

Sentaku: A Short Story Anthology

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Preface

The purpose of this publication is to showcase the craftsmanship of fiction writers—those who, by the power of imagination and hard work, both inspire and entertain. This eBook will provide a platform for those seeking to promote their work and provide an opportunity to further develop their skills as writers.

Sentaku is a Japanese word that means “selection”, “choice” or “option.” Simply enough, this book is a collection of fiction: an anthology of short stories from seven gifted and aspiring writers. While the title of this book may not seem especially profound, the stories here contained are quite to the contrary. Each of the featured authors brings an entirely unique perspective, style, genre and flavor to this choice group of fiction. Whether you fancy talking dragons and post-apocalyptic wastelands or military campaigns into the far reaches of outer space, there is a story here for you.

Please join me in supporting the following authors. With great anticipation, I invite you to enjoy the treasure that is Sentaku: A Short Story Anthology.

Reid A. Peterson

THE INCIDENT AT MESSER'S BUTTE

Marshall Harrup

August 4th, 2019

I was unhitching the mule from the plow when the truck pulled up. It was nicer than most of the trucks UFO hunters drove; their hobby tended to drain the vehicle budget a bit. It was silver, though, and that fit. I always figured the idea was to look like the vehicles they kept trying to find; at least this guy hadn't put a fiberglass saucer on the roof of his cab.

I started towards the truck, leading the mule. Might as well greet whoever it was and gauge how crazy they were before walking away from them to the barn. The driver's door opened, and in the light dust it appeared that a child stepped out. Then they began to walk towards me and I stopped moving.

He was a midget, but his face was strikingly familiar. Not the same, but very much like a face I'd seen decades ago. He stopped too, and recognized the shock on my face.

"Hi, I'm Dell Tanner." He extended his hand. "I'm looking for information about the Roswell crash. I know you've probably had visits from plenty of kooks over the years, but you're one of the very few left around who was in the area back then." He glanced up and down at me. "I must say, Mr. Deevers, you look remarkable for your eighties." I laughed.

"Well, Mr. Tanner, the desert does tend to preserve things. Let me stable Jess and I'll meet you in the house. It isn't locked." A few minutes later he was sitting at my table while I boiled some water for tea. "Mr. Tanner, you're right. I have had many, many visits from kooks over the years. I have told the same story numerous times, and even been interviewed by two different newspapers. To be honest, you don't seem like you're off your rocker. What exactly are you hoping to get from me?" I had an idea of the answer. His family obviously had strong genes, not just for height. But I also wanted to see how honest he would be with me.

"My great-uncle disappeared just over seventy years ago. He was short, like me. Dwarfism runs in our family to a degree, but he and I had it to the greatest extent of anyone in recent generations. I retired not too long ago, and decided to make it my mission to track him down. It's been difficult, to say the least. But I have uncovered that he joined the army during world war two. He was obviously unfit for the draft, and was very patriotic. All that my grandfather remembered was that an opportunity came up that my uncle got very excited about, a way he could serve his country. Then he disappeared a few years later."

I had been nodding the whole time, and stood up as he finished talking. "I'll be right back." I went upstairs to the spare bedroom, moved the nightstand to the side, and carefully lifted a floorboard. I brought the package underneath downstairs and handed it to Dell. "Alright. You get the whole truth."

June 20th, 1947

"Hey Pa," I said. "Can I get a teaspoon of black powder? There's a cactus stump back of the barn that I just can't budge. Ma wants to plant another okra patch back there."

Pa tossed me the keys to the old shed. The leftover black powder was from when his grandpa tried to prospect his way to better fortune; the keys were from Pa's time stationed at the armory in San Diego during the war. He kept everything dangerous locked up, except his shotgun and my rifle.

I ran around the corner to the shed. Ma was clipping the laundry to the line, and a slight breeze was blowing. We were grateful for any air movement; summer in New Mexico was no joke. The last couple weeks of school the teacher let us go out under the trees outside the building, so none of us would pass out. I unlocked the shed, and started digging around for the black powder. I had turned twelve not too far previous, and Pa gave me the lay of the land about my responsibilities as an up and coming man, chiefly learning to run our little farm and take care of Ma. I took the black powder and the fuse roll, and marched the hundred feet to the barn very carefully. Old powder gets sensitive to shock.

I spooned a little bit of the powder into the hole I'd dug alongside the stump, laid one end of the fuse, and started putting dirt back over the explosive. Then I ran the fuse back to around the corner of the house, yelled out that I was lighting the fuse, and did so. The spark traveled quickly along the small cord, and about a minute later a flash and dull whump showed the powder had exploded. The stump lay to the side; it hadn't come completely out of the ground, but it was loose now.

It took me the rest of the day to get the stump out, stopping for a drink every so often. By the time I finished, Ma was calling for dinner. I'm pretty sure I was asleep even before I hit the pillow, even without undressing. That turned out to be a good thing.

I woke up; for a few minutes I had no idea what had disturbed me. Then I remembered hearing a load crash and dull thud, almost like a blasting powder charge way down deep in a mine. I heard rustling in Ma and Pa's room, and knocked softly on the wall.

"Pa, did you hear something?"

"Yeah. Only thing I can figure out here is a plane crash. Get your boots on, son. We need to go see if someone's in trouble. Ma, get your kit out and get the table cleared off. If anyone's alive they'll be in bad shape."

No one else lived closer than two miles to us, and Pa was certain the sound had come from the opposite direction, back amongst the canyons. He had grabbed his shotgun. In the middle of the night like this, we didn't want to run into a pack of coyotes unarmed. We drove down the road towards the canyons. Pa stopped the truck and climbed up, scanning the area with his binoculars. The moon was good size, and the stars gave plenty of light too.

"I see something that looks like a fire. Somewhere between Old Canyon and Messer's Butte. The truck won't go all the way in, but we will get as close as we can." We were another hour in the truck picking our way along dried riverbeds until we had to get out. Sound carries in the desert air; we had already traveled three miles, and Pa estimated another mile to where he saw the fire.

"Pa, do you think anyone's still alive by now?"

"I don't know, son. But we're no help at all if we break our necks rushing through canyons to get there."

Finally, at close to two in the morning by Pa's pocket watch, we climbed up the side of a small canyon to what was, after all, a crash site. I didn't know what to expect, I had never even seen a plane except in the sky. But Pa looked startled, and that scared me.

The brush for dozens of yards around was smoldering. It looked like the initial blaze had been intense; there were a couple of places where big rocks looked like they had split. Pa shone his torch around, trying to get an idea of which direction the plane had been moving. Finally he spotted a cactus trunk, and the top of the cactus fifty feet beyond.

"Come, boy. I think they're in this direction!" We moved quickly; the ground had deep, fresh furrows as if something had reached down and scraped huge claws along the ground. Then Pa stopped short, looking down into another canyon.

"That doesn't look like a plane, Pa."

"No, son. I think that's something else. And it must run on different fuel; gasoline wouldn't cause rocks to split like back there." We started to climb down. "If I had to guess, this isn't a propeller craft. You can see how the entire thing looks like half a wing; I bet the other part is close by. I think this is some new aircraft." I thought it looked like a bird, and said so. "Birds are the best flyers, and they hold their wings different ways for better speed, distance, or maneuverability. Man had tried to mimic bird flight for nearly a century, maybe this is the latest attempt."

We finally got down to the wrecked plane. There was heat still, even long after any fire had burned itself out.

"Let's move around the torn side. If there's a way in and anyone left alive, we will probably have to make a hole," Pa said, as he kept moving. I put my work gloves on as we worked our way around. There was shredded metal everywhere, and a lot of it was likely hot enough to scorch skin. I got around the side first and started pulling on a sheet of metal that had bent over the hole in the frame.

"Pa, I need help! I think I found a way in, but this won't budge!" Pa finished picking his way under the tail of the plane, and grabbed hold next to me. It took every bit of both of our strength to bend the sheet back a little.

"Son, I know it's a lot to ask. But do you think you could squeeze in there and look around? If there is a canopy release or something it could open up a bigger hole." I wasn't sure what would be in there... and wasn't keen on seeing a dead body if I could help it. Pa saw me hesitate and put his hand on my shoulder. "Listen, son. At some point in life we all have to come to terms with death. Once the spirit's left, what's behind can't hurt a soul. But I need you to get in there and see if there's anyone alive, while I look for something to pry the frame back further. You can do it." I looked up at him, and knowing he relied on me gave me the courage to step through that hole.

I had my electric torch and shone it around. The inside was very dark and cramped; it looked like Pa wouldn't fit inside even if he got through the hole. Suddenly I realized the entire thing was upside down; there were buttons and switches near my feet, and when I looked up—

I almost screamed. I'm ashamed to say it, but the sight of two small bodies hanging there turned my feet to rocks and my knees to jelly. They were strapped into seats and the arms and heads hung straight down. I stood there for a minute without moving before I remembered to breath again. I could hear Pa moving around outside, then he called out.

"Son, are you all right? I think I found a piece of the frame to help open up this hole more. What do you see?"

"I- There's-" Then I sobbed. "Pa, there's two dead kids in here! They're just hanging, the seats are on the roof, and they don't look any bigger than me!"

"They're kids?? I don't understand... I'm so sorry, son. You can come out now. Do you see any sort of hatch release?" I looked around, and noticed a third empty seat. Directly below that was a patch of dirt; a hole in the roof of the plane.

"Pa, the hatch would just open to the ground. This thing's flipped over." I heard Pa move further away to get a better view.

"Well, ain't that the truth. Can you make it out alright, son?"

I came back out the same way, and Pa was waiting right there. I fell into his arms and he just held me tight. "Pa, why are there kids in there? What is this thing?"

"I don't know, son. I don't understand either. It doesn't seem like there's anything we can do; let's head home. We can come back tomorrow and get them out to bury them. Maybe by then someone will come around to claim this." He said the next part mostly to himself. "Someone with deep pockets paid for this, and they will certainly want it back." We had only just started climbing back up the ravine wall when we heard a rush of small rocks and pebbles from a canyon a hundred feet away.

"Get down, son!" Pa dropped behind a rock and pulled me down. I started to speak but he put a hand over my mouth. He whispered into my ear: "Be very quiet until we see who it is. We don't want to startle someone who might have a gun." I nodded and he let go. Pa slowly leaned around the corner of the rock as the sounds of steps grew louder; but the steps stumbled and tripped, and dragged sometimes. Then I heard a sound like crying and running.

"NO! No, no, no, no..." The voice was low and hoarse, like someone out of breath. Then I just heard sobbing close by. Pa stood up quietly and motioned for me to stay put. He walked around the rock; I saw him stop suddenly, then he walked around the boulder out of sight.

"Excuse me sir! Are you alright?" Pa spoke out clearly and slowly. The sobbing cut off suddenly.

