeven's 1987 original. This version feels more slick and calculated than gritty and provocative, and

	TITLE	GENRE
APRIL	Ms. 45	Horror
	47 Ronin	Fantasy
	The Hobbit: The Desolation of Smaug	Fantasy
	Hemlock Grove: Season 1	Horror
	Orphan Black	Sci-Fi
	Paranormal Activity: The Marked Ones	Horror
MAY	Devil's Due	Horror
	I, Frankenstein	Horror
	Exit Wounds	Action
	Son of Batman	Fantasy
	Dracula: The Impaler	Horror
JUNE	Wolverine: Weapon X	Fantasy
	Haunt	Horror
	True Blood: Season 6	Horror
	Robocop (2014)	Sci-Fi
	Person of Interest: Season 1	Sci-Fi
	The Last Horror Movie	Horror

## ARTICLE by Al Thomas

it lacks the freshness of its predecessor despite attempts to update various story elements. All this film proves is how futile a gesture it was to attempt to remake this film.

I've included Person of Interest in this list because its heavy technology and government paranoia is in keeping with science-fiction themes and simply because I was surprised how enjoyable this series was.

# GAME REVIEWS

**TITANFALL****ELECTRONIC ARTS****MARCH 2014****REVIEW by Al Thomas**

In March 2010, following Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2's release, Activision fired Infinity Ward co-founders Jason West and Vince Zampella. Their departure resulted in a series of lawsuits and a staff exodus. Later that year, West and Zampella founded another game development company, Respawn Entertainment, with many of the former Infinity Ward staff. At E3 2011, Electronic Arts Labels president Frank Gibeau revealed that Respawn's first project was a science fiction shooter published by Electronic Arts. Since then I, like many gamers, have eagerly awaited the arrival of Titanfall.

In terms of gameplay, players start out fighting on foot as free-running "Pilots" and later, as the game progresses, inside agile mech-style walkers called "Titans" to complete team-based objectives on a derelict and war-torn planet as either the Interstellar Manufacturing Corporation (IMC) or the Militia. The game is

online multiplayer-only, but still contains single-player elements such as plot, character dialogue, and non-player characters (NPCs). At first, the presence of AI cannon fodder seems like a way of counterbalancing the reduced player count, but they actually function like creeps in Dota 2. 'Farming' is a legitimate strategy, and some teams choose to equip one player with a minion-slaughtering smart pistol so that they can be the first to bring a titan into play.

Up to twelve human players choose their pilot types and are dropped on the map, beginning the game. A timer displays the time until a Titan can be deployed, which is reduced by killing other players. Once deployed, Titans are protected by a forcefield for about 30 seconds, which protects the player-pilot as well.



Unlike player-characters in games like *Call of Duty* and *Battlefield*, pilots are agile and accumulate momentum while running, which lets players run along walls, chain together jet pack-enabled double jumps, vault over various obstacles, and glide down ziplines. Pilot abilities include the Smart Pistol, which shoots around corners.

There are multiple types of Titans, (the agile Atlas, the ponderous Ogre, and the nimble Stryder) each with unique abilities and animations. Pilot and Titan controls are identical except where the pilot's double jump becomes the Titan's dash, as the Titans are too heavy to jump. The Titans are not slow, but their movement is slower than the nimble pilots. Titan game-balancing abilities include the vortex blocker, which stops and returns enemy ammunition in mid-air, and electrified smoke, which hurts and repels pilots climbing the Titan's back. Player-pilots can eject from Titans that take too much damage, and the Titan replacement timer is reset upon the Titan's death. Titans can also act autonomously when put in guard and follow modes, which directs the Titan either to protect their vicinity or to tail their pilot. The

game ends with a race to the losing team's evacuation dropship.

The game's "Campaign multiplayer" is separate from the game's "Classic" multiplayer. It plays as multiplayer with single-player elements, such as scripted cinematic sequences, non-playable character dialogue, and audio briefings. There are separate campaigns for the Militia and IMC factions, and the game randomly assigns the player to one for a series of nine maps. This is not a substitute for a single player campaign, but it is a novel alternative. The Militia are the civilian military of the Frontier and the resistance against IMC use of colony resources. Their most important members include Titan War veteran and former mutiny leader MacAllan, intel specialist and engineer Bish, and Marauder Corps leader Sarah. The corporate conglomerate IMC specializes in natural resource extraction, and came to the resource-rich Frontier for business. Their major players are Frontier operations commander-in-chief Vice Admiral Graves, intel specialist Blisk, and artificial intelligence companion Spyglass. A new Titan chassis is



unlocked upon finishing each faction's campaign.

You can also tweak your experience with 'burn cards'. These disposable unlocks allow you to access certain bonuses for one life only. They scale in power with rarity - the most basic allow you temporary access to weapons you haven't unlocked yet, and the most advanced grant you instant titans, reveal all enemies on your minimap, or grant you a permanent cloak when you stop shooting. Burn cards could have been a hook for some truly awful monetisation, but thankfully that's not the case. They are dished out with such frequency that after a few hours of play I never entered a match with anything less than a full set.

Titanfall is the precursor to a number of other big FPS games that are due out this year, notably Destiny. There will be significant differences between the two games, while Titanfall is not pretending to be an MMO the lack of single player forces the comparison. There's no LAN or offline support of any kind in Titanfall. You can form a party with your friends and queue for games, but you can't create your own private lobbies or dedicated servers. You can't even queue to play a



specific map on a specific game mode. This means that you can choose to play Capture The Flag but you'll have no say on where you end up doing it. This is a shame, because it is clearly the work of sharp, analytical designers, and it deserves to penetrate the thick layer of cynicism that traditionally surrounds big budget shooters.

The most exciting multiplayer shooter in recent years, held back from true greatness by some questionable design features.

## PATH OF EXILE

GRINDING GEAR GAMES

OCTOBER 2013



Action RPGs always start out the same way. You are dressed in rags and earn some gold, and possibly armour, by running around punching the undead in the face and looting their corpses. Over time the location and creatures may change but the routine is the same. Your ascent into Godhood is thus controlled by your level of compulsion. This is why the very notion of a free-to-play ARPG left me with a sick feeling in my stomach.

These games are defined by their slow levelling curves with skills that gradually unlock as you fight swelling hordes of foes to the sound of a million mouse-clicks. A badly done microtransaction store would put paid to that but I was relieved to see that it wouldn't. The store is almost entirely stocked with cosmetic items and character emotes that have no impact on the actual gameplay thus ensuring that you can't simply buy your way to the top.

There is no short cut. You start your adventure by selecting a character class, all of which have been expelled from their cushy homes for a variety of unimportant reasons and are thusly forced to carve out a new life for

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**REVIEW by Al Thomas**


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themselves by slaughtering hordes of monsters in the dark places of Wraeclast. Slaughtering monsters means experience which in turn awards points to spend on a levelling board. When you first start out this vast maze of connected nodes can seem quite daunting but you quickly get the hang of it as you dash towards powerful gold nodes that offer major stat buffs and help specialise your character.

Like its forebears Path of Exile relies heavily on socketing gems into slots as a means of customising your gear but these gems don't merely boost stats, they act as skills offering you a new way of fighting and a new means through which to dispatch your foes.

While it may not break new ground in the genre, it does update the experience and distinguishes itself with its unique ability gems and labyrinth of passive skills that permit you to create any character you can think of. Best of all it's free, and sets the tone for future free-to-play projects



Defense of the Ancients 2 is the follow up to the original Defense of the Ancients mod (known as DOTA) for Warcraft III, which is responsible for kicking off the MOBA genre. Valve consequently hired DOTA's key developers and have copied that formula almost to the letter, and as a result Dota 2 has become notorious even among its MOBA peers for its difficulty. New players are often greeted with by the community with open arms "Welcome to Dota 2!" they say, "You suck!"

Trust me they're not wrong: for the first dozen hours or so, you'll be bombarded with too much information and an often unforgiving community of extremely competitive players. But if you persevere, Dota 2 becomes one of the most rewarding and tense team-based multiplayer experiences anywhere in gaming. As such, you should not expect to have fun your first day playing or, depending on how fast you can pick it up, even your first week. This sounds like a cardinal sin of gaming, but there's method to this madness. In short, Dota 2 is a deeply layered construct of systems, and to survive you need to understand every single one and how they interact with one another. Everything from learning to work as a

## REVIEW by David Craig

member of a coordinated team to the counter-intuitive practice of killing your own AI units to deny the enemy experience points and gold they'd get from doing it themselves. Even figuring out which of the 102 heroes is best suited to your playstyle and which items to buy with your loot is a time-consuming challenge.