"Who are you?"

"I'm Earl Deevers. I live a couple miles off; I heard the crash and came to help. Were you part of the crew?"

There was a pause before the other man answered. "Yes. I'm Lieutenant Rick Tanner. Did you find anyone else?"

Now Pa paused. "I'm sorry. Nobody else survived." The other voice cried out again, then calmed. When he spoke again I got scared. Not for me or Pa, but for what the voice sounded like he would do.

"Then the general must be held to account." He sounded like I imagined the frontier judges used to sound when sentencing a horse thief. The voice continued, calmer now. "Thank you for trying to help. Could you give me a ride out of here? I ejected and ended up a ways from here. I honestly don't know how long ago or how far with all these canyons."

"Yes, we'd be happy to get you a place to rest and a hot meal. My son is with me. Come on out, boy." I stood up and walked around the corner, then stood still in surprise. Standing in front of Pa was another kid my height, with very shiny pants and shirt on. My mouth was hanging open when the kid spoke in a man's voice.

"Don't worry, I'm just a midget. This is my flight suit, I'm not an alien or anything."

I was confused. "Alien? What do you mean?" The man replied, "Like someone from another planet. Flash Gordon? Do you read magazines?" I shook my head. "No sir, just books for school. Are there beings on other planets, for real?"

Pa broke in. "No, son, and that's a silly notion. Now let's get the lieutenant back to the house so Ma can look at him. If you've been scrabbling through the canyons in the dark I'm sure your hands are torn up." The man looked down.

"Well, yes they are. I suppose I didn't feel it." He turned to look at the plane. Pa said, "We will come back to give your crew a proper burial." We then made our way back to the truck and drove home. By the time we got there, the man was completely asleep.

Pa sent me up to my room, but it was near to dawn anyways so I didn't fall asleep. Our house was built solid, but small, and Pa's voice tends to carry. I heard him talking with Ma.

"It was some sort of test aircraft. Bob was the only one who could get inside, and he thought he saw children dead in there. But it appears they were midgets. There was one survivor; he's asleep out in the truck. He's pretty much exhausted; seems he ejected and landed miles away and made his way to the crash site just as we were about to leave. When he wakes up, he'll probably be in shock. I'm sure he'll want to go back once it's light." Ma said something, but her voice is pretty soft and I couldn't make it out.

"Yes, and honestly that scares me. Those army boys can be mighty secretive, and touchy. And I can guarantee this entire thing is because of some top-secret project. They will know about where the crash happened, and they will be coming for the wreck and Lieutenant Tanner. But he seemed to blame some general for the crash, so I don't know how keen he will be to return. 'Course he has to, or face court-martial for desertion. But there's plenty of boys come back changed after seeing their friends all die in an instant."

Ma spoke again, but then they moved from the living room to their bedroom and I couldn't hear any more. I lay awake for a little longer. I was still rattled by the bodies I'd seen hanging from the ceiling. I feel terrible to admit it, but knowing they were grown men instead of boys like me was a relief.

I woke up several hours later, with the sun full in my window. It must've been all of eight o'clock, and I was shocked Ma had let me sleep so late. I pulled on jeans and came downstairs, and only the man we had rescued was sitting at the table. He had coffee and the remains of some biscuits in front of him, but his face was in his hands. I pulled a chair out from the table and he jerked back, falling back off his chair before he rolled up with his arms cocked like a boxer. For my part, I had jumped back too.

"I'm sorry, mister! I didn't mean to wake you, I just slept late and came down to get my breakfast!" He relaxed a little and picked the chair up, he seemed a little embarrassed.

"Don't worry about it, kid. I just didn't hear you come down. I wasn't sleeping, I'm just trying to think through what happened yesterday and figure out what to do next." He sat back down, as did I. Ma had left more biscuits on a plate, and I grabbed a couple along with the jam jar. I couldn't help but look at him every few seconds, and he noticed. After a couple minutes he reached over the table. "By the way, I hadn't caught your name. I'm Lieutenant Rick Tanner." I took his hand and shook it. "I'm Bob."

"Bob, it's nice to meet you. I greatly appreciate you and your Pa coming out last night, if you hadn't I'd probably still be stuck in the middle of the desert. So tell me, what do you do around here?"

"Well, I'm in charge of minding the chickens, and of course whatever chores Ma gives me to do. Pa has been teaching me more and more about fixing stuff up, since I'll take over the property one day. Sometimes I get to blow stumps out of the ground for Ma!"

"With what? Do you have black powder here?" At the time I was too proud of telling someone what I could do, to notice how interested he seemed to be very suddenly.

Pa came in from the back; "Alright, Lieutenant. I've finished up what I need to around here, so if you're ready to go back to the crash site we can leave."

"Can I come, Pa? I don't mind helping. If Ma doesn't need my help," I turned to her hopefully as she came in.

"I'm sure your father could use the help; but when you get home I'll need help planting the okra."

There were a few clouds in the sky and a stronger breeze than the day before. I was glad to ride in the back of the truck, with the cooler weather. I could hear Pa and Mr. Tanner talking up front, but couldn't hear anything they said with the noise of the truck and the wind. Pa was able to get us closer than the night before since he knew where the crash actually was, and we all got out of the truck. Mr. Tanner was my height but much stronger; he carried the same load of tools as Pa. We had crowbars and hacksaws to get into the plane, and wood and canvas bags to make stretchers to bring the bodies back.

"We need to move quickly, before the day starts to heat up," said Pa. "What about animals?" asked Mr. Tanner.

"We shouldn't have to worry about those until nightfall, and our being there would scare most things off anyway."

We set off through the canyons. Once or twice Pa looked up at the sky in the direction of the crash, and he narrowed his eyes each time. It was his thoughtful look, and I wondered what he was thinking about. I looked the same direction and just saw smudginess in the air. An hour later we were very close, when we started to hear noise. It sounded like a work crew; clink sounds of picks and shovels, pebbles scattering, and grunting of men moving heavy objects. Pa walked more slowly and motioned for us to do the same. He carefully set his pack down next to the canyon wall, and we did as well.

"It seems like we have company. Lieutenant, would the army have a good idea of where the crash happened?" Mr. Tanner nodded.

"I don't know why I didn't think of it sooner, but the plane was designed to be invisible to radar; it had a radio beacon so it could be tracked by the base."

We crawled up the side of the canyon to see the crash site. I barely peeked over the edge, and saw a dozen men dressed in green scrambling around the crashed plane. Most were digging around it; two were setting up a large tent. They had already cut a large hole in the plane's side, and a dozen yards from the tent were the two bodies with blankets draped over them. One man in the middle just stood there, looking at everything. He was middling height, and his chest was covered with shiny things. I heard Mr. Tanner breath in sharply, and turned to look at him. His face was set with a hard, hateful expression. "Mr. Tanner, are you okay?" Pa turned to look at him too, and we all slid down from the canyon rim.

"That's General Perkins. The aircraft is his pet project." He ran his hands through his hair and bent over. "It's the most maneuverable vehicle to ever leave the ground, and is invisible to radar. Unfortunately it takes a crew of three to operate; there are no mechanical devices capable of taking in all the readings and reacting quickly enough to keep the thing in the air, and it's too much for one person." He sat down and leaned back. "They also couldn't build it any bigger than it is, or the g-forces it can hit would tear it apart. Even aluminum isn't really light and strong enough for that thing; they've worked out new materials to build it with. So someone suggested recruiting midgets to fly it. We don't take up as much room, and we can handle more force without passing out." Mr. Tanner looked at my dad. "I wanted to serve America during the war. Obviously I was unfit for the draft or even enlistment. When a man in uniform came to my house and offered me a chance to do something, I was thrilled. There were two more, John Gibson and Ethan Morton. We trained for the last two years to work as a team, reading and reacting to all the instruments while on the ground.

"Looking back, I'm not shocked at what the general did. Over the last year it seemed like he stopped treating us as soldiers, or even men, but guinea pigs. He kept ordering us to train harder, made the simulated flights tougher. We thought he was just under pressure to deliver; there are rumors Stalin is working on the same thing."

"You said the general had to be held to account. For what?" My father asked in a low voice. The noise of work had died down somewhat; it was around midday, so they were probably having lunch. I had sandwiches and water in my bag and got them out. There were more clouds now, so we didn't worry about finding shade.

"Our first flight was a month ago, just a simple takeoff, circle, and landing. It went well. We had a longer flight a week later, and last week we tried some aerobatics. The craft performed perfectly, and we three were moving in unison. But when we landed and saw the general, he wasn't as pleased as we thought he would be. He was very curt with us, and told us to prepare for our next flight even more." He took a long drink of water. "Sorry, I'm from back east. Not used to the dry heat. Yesterday's flight was to test how well the plane stayed off the radar when performing high-speed, tight maneuvers. The idea is that the plane is curved so radar doesn't bounce back to the receiver, but there might be some orientations of the craft relative to the radar that it would show up. So anyway, we took off from Los Alamos, and for a couple of hours everything was fine. We were flying south, and every so often would initiate maneuvers to present different profiles to the radar station. We weren't far from here, when we heard the General's voice on the radio. He informed us that they were about to test a radio-control system that had been installed in the aircraft, and that the controls would not respond to us temporarily but not to worry."

The sounds of work resumed. We were all clustered together in what was becoming the shadow of the canyon wall.

"We all three protested, and told him there was no way the aircraft could function without our input. It doesn't act like a normal plane; parts of the body are covered in flexible fabric and control surfaces move underneath. But he and everyone else ignored us, and all of the sudden none of the controls would respond to us. We immediately started to see readings on the instruments that needed corrected, and were shouting to flight control to correct for them. I don't know if they couldn't hear us, or if they ignored us. But then we heard the general keep talking to the controllers; the radio must've been left on by accident. He didn't know we could hear."

Here his voice tightened. "He ordered the flight controllers to begin evasive maneuvers. Complicated twists, turns, and rolls, all over radio control, which can't even be used for a car or boat, much less an aircraft that is unstable and needs constant coordinated input to keep in the air. We soon learned the maneuvers were also worse than anything we practiced. The turns were faster and tighter; I almost blacked out once. I think it was as much to test out what we could really handle as much as the aircraft. Within a couple of minutes it started to become unstable; they continued to ignore our warnings over the radio. Finally, we started dropping toward the ground, and could see there was no way to stop a crash, even if we'd had control. John tried to eject, and then yelled out the eject handle was stuck in place. Ethan and I tried ours; all three were stuck. We knew they worked; we had practiced the ejection procedure on the ground before our first flight. The radio control must've also locked the eject handles, since the canopy would blow off if any one of us ejected. Those next few seconds were torture, all of us trying to work the handles loose before we hit the ground. I'm not sure why, but suddenly mine came loose. I ejected, and saw the plane keep dropping and crash. I didn't see any other parachutes. The wind carried me a far distance, then I made my way back here."

Pa looked up over the canyon edge again. "It doesn't look like they're going anywhere. And eventually they will probably post sentries. We should probably get back to the house and figure out what to do."

That night at dinner, Pa, Ma, and Mr. Tanner talked about everything. Ma thought we should call the sheriff, but Pa pointed out the military usually overruled local law enforcement. And by not reporting in, the lieutenant was now AWOL and could face court-martial. "If they even took me to court. I know what the general did, and what those people in the flight center did, even if it was under orders. I think we weren't meant to survive. But I'm still confused as to why he would risk our lives and risk the plane." We all headed to bed right after dinner; none of us had slept much the night before, and nobody had come up with an idea of what to do.

I woke up, this time to the sound of the truck starting outside. I jumped to the window in time to see it pulling out of the yard and back towards the canyons. Pa and Ma were both up too. "That fool; rain's coming and it will wash those canyons clean. He doesn't know what he's doing! Get dressed, honey. Bob, you awake?"

"Yes sir!"

"We've got to get to the crash site, and make sure the lieutenant doesn't do anything crazy! Let's get the mules hitched up!" We had two mules for plowing, and a wagon Pa used to use before he bought the truck. I heard a clapping sound and looked out the window.

"Pa, the shed door is hanging open!" We all ran downstairs, and Ma and I went to the barn to hitch the mules. It was plenty dark, but Ma had a couple of lanterns lit from the house. The wind was blowing pretty strong now. Pa ran over from the shed.

"He took the black powder! That's thirty years old; if he hits a rock too hard it could all go off. Let's go!" It started to sprinkle and that scared me; rain in the desert can turn into a flash flood, since the water falls too fast for the ground to absorb it. We set off towards the canyons; Pa was driving, and Ma held the two lanterns high to light the trail ahead. "Where is the crash, did you say?" She yelled above the wind.

"East side of Messer's Butte! Closest we could get was Line Canyon in the truck. How close do you think we can get with the Mules?" Ma's family had been in the area longer than Pa's, and she had ridden around a fair bit of the canyons when she was younger.

"If we go a little further south, there's a trail the mules could handle that would take us right to the top of the Butte. Then there should be a way down on foot. What are you thinking we'll do?"

"I don't know if we will be able to do much. He has a head start with the truck and is moving faster, but if he's going to try something with the black powder he will have to carry it about the last mile. He's a good man, but he's convinced the general deliberately caused his friend's deaths." It was an hour's ride to the canyon in the truck, but over rough ground. The mules took it only a little slower. We were about two miles out when we heard a sharp pop carried through the air. Pa stopped the mules to listen.

"Pa, was that the black powder?"

"No, son; it would've been much louder and sounded deeper. That sounded like-" Suddenly we heard over a dozen more pops. "Gunfire. Bob, hand Ma the shotgun, and hold the rifle ready. There's no comforting explanation for that many shots fired out here." Half an hour later we were at the foot of Messer's Butte, and started up the trail Ma remembered. The rain had kept to sprinkles, but we were still scared. Rain could already be falling miles away, and we wouldn't know it till the sound of rocks and logs being carried down the canyon meant it was too late. The mules kept pulling us up the trail, but Pa kept them from going too quickly. We weren't sure what had happened, and didn't want anyone hearing us. Finally we got to the top; it was fairly flat, about a hundred feet across. We got out of the wagon and quietly crawled to the other side. Below us lay the ravine the plane had crashed in, and beyond that the small field with tents. But now over a dozen dead bodies lay in a pile off to the side. I felt sick and turned towards Ma. She saw me and pulled me close. Pa started whispering.

"The lieutenant was right. The general is a monster. I can see him now; he's ordering a bunch of other men around. They're all in civilian clothes. We need to get back from the edge." We quietly pulled back; tears were filling my eyes. Earlier I had seen all those men alive and moving around; I'd seen more dead men in the last two days than I'd ever wanted to. We could hear shouted commands drifting up, but I couldn't understand the words. Pa seemed to, and his expression became the angriest I'd ever seen. Ma noticed it too.

"What are they saying?"

"I don't know what they are saying. But they are saying it in Russian. That General Perkins must have arranged this; crash the plane in the middle of the desert, or as close to Mexico as possible, and arrange for a recovery team. He sacrificed another dozen lives tonight; I wonder what they are paying him." Suddenly we heard more shouting and gunfire,

followed by a muffled boom. Pa moved quickly back to the edge to look, then motioned Ma to come up. I came too, but Pa turned and whispered urgently, "Go get the rifle, and be quiet about it!" I turned and moved as quietly back to the wagon as I could; the mules were getting nervous about the weather and started to shift their hooves.

I brought the rifle back over and handed it to Pa; Ma still had the shotgun, but we were too high up for it to do much. Another boom sounded, and I looked over the edge. Part of the bank over the ravine had been blown off, and half the plane was covered up by the rocks and dirt. It looked like someone had been caught near the blast; there was a body down in the ravine that hadn't been here before. There were about half a dozen more men wearing regular work clothes and holding guns, all staring about in confusion. The general was in the middle of it all, and yelling things I didn't understand, even though they sounded like English. Then I saw motion in another ravine below where the tents had been pitched; it was hard to see, but it looked like a small man moving around with a sack. I realized it was the lieutenant, sneaking around the camp and pouring black powder! He was dressed all in black; he must've taken some of my clothes before leaving the house.

He was hard to see with no moonlight, and the explosions had all the men focused on the side towards the crash. I pointed him out to Ma and Pa, and we watched him climb up into the camp and make his way into each tent. Then I heard a sound that chilled me; a low deep rumble, like when a train is several miles away but you're standing on the tracks. I knew there was a flash flood happening somewhere nearby; we were safe on the butte, but the lieutenant down below was in danger.

"Pa, do you hear that? If there's a flash flood coming, will it hit down there?" Pa considered, and looked at Ma. She was glancing around at the sky and pointed to the north. "There's lightning up there, and if the rainfall is with it, then the flood will come down Old Canyon. It could very well wash the entire area below us away."

"What about those men down there? Can we warn them?"

"It looks like they're willing to kill for what they want," said Pa. "I doubt they would give us a chance to warn them."

"What about the lieutenant? He might die down there!"

"Son, I can't think of a way to warn him without endangering our lives." There was another boom from below, and the tents went up. As the men all ran in that direction, we could see the lieutenant sneaking around the rocks and cactus back towards the crashed plane. He was laying fuse behind him as he went. In another few seconds he would be right below us. I looked over at Pa.

"There's a rope in the wagon. If you lower me down, I can grab him and you pull us both up!" Both of them shook their heads.

"It's too dangerous, the other men could turn around any minute and see you going down or coming up!" The low rumble was increasing. "Pa, the flash flood could hit any minute, and he's in the worst spot right now! I know I can do it!" Pa looked at me for a couple seconds, then nodded. I was surprised when Ma agreed, and ran to get the rope.

A minute later I was on my way down. The storm had moved in our direction, and the wind was blowing through the canyons and making awful howls. I kept an eye on where I was heading, but mainly let Pa and the mules do the work. I didn't think about what would happen if any of the men looked back this way and saw me; I could see them looking around the camp, and some had disappeared into the ravines. Twenty feet below me, the lieutenant was emptying the last of his bag of powder into a crevice below the other half of the plane.

"Mr. Tanner!" I whisper-shouted, and he jerked around and saw me. "Bob? What are you doing here? Get out; this is worse than I thought! General Perkins brought in a bunch of Russians and they killed everyone else! Clear out!"

"You hear that rumbling, crashing sound? There's a flash flood going to hit any second, we have to get out!" He looked confused, and then we heard a shout from the ravine edge above us. We looked up to see a man with a rifle, pointing it at us. Suddenly a gunshot sounded, and the man fell backwards. I looked up at the butte, and Pa was standing there with his rifle. He yelled out above the wind: "Get out of there, if you want to live!" I jumped at the lieutenant and wrapped my arms and legs around him, just as the rope around me pulled taut and I started moving up. Suddenly

the rumble turned into a roar, and in mid-air I looked to the north to see a mass of boulders, cactus trunks, and water twenty feet high leap around the corner of Old Canyon. I yelled out, and the lieutenant saw it too and grabbed on to me. We leaped in the air and I almost lost my grip on Mr. Tanner; Pa must've seen the flood too and hastened the mules along. I was slammed against the cliff wall and dragged several feet up; it tore the back off my shirt and seemed to rip my back open, but I held my grip. The flash flood passed less than ten feet below us, and we saw it obliterate the camp. The tents, men, dead bodies, and crashed plane all disappeared within a couple of seconds. Then I felt Ma and Pa's hands lifting us up over the rim of the cliff. I was shaking without realizing it, and barely heard Ma's cry when she saw my back.

Within a few minutes the flood was gone, but we knew that we wouldn't be able to get back to the house till daylight. There was no way of knowing which trails were still usable, or if another flash flood would come along. We started making a small camp there on the plateau, although I mainly just laid in the wagon on my stomach. Ma had one of the lanterns and said she was pulling pebbles out of my back; it felt more like she was digging around for my bones. Once Pa got a tarp set up with a couple of blankets on the ground, I heard him start speaking to Mr. Tanner, and I could tell he was plenty mad.

"What right have you, to come back over here in our truck with a load of black powder? What was your plan? And now we risked our lives coming out after you, and Bob especially dropping down to bring you up. What were you thinking?" Pa pretty much shouted that last part.

There was a pause before Mr. Tanner answered. "I'm sorry for putting you in danger, and I'm sorry for stealing your truck. My plan was to bury the remains of the aircraft and my crew, and-" He paused again, and then spoke in a guilty voice. "Murder General Perkins. I know that's wrong in the eyes of the law, but I know that it would be justice. The fact that he came out here, and earlier was just calmly ordering men around; the more I thought about it the angrier I became. I knew he was responsible for their deaths, and that he needed to be held accountable. Of course when I got here and saw another truck pull up and massacre the soldiers down there, everything made sense. I don't regret planning on killing him, but I do regret putting any of you in danger. I'm grateful you came out here last night, and that you came and saved me again tonight." I heard light footsteps approach the side of the wagon, and Mr. Tanner spoke out very near. "Bob, that was incredibly brave of you to come down there for me, and I'm grateful. I'm sorry to have put you in danger tonight."