Dota 2 deserves its intimidating reputation, and it probably won't suit you if you're looking to play casually. There is a huge time investment required before you can even enjoy a game, let alone feel competent at it. But once you start to learn its secrets, there's a wild and exciting variety of play here that's unmatched, even by its peers. The fact that it's totally free to play in the way we wish all free-to-play games could be isn't just a gesture of goodwill by the developers, it is essential to maintaining a level playing field where skill and cooperation are paramount.

So let the games begin and may the best team win.

## FIRE EMBLEM: AWAKENING

NINTENDO INTELLIGENT SYSTEMS APRIL 2013



ARTICLE by Ruairaidh Cresswell

If you owned a Game Boy Advance during its early years circa 2001, you may have heard of Advance Wars and possibly of its developer Intelligent Systems. One of Nintendo's more aptly named internal studios with a specialisation in RPG and strategy games, their fusing of precision engineered turn based game mechanics with beautifully tailored pixel artwork and animation has made their output especially well suited for Nintendo's handhelds. Like the Advance Wars series it shares much of its DNA with, Fire Emblem has a history going back to the NES, but did not make it's western debut until Fire Emblem 7 on the GBA in 2003.

Popular discussion of Nintendo software has a tendency to fixate on the most mainstream friendly franchises like Mario and Pokemon. Perhaps it is simply a lack of promotion and awareness but the sheer depth and variety of the Nintendo's portfolio too often goes unacknowledged. As the 3DS hits its mainstream stride this year it has been Animal Crossing and Pokemon X&Y that have

gathered the majority of hype, sales and streetpass hits. However, it has also seen one of Nintendo's darkest horses allowed to stretch its legs on the platform. The result is a strategy RPG that is as engaging, rewarding and demanding as any experience in gaming.

For the new player, Fire Emblem succeeds by keeping it simple and understandable from the get go. This is especially vital with permanent character death being one of the series' defining characteristics. While your small army is made up of individuals cut from standardised class templates, they are neither mass produced units nor randomised hirelings. Everyone has their unique portrait, story, skills and statistical growth potential. New recruits are acquired either at key points in the story or commonly, from the field of battle where they will either need rescuing from enemy hands or persuaded into coming over to your side by team leader, manoeuvres that carry risks of their own.

Actual unit customisation is minimal bar the weapons they carry and the ability to choose a



class specialization when they reach a certain level and are promoted. Strategy is expressed by the composition of your regular army. With a fixed number of units of any given class and, losses aside, more new units than you will realistically use, hard decisions have to be made as to who and where you invest your efforts. Even with these restrictions a new face proves far more pleasing a reward for your struggles than a sword ever could and proves to be the primary motivator to progress the story and explore as much of the games plentiful side content as possible. For the first time in the series, the player will also name and customise their own avatar to represent them in person on the battlefield as a versatile and powerful tactician unit who joins the games leading trio of characters.

The possibility of careless unit positioning or a miscalculated assault leaving a character dead, or at least permanently incapacitated depending on their role in the story, makes your own role as much a caretaker as commander. Managing your characters development and relationships is crucial for your long term strategy. Training your weakest units up from scratch will result in the greatest gains in the long run while the stronger pre-promoted units may gain little from one-shotting enemy units so a balance needs to be found between giving neophyte characters the chance to grow and keeping them from being cut down prematurely. Given the chance, they will not only develop as individuals but as comrades. Characters positioned adjacently will see their



relationships forged as they kill together, giving significant defensive bonuses and the possibility of extra strikes. This development will continue outside of battle as conversations between characters are unlocked and under the right circumstances this can lead to marriage. A plot contrivance involving time travel allows their adult offspring to fight alongside their parents, inheriting some of their skills and characteristics as well.

They are such a likable bunch, odds are you won't want to lose anyone. Given the choice between eating the loss and carrying on or biting your lip and restarting a half hour battle from scratch, the 3DS soft reset (L+R+Start) will likely be put to good use. The GBA titles 2D portraits and sprite animation lent a sense of both charm and force to characters and battles that the 3D models of the GC and Wii games couldn't quite live up to. Awakening wisely adopts a more exaggerated visual style for battle animation that does justice to the style of the GBA games while putting the 3DS Stereo 3D to great use. Battles between pairs of characters versus enemy boss units are especially fluid and dramatic to watch, and the soundtrack is easily the best to grace the franchise.