"I forgive you, Mr. Tanner. I'm sorry you lost your friends." I was feeling real tired all of the sudden, probably from two nights in a row with a couple hours of sleep. I felt Ma put a blanket over me and drifted off. When I woke up the sun was high in the sky and we were moving down the butte. Ma was up front driving the mules, but I didn't see Pa or Mr. Tanner, and asked Ma about it. "They went to see if the truck is still there." When we got home the truck was sitting in the driveway, and Pa was putting a tarp over the bed. Mr. Tanner came out of the door with a bag over his shoulders. "Well, praise the Lord the truck is fine. What are you doing now?" Ma said as she stopped the wagon next to the truck. Pa said, "When we were driving out of the canyons we saw an army plane, a regular one, flying low and slow south of here. We both talked it over, and decided it's probably still looking for the plane, and now looking for the general. They would've been waiting for a morning report from him, and now are probably looking for the remains of the camp as well as the plane."

"So that led you to put a tarp on the truck?"

Mr. Tanner broke in. "Since I haven't reported in, I risk a court martial for being absent without leave. But I've already told your husband I'm not going back. For one thing, I don't know who else might be working with the Russians. If I show up alive and the general is dead, there will be suspicions that I had something to do with his death; and if there are other traitors at the base, they might decide to kill me on the chance I found out about the plot."

"Do you have a family, Mr. Tanner?"

"I'm not married; I have siblings, but I'm afraid of putting them in danger if I try to go home. I've decided to leave the country." Pa broke in. "I'm taking him to San Diego. I know a few freight steamer captains down there who could

get him out of the country. The quicker we get him out of here, the less risk that he's discovered to be alive, or that we helped him."

August 4th, 2019

"A couple weeks later, there were more trucks out in the canyons, I guess attracted by the explosions only a couple days apart. Of course it helped that a couple pieces of the experimental plane were found, even though the flood had carried them miles from the actual crash site. The army never came back in after the story of a suspected alien crash started spreading; I imagine they eventually figured out they had a Communist defector on their staff, and if they showed any signs of trying to retrieve something or cover anything up, it would only make the embarrassing truth more likely to be discovered. When Pa got home, he said they had found an old friend of his from the war that now operated a freighter. Your uncle signed on; we never heard from him again and didn't expect to. Pa did find out later the ship ended up spending time off the Vietnam coast during that war. The ship's name was Regent Sparrow. And that's all I can give you. Plus this, of course."

I opened the small package and handed the contents to him. It was his uncle's flight suit, still reflective and small. If anyone had found it in my house over the years, it would've brought the entire country's reporters down on my head.

"Thank you for the story, and for helping my uncle. I'll keep in touch; guess I need to get a passport now!" He shook my hand, and after finishing his tea was on the road. About three months later, I got a letter and photo in the mail. It was from Dell, and the photo was of him with a very much older Rick, as well as a dozen more people of various ages.

"Dear Mr. Deevers,

Incredibly, my uncle was still alive in southern Vietnam. He married a few years after arriving in the area on the Regent Sparrow, and has had children and grandchildren, with a great-grandchild on the way. I've now met an entirely new wing of our family. Uncle Rick said to tell you thank you once again, not only for helping him but never letting the secret out. He likely will not be able to travel back to the States, but one day perhaps I'll visit again. God Bless, Dell Tanner."

About the Author

Marshall Harrup started reading voraciously as a young boy, and has never slowed down. Science Fiction is his favorite genre due to the back and forth relationship it has with real-world technology and research. He works as an optical engineer on the Mississippi Gulf Coast, where he and his wife Amanda are heavily involved in their church and in raising their son Caden. He enjoys reading, board games, playing guitar, and seeing new parts of the country with his family.

A KITE IN MY GRIP

Dheepa Saravanan

"Have you finished your job? Today was your deadline!" The manager yelled at Aditi, in front of her peers.

"Sir please, let's talk in your cabin," Aditi said in her pleaded tone.

"What's there to talk, submit today or get ready for your send-off party," the manager showed his commanding attitude.

"Sir, understand my situation, I took a week off because my mother was hospitalized. You know very well," said Aditi.

"Don't give me puerile reasons, I gave you two days extension and supported you, but still your work is not yet completed," the manager said.

Amidst the conversation, gossip spread throughout her peers. Some were sorry for her; some were thrilled to see her in this scene.

"She's not interested in this job," one colleague complained to others about her.

"She was mentally upset because of her mother's health," another colleague felt for her.

Aditi could no longer bear it; finally, she agreed to submit it by evening. She didn't take her lunch on that day. She fixed her eyes to her computer for long hours and mailed it to her manager.

On the way back to her home, she brought some medicines to her mother who was suffering from persistent coughing.

Aditi was a short (maybe just about five feet tall) adult woman with medium toned skin and short hair. She belonged to a middle-class family and was the only daughter of her parents. Her father ran a bike mechanic shop and received income enough to run a family. In the midst of the crisis, he enlisted his daughter to study. She had always been passionate about life and her principle was to enjoy every crossing minute. She was very interested in photography, and had decided to pursue it after schooling. But life had played the reverse. With the persistent insistence of her parents, life threw her into engineering. By wondering why this is so? What will I do next? Four years have gone by like a stranger. Destiny landed her in an IT company. Instead of the camera, she held the mouse to turn on the computer. She changed day by day and lost herself in the stress of work.

She was not interested in her job, simply holding it to support her family. But her dream was still alive. Sometimes she thought of throwing it all away, and get lost somewhere but it all vanishes in a moment when thinking of her parents. All these problems, along with her mother's health, made her depressed and unable to concentrate on her work.

She gave medicines to her mother, refreshed, and went straight away to her only friend, Ruby, who lived near her as a neighbour. They both were schoolmates, as well as close friends. Aditi usually shared all about her to this single soul. Ruby understood her and a well-wisher too. She gave her shoulder to lean on every trouble day.

Aditi felt light after it has been discussed with Ruby, so today, she went to her home. She greeted Ruby's mother and questioned her whereabouts.

"She was upstairs, with her brother," Ruby's mother said. Without replying a word, Aditi moved up and reached upstairs. The evening breeze hit her. She saw Ruby and Ruben, who was her younger brother. They were in the corner with a kite, ready for launch.

"Hi Aditi," Ruby said hugging her. In response, she said no words and smiled at her.

Ruben also greeted her, but his whole mind was on the kite that had just begun to fly a minute ago.

Aditi shared her story of what happened today and felt sad. Ruby sighed in an expressionless way and then smiled at her, which was the signal of the sermon. Aditi understood that she was going to say something, but she felt confused when Ruby grabbed the kite from her brother and turned to Aditi.

"Hold on to this kite," Ruby said.

"Oh Ruby, I'm not interested in this," Aditi said.

Ruby forcibly took Aditi's hand and gave her the kite. By watching all this her brother glared at them both and left from that place.

"How's the kite," Ruby raised the question to Aditi in her sweet tone.

"Yeah, it looks colourful and flies free." Aditi didn't know why she was asking this.

"Exactly Aditi, Life resembles this kite. It gives you unexpected things whether you like it or not. Kites can't really fly free as it thinks it is, it should be anchored the one who holds it.

"Just hold it in your full grip. Loosen your grip to fly higher. It's difficult to rise but easy to fall. Strong wind may confront you, fight back and learn to balance it. At last turmoil, which travelled towards you, will turn positive and aims to fly higher. If you try to release the grip, it loses control and flies away from you. It can get hit or tear or settle into other hands. It will never return, eventually only you feel empty.

"Let your kite fly high, hold it, balance it when it tries to hide from your vision, pull it to your direction. Grab your present and work for your passion," Ruby preached.

Aditi felt still kite was in her hands, flew very high by keeping balance over it. Not only was flying a kite fun to do, it also can teach a valuable lesson on living. Sometimes small things can bring greater results in life. While thinking this, a smile began to rise on her lips as well as in her life too.

About the Author

Dheepa Saravanan resides in Tamilnadu, India. She is a graduate in Fashion Technology from Anna University, Tamil Nadu and currently works as a freelance Textile and Apparel designer. She loves writing and contributes her writing to many online platforms. Dheepa was writing poems and short stories for the anthologies. She observes people and her surroundings keenly to recreate in her stories. She even runs her own blog named "A Girl's Memoir", where she showcases her writings. She writes in simple English so that everyone can read her stories no matter what language they speak. Her target was to share her ideas with larger audience through her writings. Apart from this, she is an animal lover and loves to explore new places. In the future, Dheepa plans to write more anthological books. To know more about the author, you may follow her on...

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SILENT STARS SHINING

Lorenzo Patelli

Silence. Near total silence. Except for the soft rustle of the vents pushing out recycled air into the room, and the steady vibrations of the ship underfoot, the atrium provided a place of solitude. Looking up through the viewport overhead, it was possible to see the shimmering blaze of stars as they shot past in a blur of light. Traveling at relativistic speeds through the heavens created a beautiful and mesmerizing vista to gaze upon in the otherwise plain and unadorned vessel. It allowed the beholder to realize their petty insignificance in a universe that is vast and amazing beyond comprehension. Contrasting the splendor of the view, the room was filled with the usual overflow of pipes and wiring that infested the ship, and was painted in the same pale gray as the majority of the interior; however, this room was special. It boasted only two chairs but that was alright; this room was a place of inflection and so there was no need for more. Strapping into one of the chairs, reclining, and just allowing the swirling of the stars to work its hypnotic effect on you was enough. It allowed the mind to float away into the heavens and forget about the existence of calamities and terror that seemed to have encroached upon humanity as of late. Simply escaping the fear that seemed to reside in the heart of life itself was reward enough. This is what made the atrium special, according to Blayne anyways.

He often enjoyed thinking about history while in the atrium. Knowing where man has come from and wondering where they have yet to explore was an intoxicating subject. Since a child he had poured over the history books, most notably the ones concerning man's great adventures into places unknown, hence his love for Earth's Colonial Exploration Fleet. This is also why he was currently thinking, as he gazed out the atrium viewport, about earth's first flight amongst the stars and where it had irrevocably led her.

Once man had finally undertaken the last great journey, the voyage into space, it was thought that humanity could overcome anything, but they had no idea the horror that would follow. Uniting the nations through a joint colonization effort allowed for unprecedented cooperation among the remaining global superpowers. Creating a vast armada of extra-terrestrial ships, it was the hope of humanity to spread her seed among the stars. Selecting thousands upon thousands of families with bright futures, and the perfect combination of useful skill and unbridled ambition, the ships set forth with hope against the daunting challenge of colonizing other planets. They set forth with the blessing of an entire planet they were leaving behind. They knew it was a dangerous and unpredictable undertaking, and with no exact knowledge of how long it may take the seed ships to find a surrogate home, humanity waited with bated breath. Although it was known that the mission may not be able to count success until well after some of the original founders had passed away, man often forgets how slow the walk of time can really be when waiting upon the future. They forget that even with the invention of a successful warp drive, cosmic distances are unfathomably large and take equally large periods of time to traverse. Years upon years passed by and there was no reply of success. These years turned into decades and then half a century. Interest in the mission, which at first was incredible, slowly diminished until only the scientists in their increasingly sparse control rooms were conscious of its existence.

Then, unexpectedly, the first report of a successful landing and colonization effort was received. The response was tremendous. It renewed the passion for space that had since left mankind. Then, as unexpected as the first, more reports began to pour in depicting successful habitation and terraforming efforts on other planets. Filled with renewed vigor, new seed ships were sent out into space to double and even triple colonization efforts. Armed with new technologies, the process continued faster than ever before. The population on foreign planets was booming, and they began sending out teams of their own to explore space.

Of course, with all the success and exclamation there also came inevitable distress and woe. Countless colonization efforts failed, ships went missing never to be heard from again, and there was the occasional ship that was rediscovered

only to be found destroyed, but this only served to focus the resolve of those involved. Technological innovation was driven forward by these efforts in ways unseen since the last great wars.

It was interesting, Blayne thought, how such a wonderful epoch in the history of man could be turned into a source of such great terror. It was nearly a century after contact had been remade with the initial seed ships that the first attacks came. When the ruins of the first attack were discovered it was thought that perhaps a civil war had broken out amongst the colonial inhabitants and they had destroyed themselves in the process. This theory was quickly set aside when peculiarities were found amongst the ruins. Evidence left behind of the weapon damage was far beyond anything that the ColEx Fleet possessed; it indicated that some type of foreign advanced directed energy weapons were used. Weapons they would soon learn to fear. In addition to this, there was no evidence remaining of the human inhabitants themselves at all, but before an answer could be found a second colonial attack came. This time a chilling cry for help managed to escape the attack that suggested an invading force of foreign origins like nothing they had seen before. More attacks soon followed this. Some of them were aimed at exploratory parties and others at colony centers themselves. The devastating attacks came without warning, and they showed no hesitation in their obliteration of the colonies. The identity of the attackers, as well as what purpose drove them—if they had one—was left unknown. They struck as lightning—appearing suddenly and without warning and wiping out all human resistance with seemingly minimal effort. Making the attacks even more horrifying was the fact that no human remains were ever recovered when arriving upon the scene of an attack. The complete destruction of all infrastructure would be readily apparent, but the existence of all humanity would be wiped away. It was undetermined if the enemy simply executed every individual they found or if they stole them away for some other unknown sick purpose.

Panic began setting in amongst the colonies, and cries arose for a defensive space fleet followed by retaliatory action. A fleet was formed. Unlike any other in the history of the Earth, the United Colonies Space Defense was the greatest assembled military might in the storied struggle of humanity. They set out for space to provide defense of Earth and all her colonies. Although the mere presence of the UCSD brought with it a sense of security to the people it represented, where the enemy originated from was unfortunately still unknown thereby making any retaliatory action impossible. Likewise, predicting where and when the enemy would attack proved impossible which made the war on the Ignoti, as they came to be called, an unbearable game of waiting.

The sporadic and lethal attacks had been going on well over two decades now. Where the trails of history lead from this point forward is a question that Blayne had no answer for. All he knew was that he wanted to make a contribution, however meager, to the legacy of man. To this end, leaving the ColEx Fleet and joining the UCSD at age 18 was the logical conclusion for him. Following the years of vigorous training and endless hours in the flight simulators that accompanied this decision, he earned his wings as a Trygon pilot. Now he was on board the UCSD Prodrumus heading for the planetary colony called Lehtis to serve as a guard against any threat from the deep. They had been travelling for some time now and he knew that they must be getting close to their planetary destination.

Unclipping himself from the chair, Blayne righted himself while giving one last look at the swirl of stars through the atrium viewport. If only this guerrilla war with the Ignoti could come to an end, then he could truly appreciate the majesty the view enticed him with, but he knew now was not the time for sentimentality. Tearing his eyes away from the stars he gave himself a push off the chair and began floating through the door and into the passageway. He gripped the rung on the doorframe, pulled himself around, and redirected himself towards his bunkroom. Hopefully, his bunkmates will not have noticed his absence and he could still get a few hours of sleep before having to report to the mess hall.

He reached his quarters and attempted to unlatch the door without creating too much noise. Sneaking inside, he lightly pushed off the bulkhead to float towards his bunk meanwhile wary of any miscellaneous objects that may be floating around despite regulations that would prohibit such negligence. Reaching his berth, Blayne pulled himself inside and was about to close the curtain offering the only real privacy he could expect aboard the Prodrumus when, to his

dismay, a low powered personal light clicked on across the room. Knowing he was about to be grilled about his whereabouts, Blayne twisted himself around slowly. Lying across the walkway from him was Massey; the man he probably considered his closest friend aboard the *Prodromus*. He was a shorter, nearly squat fellow but that did not stop him from keeping his body in peak physical condition. He possessed a more than healthy amount of pride, and as such, he would not let his smaller stature serve as an excuse for weakness. Although Massey often time came across as unapproachable due to his intensity, he had a truly soft core that deeply cared for his crewmates.

Blayne met his eyes but did not initially say anything. He waited for Massey to make whatever remark was clearly hanging on his lips. After several moments of silence, Blayne was about to offer up an unsolicited excuse for his absence, but Massey spoke first.

“Blayne, what do you think you’re doing?” Someone shifted in a neighboring bunk giving Massey pause, and then he consciously lowered his voice to a whisper. “You can’t just keep sneaking off in the middle of the night to do whatever it is you’re doing.”

“Night” was, of course, a relative term since there was no true day or night cycle in the depths of space, but this was entirely beside the point. Blayne could tell readily enough that Massey was more concerned than he was mad, but Blayne was not ready to explain his sojourn off to the atrium. He felt it would not befit a soldier to speak of beauty or internal reflection, so he simply waited for Massey to say what he was going to say, which he shortly did.

“Seriously man, I mean it! One of these times you’re going to get caught, and they’re going to shoot you off into space to be eaten by some black hole. Whatever it is you’re doing you have to stop. Besides, every morning you’re looking worse and worse for the wear. How are you going to make ya daddy proud if you’re falling asleep in your *Trygon* during an exercise?”

“I’ll be fine. I just had to hit the head.”

“For two hours? Right. Anyway, while you were away a memo came in. We are supposed to arrive at *Lehktis* by morning. Once we get there our squadron will be among those sent down to the surface to help deliver supplies, and then we will have a couple days of leave before coming back up. So, do yourself a favor while we’re there and try to rest a little—get your head on straight. Maybe even try to find yourself a nice lady. I hear these colonial girls have a little somethin’ special.”

Blayne just gave him a snort in response and twisted back around. His reprimand was light, and he knew Massey was just trying to look out for his best interest. While hooking his bed straps around his chest and closing his curtain, he saw Massey turning off his light and doing the same. He tried to relax his body and allow sleep to overtake him, but his mind was still too active, especially after learning that they were almost to *Lehktis*. He had heard wonderful things about this planet. That it sparkled like a gem set in the black silk of space, that the three natural satellites in orbit around the planet glowed more brilliant than Earth’s moon itself, and the lush flora that covered the surface wore the colors of the most vibrant of rainbows. Although he would be on duty for the majority of his time there, patrolling space around the perimeter of the system, it was a great location to be stationed. He was imagining what the colony on this planet might be like, what kind of culture had developed in the intervening years since its founding, when he drifted off into a restful sleep.

Screaming. Terrible Screaming. Blayne found himself swimming towards the surface of a bottomless ocean with muffled screams of terror filling his ears, but as he neared the surface he realized that it was not screaming. No, the shrieking noise was now lowering in pitch and it began to take on a rhythmic throb that was just as mortifying. Deep inside he knew that it was a bad noise, but he did not know why. His lungs were beginning to burn in the darkness, and he could see the light at the surface getting closer and closer. He began to swing his arms wildly until he broke the surface of the

stifling ocean. His eyes shot open and he involuntarily tried sitting up as his swinging hand struck the low ceiling that formed the bunk above him. It took a moment to register several important facts. The first was that he had been dreaming. The second was that he was still strapped in his sleeping berth so he could not sit up even if he wanted to. The third, and arguably the most important fact, was that the screaming was real. It was the scream of the klaxon sounding on all decks of their vessel indicating an emergency. The significance of the third fact finally broke through his grogginess and sent a surge of adrenaline through his system. In several quick motions Blayne undid the straps holding him in place and pulled himself out of his bunk. He efficiently pulled on his jumpsuit in the zero-g environment in a manner that only comes with daily drills accompanied by incessantly screaming drill sergeants. Half the bunks in his quarters were already empty—his bunkmates must have already left for the mess hall by the time the alarm sounded.

He needed to find out what was going on. He pushed himself toward the door latch and pulled his body into the passageway. Over the noise of the alarms he could hear a voice from the speakers give a repeated warning to all personnel aboard.

“This is not a drill! This is not a drill! General quarters, general quarters! All hands man your battle stations! This is not a drill! This is not...,” the voice continued repeating in its assertive and eerily calm voice given the circumstances.

Blayne immediately turned around and began making his way toward the aft of the vessel where the Trygon launching station resided. Along the way he turned and made a slight detour that took him in the direction of the atrium. Hoping he might get a glimpse of anything that could offer a clue to the situation occurring outside the ship, he found the correct door, pulled himself inside, and immediately gave himself a push off the deck towards the overhead view-port. What he saw made his heart freeze. They had apparently arrived at Lehtis while he was asleep, but the colony that was supposed to inhabit the planet must have been utterly obliterated. In orbit around the planet were several massive vessels of a design he had never encountered before. Shooting forth from the vessels towards the planet were beams of directed energy nearly the size of an entire Trygon fighter ship. He could see from his relatively close position to the enemy ships that the Ignoti were beginning to maneuver themselves away from the planet and in the direction of the Prodrumus.

Hastily launching himself away from the port and toward the door, he accidentally floated right into one of the protruding beams. It caught him directly above his right eye and he felt the sting of his flesh splitting and the warm sensation of several droplets of blood oozing out. There was no time to worry about it now. He quickly pulled himself back into the passageway and thrust himself aft. Making sure to hug the port bulkhead as he moved, streams of opposing traffic following the starboard side moved towards the ship's fore to man weapon emplacements there. After nearly a minute of frantically guiding himself down the passageway and around and past fellow crewmen, he finally arrived at the Trygon launching station. Here he found Massey along with the rest of his flight group. Their flight group was composed of eight men—four pilots for four Trygons with a gunner for each. Their commander, Jenkins, was just beginning to apprise them of the situation, for apparently Blayne was the last to arrive.

“Here's how it is men. The Ignoti apparently couldn't wait for the Prodrumus to arrive, and, acting like the sick fleas they are, decided to attack the defenseless Lehtis beyond recognition.” A pause. “Lehtis is now gone.”