The relative comfort of your barracks and story interludes shows the human side of your band of warriors and while the main trio are somewhat forthright and staid, the rest of the crew show a surprising amount of personality and in certain cases notable issues and even sociopathy. This can be explored and



developed further through the support conversation system, going a long way to compensate for a cookie cutter plotline that rapidly gets forgotten under the combat and character development. The return of an undead army, last seen in Sacred Stones, is a little regrettable in a series that has generally preferred to pit warring factions of humans against each other and kept the supernatural on a leash outside of magic and the occasional dragon. However, pallid skin and glowing eyes aside they conform to the standard classes and behave like any other human foe.

For fans of the series, it is safe to say Awakening is easily the strongest entry since Path of Radiance on the Gamecube, deftly avoiding the pitfalls of the anemic NES remake Shadow Dragon on the DS and hard to the point of sadism Radiant Dawn on the Wii. Likewise, many of the best gameplay features from the latter GBA title Sacred Stones such as the ability to reclass promoted units make a very welcome return. It is possible that certain series stalwarts will not appreciate the new “casual” difficulty setting that disables permanent character death or

the possibility for level grinding, but as these features are entirely optional they can be safely ignored.

This is a vast and deep game, and even outside the main quest and obvious side missions is a tremendous amount of bonus content and fan service including famous faces and weapons from earlier Fire Emblems to be acquired. It is possible to “break” Awakening by repeatedly grinding against the pockets of undead that show up on previously cleared maps but this would be both tedious, unnecessary and ill advised due to the games careful balance and wealth of unique content to match and develop your team against. This is without even going into the various DLC on offer. It’s the unwritten contract of demand and reward between game and player that ultimately makes Fire Emblem Awakening so compelling. The last few years have seen the technical achievement and production values of mainstream gaming reach a new apex, but it is a welcome reminder of what pure design diligence can achieve.



# UPCOMING RELEASES

## A look at second quarter game releases

This Easter's release schedule is taking a decidedly fantastical look with the release of Lego: Hobbit, Final Fantasy XIV and Demongaze. It also sees Elder Scrolls Online and Dark Souls II arriving on PC.

Despite the lack of connection in the series, Dark Souls II is the latest game in the series that began with Demon's Souls. The franchise has long been renowned for its "killer" difficulty and in this sequel the developers have turned it up a notch further. The game has received critical acclaim for its visuals and atmosphere. If you didn't get it on consoles then its definitely worth picking up on PC.

Elder Scrolls Online is the latest MMORPG to try and take on the might of World of Warcraft. It has been developed by ZeniMax Online Studios and is part of the franchise from which it takes its name. As in previous Elder Scrolls games the gameplay is non-linear and features the usual assortment of quests decided to encourage exploration. Some gamers may be sad to find out that it has no offline play, though developers have stated that there will be "plenty of content" to accommodate the less social fans of the franchise. If you are a console player then you'll have to wait till June for your fix of Elder Scrolls.

Bound by Flame is an ARPG set for release in early May. It places you in the role of the victim of demonic corruption where you have to choose between the evil powers you are offered or developing heroic talents. The bite in the games comes from the ratcheting difficulty that will make it more and more tempting to fork over part of your soul as you progress through the game. The choices you make will be reflected in both the storyline, and like Fable, in the appearance of your hero.

Carbine Studios will see their Sci-Fi MMO, WildStar, arrive in early June. I'm not sure how well

	TITLE	PLATFORM
APRIL	Elder Scrolls Online	PC
	LEGO: The Hobbit	Multiplatform
	Titanfall	Xbox 360
	Final Fantasy XIV: A Realm Reborn	PS4
	Demongaze	PS Vita
	Dark Souls II	PC
MAY	Etrian Odyssey Untold: The Millenium Girl	3DS
	Wolfenstein: The New Order	Multiplatform
	Watch Dogs	Multiplatform
	Drakengard 3	PS3
	Lifeless Planer	Win, MAC
	Bound by Flame	Win, PS3, PS4, Xbox 360
JUNE	Killer is Dead: Nightmare Edition	Win
	Elder Scrolls Online	Xbox One, PS4
	Murdered: Soul Suspect	Multiplatform
	Wildstar	Win

## ARTICLE by Al Thomas

this game will do when launched alongside the Elder Scrolls Online, which is a shame because it looked very promising. If your interest is piqued then check out my review in Issue 5.