This announcement was enough to draw sharp gasps from the pilots in attendance. Much to Jenkins' satisfaction, however, their discipline was enough that this was their only reaction and he continued.

“When we arrived in-system the Ignoti were apparently just finishing up their homicidal handiwork, because our scans are unable to pick up any human life left on that rock. Now I know these punks need to be taught a lesson in manners—learn to stay away from where they're not welcome—but it will have to wait until another day. Their fleet grossly outnumbers ours, and we can't afford to risk the lives aboard this vessel for a planet that's already been lost. Don't you dare worry though. They will get theirs someday very soon. Now suit up! Those Ignoti won't be letting us go without a challenge.” Finishing his address, he put words to action by grabbing his VacSuit off the wall-mounted rack.

Commander Jenkins was a good man. He had a heart for the men, and he had been serving long enough to know that sometimes a word of self-assured confidence could be the most powerful tool. He was older than the rest of the men in his command, and it was clear that his large and powerful form was not composed entirely of muscle like it had once been, but his wisdom and capacity as a pilot was never questioned. Blayne, alongside Massey and the other five members of the flight, quickly followed suit and pulled over their protective VacSuits that performed vital functions in their Trygon fighter ships. The VacSuits connected to their ship's life support and provided a steady stream of health data corresponding to the wearer. In addition to this, the suits were pressurized and provided thermal and cosmic radiation protection in the case of a pilot surviving the destruction of the ship. In these situations, the suits had homing beacons that could be employed, as well as small but powerful maneuvering thrusters.

Once Blayne finished pulling on and sealing up his suit, he grabbed his small sidearm and directed himself towards his fighter. Within the launching station, only the rear half of each Trygon was visible—only what was necessary to enter the cockpit. The front half of each vessel protruded into a small tunnel that fed directly through the side of the Pro-dromus and into space in a manner similar to a torpedo tube. This allowed for the pilots to quickly and easily enter the cockpits of their fighters and launch directly into battle, thus saving time on deployment. Upon returning to the ship their fighters would come back through the same tunnel with use of a landing assist and be pulled back inside where the system would rotate, reorient, and refuel them to be prepared for another launch. After reaching his personal fighter craft, Blayne did a cursory glance over the stern of his ship, keeping a watchful eye for anything that looked or felt out of place. With everything looking to be in order, he and Massey did a quick check on each other's VacSuit. Finding everything to satisfaction he popped the hatch on his fighter and climbed inside and into his seat. He placed his sidearm in a wall compartment and checked underneath his seat for a box of assorted survival supplies. The box was there and fully stocked just as he always made sure it was. He continued his mental pre-flight checklist and buckled himself into his pilot's chair followed by his suit into the life support. His helmet's heads-up display came online and immediately began updating itself based on his current surroundings and his biometrics. He reached forward and nudged a picture of his family he had hanging near his instrument panel. It was a very old picture, but he hadn't had the opportunity to see them in years, so it was one of the very few mementos he had of them.

Bringing him out of his momentary reverie was the sound of Massey, his gunner, climbing noisily into the seat behind him. Like Blayne, Massey had a routine that he followed every time he entered their Trygon. In fact, as far as he knew all pilots likely had one, for they were a superstitious bunch. With the fatality rate of pilots in combat against the Ignoti being as high as it was, it was easy to consider certain items or routines lucky when a pilot managed to return from a flight alive. Their routines and lucky charms may have seemed as small things, trivial, but they were concrete things in which they have a small measure of tangible control over – a boon to the spirit when so much of their fate often seemed out of their control. When all else seemed futile, being able to grasp the smallest of hopes is sometimes the only measurable gauge of success. This was the bond of the pilots: A bond between fellow men that could only be known by those who fight and die together. A bond that allows them to continually press on.

Ultimately though, the bond that forms between man and machine is like none other. When a pilot has spent enough time in the cockpit of his ship, he begins to feel how the ship feels and think one with the ship. They form a symbiotic being as they meld into a single entity moving through space. Something as simple as the sound of a component rattling out of character or an out of place glint on the exterior can alert the acute senses of the pilot who serves as caretaker and friend. Blayne couldn't help but think how the evolution of man would further entwine with machine as the ages pass; how humanity would continue to develop technology, and how its advance would be molded by their needs, but also how technology would reshape humanity in return.

Maybe he had been doing too much thinking. Spending too much time in the atrium gazing at the stars. Now was not the time to think. Now was the time for instinct. Instinct that had been drilled into him through hours upon hours of training.

He could hear Massey finally settle in which meant they were now prepped and ready to go. Blayne allowed himself a moment to clear his head and take a relaxing breath after all the rushing that immediately followed his awakening. By now their vessel surely must have entered warp drive to escape the reach of the planet and the Ignoti that surrounded it. All he could do now was wait for the call that the danger had passed and they could return from general quarters. He had just laid his head back against the head cradle when a shudder suddenly shook the ship. He picked up his head and was about to ask Massey if he noticed it when another shudder rocked the ship. This time it was much more powerful. Suddenly, all the lights in the launching station flickered on and off as the ship rocked yet again – shaking violently enough to knock maintenance items clear out of their compartments and send them floating lazily about the strobelit room. After one last violent shake, Blayne felt the ship lurch out of warp with a terrible groaning that made it feel as though the ship were about to break in two. Barely a moment went by before more alarms and bells were added to the already cacophonous symphony emanating from the wall mounted speakers. Through his helmet's earpiece, the firm voice of Commander Jenkins suddenly came through startling Blayne.

"This is it, men! It's time to extract some justice on these Ignoti. Seal your cockpits and prepare for launch."

"Commander, what's going on?" It was the voice of Massey coming through his helmet comm. "I thought we made it to warp?"

"We did, son, but those creeps managed to follow our warp vector and if that wasn't enough they somehow disrupted our warp shielding. We've been spit balled back into real space with a fried space-field generator. We won't be leaving anytime soon. And to boot it looks like we've come out over an unknown planet. Don't be counting on any outside help."

This is it then, thought Blayne, time to prove my worth. He hoped their Trygon flight, along with the other three, would be able to provide adequate defense from the enemy's fighters. The Ignoti's arrow-shaped Sagitta were quick and powerful. It took vast skill and cunning if you wished to even stand a chance against them. He knew of only a few instances in which friendly Trygons were able to take down a group of Sagitta, but those small victories always came at high cost. If they managed to at least keep the Sagitta occupied for long enough, then the Prodrumus could make use of the massive firepower that all battleships like her possessed and provide challenge to the opposing fleet.

"Prepare to launch in 5..."

Launch control was now giving him his final prelaunch countdown. Refocusing his resolve as his Trygon slid fully into the launch tube and the breech door behind him moved into place, Blayne looked forward out his cockpit window, and down the dark tunnel that led to the void of space.

"4..."

He could see the muzzle door at the end of the tunnel begin to slide open in preparation for his launch. Red guide lights began to flicker on that would lead him into the battle.

"3..."

He felt the hand of Massey reaching down through the gunner station and give his shoulder a pat. Looking back, he locked eyes with his friend, and they gave each other a silent nod of acknowledgement.

"2..."

His ship lurched as it moved forward into final launching position, and he hit the switch to unlatch his ship from its mooring.

"1..."

He tightened his grip on the yoke, focused on the lights overhead, breathed in and held one final breath, and braced himself for the sudden acceleration.

"Launch!"

Blayne thumbed the ignition switch sending him hurtling down the short tunnel into space. The acceleration was tremendous. He was pushed back deep into his pilot's chair, and the breath he was holding was forcefully expelled from

his lungs. The flashing lights overhead that had changed from red to green on launch were now merely a blur—a beacon for him to concentrate on during the few short moments it took to escape the confines of the battleship.

Then he was free. Emerging from the side of the ship, he shot directly towards the enemy position. On his sides he could see the other three members of his flight soaring out of their respective launch tunnels as well. Directly behind the Ignoti fleet lay a planet like he had never seen before. As if they had left the gem of Lehtis only to find its unholy inversion. This planet was as dark and unwelcoming as any he could imagine. Giving the impression of a hole in the very depths of space, it was a swirling mass of liquid black. An onyx that had been violently breathed to life. Blayne could not help feel it served as a sort of omen for things to come, but he could not let such thoughts enter his mind now. He turned his eyes away from the planet and focused his attention on the enemy Sagitta now slowly approaching.

“Everybody form up on me!” Commander Jenkins began dictating to the group. “Our flight is going to be the tip of the spear on this attack. We’ll drop in low and fast relative to their formation and attack them from below, and with any luck we may catch a few from behind. The other three flights will follow us in with a fanning maneuver from above. We want to keep their focus off the Prodrumus as long as we can.”

Following Jenkins’ command to form up, Blayne guided his ship into the flight’s second position port and abaft of his commander. The third craft came in starboard and abaft of the commander with the fourth falling in starboard and abaft of the third ship. They formed an asymmetrical arrowhead directed towards the enemy who were now stationed in a surprisingly still formation.

“What are they waiting around for?” Blayne asked out of nervousness. He did not understand why the Ignoti would bother to pursue them through space and knock them out of warp if they were not going to use this critical moment of vulnerability to launch a follow up attack.

“Keep the nonessential chatter to a minimum, Two,” Jenkins interjected, “this just means...”

But he didn’t have time to finish his thought, because his attention was suddenly drawn when three enemy battleships maneuvered apart to reveal a smaller, destroyer-style ship hiding behind them. It was known that the UCSD certainly did not have a complete accounting of Ignoti ships and technology, but this was a ship like they had never encountered before. It appeared to have a cavernous mouth at the bow of the vessel, and a body that slimmed down to a narrow tail at the stern. As their formation rocketed towards the enemy, the lack of Sagitta coming to greet them began to gnaw at Blayne’s brain. As if in response to the inactivity assumed by Blayne, the center of the destroyer’s mouth began to rotate hundreds of circular rows of protrusions that reminded him of the rows of teeth found in a shark’s mouth.

Then, without warning, the mouth with the rotating rings of teeth began to glow so intensely that Blayne had to turn his face away even with his UV protected helmet lens in place. A moment later, a blinding beam of light, a stream of deadly and intensely focused energy, shot out from the mouth and connected with the starboard side of the Prodrumus. Instantaneously, the side of the ship melted into a mass of boiling liquid metal that exploded out into space. The massive globs of metal quickly refroze, thereby creating projectile missiles that rocketed in every direction. The damage done to the side of the vessel was tremendous. Parts of the ship that were now exposed to the vacuum of space faced even more damage as pressurized oxygen blasted its way through damaged bulkheads in nature’s attempt to eradicate the pressure imbalance between the ship and space. The launch tunnels where his flight had been only moments before were utterly destroyed, and the tunnels for second flight that lay directly below theirs was equally devastated.

“Commander, was second flight able to make it out in time?” It was the shaken voice of Four asking, but there was no need for reply. The devastation was apparent. “Commander, what do we do?”

Before Jenkins even had a chance to reply, the enemy destroyer fired its deadly weapon yet again at the Prodrumus. The damage was so catastrophic that it was clear their home away from home no longer had any chance for survival. The intense beam of coherent light tore completely through the ship and ripped it in two. Interior explosions began rocking it further apart, and the glow of interior fires was visible where there was still oxygen left to burn. Drawing too close to the highly protected fuel reserves, the intense heat of fire and explosions soon set off a highly explosive reaction. The

aft half of the ship was completely incinerated in the resulting explosion, and the fore sustained incalculable damage. Blayne wished for there to be survivors still aboard, but the ache in his gut belied his hopes. He knew there was nothing left of worth in the wreckage. Now it was simply a pile of scrap metal floating through space that may someday wander into the heart of a star and find its peace. Now, however, he had other concerns to attend to. The members of his flight were the sole surviving crew of the *Prodromus*; they had to act quickly. Being the first one to come to his senses in the aftermath of the destruction, Commander Jenkins was the first to speak something intelligible amongst the gasps and cries.

"I think it's time we demonstrated a little hospitality of our own, one flight. Show them what humanity has to offer. If we're going down today, then we're certainly taking some of them with us!" His thrusters flared as he launched ahead of the group to lead the charge. Blayne followed suit and he could see Three and Four on his starboard side doing the same. "I'd say today calls for something different. The Leeroy maneuver, let's make it happen!"

Following his own instruction, Blayne saw his commander pull up from their original vector and begin a tight barrel roll that was directed into the very heart of the enemy fleet – his *Trygon* moved consistently toward the enemy while he rotated it about the longitudinal axis in a helical fashion. Blayne followed suit by pulling back on his stick and then twisting himself into a barrel roll that followed opposite the commander's spiraling path. Looking back, he saw Three and Four doing the same spiraling maneuver; however, their spiral pair rotated counter to Jenkins' and his, possessed a slightly larger turn radius, and followed just aft of the Commander and Blayne. The Leeroy maneuver made them more difficult targets to hit because of their constant rotary motion. It also made it harder for an enemy to fall in behind their tail to get a shot because of the pairing system. If an enemy did happen to fall in on their stern, their partner could drop back in the spiral until they had the enemy in their own sights. It was a beautiful maneuver to behold, but it required a confident team that could read and trust every movement made by their partner and the rest of the flight. It was said Commander Jenkins created the maneuver himself, and whether he did, Jenkins certainly prided himself on training his flight to successfully execute the maneuver.

Once the flight had sufficiently passed into the enemy's line, they would break their formation apart like a spinning disk unable to hold itself together against centrifugal forces, and then the flight would quickly reform into two fighting pairs. Hoping to catch the enemy by surprise with the sudden break, they would attempt to quickly inflict maximum damage before having to engage in one-on-one dogfights. Due to the dynamic nature of this mode of attack, the final breaking order, and on whose initiation, had to be called out explicitly so the synchronization could be without fault.

They had just about reached the *Ignoti* line of defense when a line of *Sagitta* fighter ships shot around the backside of one of the enemy vessels. Despite recognizing the vast firepower that this line represented, Blayne followed his commander's lead and continued forward undeterred. To make full use of the Leeroy maneuver's effectiveness, they could not back down now. They must wait until they reached the epicenter of the opposing forces. The *Sagitta* began making a few long shots at them, but none were able to connect. Blayne's physical ability to maintain his barrel roll was wearing thin, the G-forces were beginning to make him see spots and it was becoming increasingly difficult to maintain the focus he needed to stay in sync with his partner. When Blayne was nearly ready to signal the break himself, their commander finally screamed the order to break.

"Leeeerrroyyyyy on Jennnkkinnnnss!"

With that command as his battle cry, his commander suddenly broke tangent to the spiral and flew right into the middle of the incoming wave of fighters. Blayne reacted with incredible speed and followed the path Jenkins was already beginning to clear ahead. He could see the commander's dorsal turret begin to fire on the enemy who was, at the moment, completely encapsulating them; though the perfect execution of their attack left the enemy caught off guard. Blayne heard Massey behind him begin to lock on to enemy fighters, followed shortly by the booming of the turrets which sent vibrations all throughout the *Trygon*. Blayne followed the tail of his commander, providing support, as best as he could, but whenever an enemy crossed his flight path, he allowed himself a slight detour to attempt target-lock

using his own forward cannon. He managed to graze several enemies with this method and heard shouts of excitement as Massey scored critical hits on several Sagitta himself.

Suddenly, he was free of the first line of enemy fighters, and he followed his commander around in a loop to begin a second attack run. During the first run they had the element of surprise in their favor thanks to their use of the Leeroy maneuver; however, this time would be different. Now both groups of ships were coming head to head and preparing to throw blows in an all-out brawl. Blayne followed abaft port his commander, and on Blayne's portside, on the far side of the enemy line, were Three and Four ready to mirror their attack. All ships, friendly and enemy alike, accelerated into the space currently sitting empty between them and, as soon as they came within firing range, began unleashing their firepower.

UCSD weapons made use of electromagnetic projectile launchers commonly referred to as rail guns. Being capable of launching projectiles at hundreds of times the speed of sound, they caused substantial amounts of kinetic energy damage. When they were tipped with high-grade explosive rounds, their lethality could not be overstated. Just recently, however, had come a new addition to their arsenal. Nanobot infused railgun tips that were capable of literally eating through metal. These rounds were particularly effective in instances where it was hard to land a critical hit on an enemy craft, for just a grazing hit was sufficient to set loose the nanobots upon the hull. They begin tearing the ship apart immediately. Therefore, the Sagitta were the perfect targets for these rounds. Their tough armor may normally be able to withstand multiple indirect hits from a Trygon railgun, but with the nanobots they could be weakened with just one round and taken down much easier.

Although the power and destructive potential held within the Trygons gave Blayne reason to shudder, the weapons the Ignoti provided their Sagitta were even more terrifying. Their technology was obviously far beyond what the UCSD possessed—as was evident when they somehow pulled the Prodrumus out of warp and then used that destroyer's devastating weapon system against it. The weapon systems aboard the Sagitta fighters were similar in nature to what was on board the destroyer, though much smaller in comparison. It was true that UCSD had made advancements in weaponized laser technology in the past, but it never had been deemed effective enough for combat. Apparently, the Ignoti had found a way to maximize the potential held within that technology.

As the two sides came together, Massey and the other gunners fired round after electromagnetically projected round at the enemy, while the Ignoti discharged countless beams of intense energy back at them. Blayne did his best to perform evasive maneuvers but his damage indicators informed him he wasn't entirely successful. First one warning light came on, then another, and then his cockpit began ringing with the sound of an alarm, but he was now once again through the onslaught of enemies. A slight wave of relief passed through him with the knowledge he had made it through the second run alive, but with the amount of damage he already sustained, he knew that neither he, nor his group, had much longer to live.

"Everybody report in." It was the voice of Jenkins over the comm.

"Two here. I've taken several hits, but no critical issues yet."

"This is Four. Number Three is gone—took too many hits on that last pass. I'm barely limping along, myself."

"And my maneuvering capability is shot," Jenkins concluded. It was evident in his voice his earlier enthusiasm had been knocked down a couple steps. "Alright then, seeing as how nothing short of a miracle will be getting us out of this one, let's see what we can at least do with that destroyer of theirs." As he spoke, the three spacecrafts continued pulling away from the edge of the engagement zone and were making their way towards each other. "Two, since you've currently got the most operational Trygon, on this next pass we'll all head in towards the destroyer, but I want you to break off from the group and engage the Sagitta. Hopefully you can divert their attention long enough that Four and I can do some damage to the destroyer. Four, that means you and I are going to inflict as much pain on that beast as we can. We will take it down."

"Yes sir!" Four responded as he formed up on the commander.

“Yes sir.” Blayne echoed.

With that the three ships took off in one last daring run on the enemy. As their formation neared the approaching enemy ships, Blayne veered toward the formidable fighters as soon as he saw them turning to intercept, and Jenkins and Four simultaneously pulled away from him and towards the destroyer. A small group of Sagitta followed Blayne’s trajectory, but not nearly enough. A substantial fraction followed the other two ships and immediately swooped in on their tails with their weapons already engaged. While attempting to put some distance between him and his comrades, Massey let out a sudden yell prompting Blayne to look back over his shoulder just in time to see Four explode in a violent shower of parts and Jenkins taking multiple hits.

“No! Four is gone and my gunner is dead. Two, I don’t have enough time or firepower to hurt this thing. There’s nothing left for me to do. It’s been a privilege serving with you. See you on the other side.”

Blayne immediately twisted his craft back around towards the destroyer. He had taken more hits than he could count, and he knew he couldn’t evade his fate for much longer. Massey had probably saved their lives in this battle already more times than Blayne could count, but he knew his deadly aim would not be able to prevent the inevitable. Blayne finished his one-eighty and glanced at his HUD as the distance between him and the destroyer began counting down. Finally regaining line of sight with Jenkins he realized what he was about to do. Jenkins was accelerating directly towards the mouth of the destroyer, and it was apparent he was planning to impale it with the pure kinetic energy of his own Trygon.

An idea suddenly occurred to Blayne, and he risked an engine overheat by dumping even more power into his already fatigued system to see if it would work. His ship shot forward – temporarily throwing off the aim of his pursuers before they, too, increased their speed. His momentary advantage wore off and he once again sensed obliteration was nigh. The Sagitta resumed firing and he could feel the ship violently lurch with every consecutive hit. If only he could trap his pursuers in the inevitable explosion that was awaiting the destroyer ahead. A few more passing hits struck his ship causing all his systems to go critical, but he hardly had time to register the corresponding lightshow appearing on his instrument panel before he lost total maneuvering control. He knew that he was about to die, yet in the face of this knowledge he did not feel fear. Instead, he watched the motion of events unfold slowly around him. He saw Commander Jenkins’ ship about to plunge into the open mouth of the destroyer, but Blayne’s line of sight was cut off as he passed behind the destroyer’s stern. This being the point in space he had been aiming for before he lost control of his system, it looked as though he would clear the edge of the tail by mere meters. Behind him he saw several Sagitta still in pursuit, with one approaching close enough to fly nearly adjacent to him, as if the whole battle was merely a game and it was only toying with him.

It was at this moment Jenkins struck the ship. Blayne knew because he could see the shock wave pass through the destroyer right as he crossed the tail, and a million bright spider-webs of light shone forth through the expanding cracks in the destroyer’s hull. For a moment Blayne considered it beautiful. The lines of light continued to spread and expand until the hull could not contain itself any longer and burst apart into a million glowing pieces. His commander’s ship had caused a chain reaction in the powerful, and delicate, internal components resulting in a massive discharge of heat and energy. The whole process lasted for a scant few milliseconds, but in the eyes of a man on the precipice of death, it lasted an eternity.

As if still moving in slow motion, Blayne turned his head back in time to witness the resulting explosion engulf the Sagitta behind him. Though partially protected by the tail structure, the maelstrom of debris and heat, likewise, gripped his own ship and launched him away toward the planet below, but not before his Trygon collided with the Ignoti who had chosen to rub elbows with him. Their hulls fused together under the immense force and heat of the blast. Whether he liked it or not, it appeared he and his enemy were now going to share a fate. Blayne’s perception of time began to speed up once again as he hurtled uncontrollably to the black depths of the planet below and his ship began tearing

apart. As his canopy gazed down upon the swirling fluidity of its atmosphere, and as the blackness around his vision began to set in, he could not help but notice the comforting silence settling upon him that he assumed must be death.

This planet, his suitor, lovingly bid him welcome to his new eternal resting place, but before the last of his vision faded away, Blayne, for the first time, witnessed the planet's sun as it rose over the horizon. The light of a beautiful red star greeted his fading form, illuminating the inky blackness of the planet's atmosphere, and creating a brilliantly striated gemstone to replace the bleak orb that had been there only moments before. Once again, even now in the face of death, Blayne was struck by the magnificence of stars. The life of man is but a blink in the lifetime of a star, and yet they, too, return someday to ethereal dust. They provide the foundation for all life to flourish, and yet they are one of the most powerfully destructive forces in the universe. They command the heavens without refute yet hang contently silent in the firmament.

Yes, stars certainly highlight the incomprehensible vastness of creation, and yet amongst all the chaos and destruction, Blayne could joyfully say he had finally found a place of total serenity, here, on the altar of the silent stars shining.

About the Author

Lorenzo Patelli is an aerospace engineer with a background in physics and a love for science fiction and fantasy. He'd probably be lying if he didn't say he entered those fields to learn the Force(s) and to work on spaceships (X-wings in particular). Although experiencing creative hankerings now and then, it isn't often he gets to flex those muscles; this is one of the exceptions. Lorenzo currently resides in Kansas but has yet to find Toto or a nice pair of ruby slippers.

THE GIRL IN THE RAIN

Ian Harrup

The one thing Juliette Monaghan didn't count on was the rain.

She stood at the edge of a clearing of pine trees, surveying the sloping valley spread out before her. Mountains lay beyond it, but she was already tired from crossing the one behind her. Now she was cold and wet, in search of someplace dry. She descended the slope, tugging at the brim of her big, floppy hat to keep the raindrops off her face.

It was now twenty years into the Apocalypse, and yet even after humanity largely went down the tubes, the seasons kept their rhythms and the rain poured on. More problematic to Juliette than the lack of a family, home or nation were her clammy garments and the gnawing sensation in her gut. Her nomadic journey had no particular destination, and she carried no map. But what she did have was a sense within her to go west; like thousands of travelers in time forgotten, Juliette forged a path to a brighter future to her gloomy present.

Juliette pulled her trench coat tight around the ill-fitting army fatigues that clothed her thin frame. She padded along in oversized hiking boots caked with mud. An unrecognizable Swissgear backpack weighed heavily on her, but right now she needed the ballast to drive her forward. Weary as she was, her Ruger Mini 14 hung readily over one shoulder. Years of experience had taught her never to assume she was alone.

She reached the valley's stream, rushing and bubbling from the day's weather. She found stones to scrape her boots with, and then followed the stream towards a bend in the valley.

Once she rounded the bend, her eyes narrowed at the sight of an abandoned town a mile down the valley.

Juliette poised her rifle at the hip, eyes wary for danger. The town was a collection of old houses mostly, a small country community nestled among the mountains. But for all its seclusion, it hadn't escaped the devastation of the past. The evidence of drone strikes was in the bombed-out ruins of many of the homes, and the bullet holes stitched through nearly every dwelling.

She peered through the window of one of the intact houses, but refrained from stepping in. An unexploded missile protruded upward in the front room, having smashed through the roof and embedding itself in the floor ages ago. On the side were crudely written words addressed to the town inhabitants from whatever adversary of the past directed the missile strike, but Juliette could not read them. Having lost her parents in early childhood, she had never been taught how. Juliette knew the missile could still explode if jostled, so she moved on. She sighted a church ahead, only half bombed out, and made her way over. But as she drew closer, her fingers clenched around her rifle. Campfire smoke drifted upward through the gaping hole in the roof.

Her lip curled warily, but she longed for the heat of a fire.

Two weary travelers crouched low over a meager campfire, enjoying the warmth. They sat up sharply when Juliette approached and presented herself, rifle upward but ready.

"Mind if I join your fire?"

They blinked at her, a man and a woman both in their late 40s, as suspicious of Juliette as she was of them.

"What's your business in these parts?" said the man.

"Just passin' through."

The man mulled it over for a moment, then gestured to the floor by the fire.

"Take a seat."

Juliette sat down, making no sudden movements. The woman continued to eyeball her, either keeping alert for danger or imagining what she might have in her pack.

Time passed as the three travelers fed the fire and waited for the rain to die down. Hours later, it showed no sign of stopping.

The man and woman were a taciturn couple, known to friends as Bill and Stella. Bill, square-jawed and beady-eyed, smoked a pipe in silence. Stella, haggard with huge blue eyes, mumbled some old song to herself. Neither were much interested in Juliette's company, but Juliette herself was not as comfortable as they were with silence.

"I been walkin' three days straight before I got here. Which way'd y'all come from?"

Their unfriendly eyes turned to her, resenting her intrusion on their reverie. Bill pointed his thumb in the westward direction.

"That way."

"Anything habitable that way? Groups of folks?"

He frowned. "You think we'd come this way if there were 'habitable' parts to be found?"

Juliette's heart sank. The memory of the last several weeks of walking, and her aching feet, felt all for nothing. She longed for a place to rest, perhaps even a place with other people, and it now felt farther away than ever before.

Bill muttered as if to himself. "We woulda stopped at the castle down that way, if it weren't haunted. Just our luck it's packed with ghosts." Juliette glanced at him through questioning eyes. "How far from here, would you say?"

Bill spoke before he thought. "A day and a half's journey toward that mountain peak."

Then his eyes widened. Stella's eyes widened too, and they both stared at Juliette.

"Why, what about it?"

Juliette was more casual than most on the subject of ghosts. "To see the place for myself. I've never been in a castle before."

"Did you not hear me say 'haunted'? Lemme tell you something: the two of us come upon this place a couple nights back. Big ole' castle, just like you see in the hist'ry books. We break in the doors and go right in, not a soul in sight. We start lookin' for things to eat, maybe some stuff to loot, but then we start hearing these NOISES..."

Stella's eyes became unnaturally hollow at the memory of those noises. Bill kept going.

"Like nothin' I've ever heard in my life, and I've heard some things, I tell you what. This moanin', shiverin' wail, like the Lady of Hell was openin' the door and invitin' us down to the depths. Scared us both half to death, and we scrambled outta there." He paused to reflect. "Whatever ghost lives there sure didn't want our company."

Bill shivered at the thought, and hovered his hands over the heat of the campfire.

Outside, the rain came to a low drizzle. A distant ray of sun shone out the slightest of rainbows, a splash of color against the overwhelming gray of the sky. Juliette noticed this, and made up her mind. She rose up, gathered her pack and rifle, and tipped her hat to Bill and Stella.

"Rain's lettin' up, I'd better be on my way. Thanks for sharin' your campfire, good luck on your journey."

They glanced awkwardly at each other, unsure how to return a polite gesture.

"You could come with us," Bill offered. "No reason to go tangle with ghosts." Juliette made her way down the church steps. "Don't worry, I'm not afraid of ghosts."

Bill was incredulous. "Why ever not?"

She turned her head with a knowing glance. "You see one, you've seen 'em all."

Juliette waved to them and was soon out of their sight. Stella, who rarely spoke, opened her mouth to Bill.

"Did we just see another ghost?"

The Ghost by the Fire

As Juliette followed the path in the direction Bill pointed, she reflected on the statement she had made. Ghosts have lurked in the corners of humanity's nightmares since the beginning of time, but few living have ever truly said they believed in them. When the world fell apart, untold multitudes of people died with it, such a death toll as had never been known since the Flood. Those that were left behind, however, became quite certain that the dramatic decrease in living world population had led to an equal explosion in the population of the visible, wandering dead.

Bill and Stella were both fairly certain, but Juliette was sure. Once she had seen a ghost, or at least imagined it: an old comrade of hers, a taciturn girl nearly her age named Marlene Jacobson.

In times past, they had been fellow marauders, roving with others their age, plundering other folks far and wide. Those were high times for Juliette and Marlene, until one fateful day when a bigger, meaner band of marauders fell upon them. Most were slaughtered, including Marlene. Those who survived fled, never seeing each other again. There's a saying as old as history itself: no honor among thieves. Juliette was no exception.

It was while Juliette was plundering a cache six months ago that she thought she glimpsed Marlene in a mirror, watching her. It was only momentary, but the frightful expression on her face, coupled with the terrifying prospect of seeing one returned from beyond the grave, put a sudden stop to Juliette's activity that day.

So yes, Juliette had seen a ghost once, but perhaps she had been premature in her assumption that any two ghosts were alike.

As the sun sunk below the tops of the trees, the land around her grew dim. The thickness of the woods diminished the visibility beyond a few yards, so Juliette picked a spot to bed down for the night and began work on a fire.

As the twilight turned to pitch dark, Juliette felt a strange breeze blow around her. She looked around, cautious; the back of her neck prickled, a sign she knew from experience meant that someone or something was nearby.

She quietly kicked the fire apart to smoldering embers, diminishing nearly all the light, and waited.

Twenty minutes passed, then an hour. In these situations, Juliette could be patient. An enemy might wait twenty minutes or an hour to spring.

But after two hours, unable to watch any longer, Juliette fell asleep.

She awoke to the sight of a phosphorescent glow all about her. The fire had somehow lit again, its embers gathered together into a flame that was somehow the source of the unearthly light; a pair of hands warmed themselves over the wavering tongues.

As Juliette's eyes focused on the image before her, she sat up with a start at the sight of Marlene Jacobson, warming herself by her fire.

This time was more than a glimpse. It was undoubtedly Marlene, the same round freckled face, the same auburn hair, and the same overalls she had been known for wearing. Her cold, deathly eyes were fixed on the flames. She rubbed her hands in the heat, but the fire must have been of an infernal atmosphere all its own, for Juliette could feel none of its warmth for herself. Rather, it chilled her more than the night air.

The phantom made no indication of awareness to Juliette. After what felt like an unnerving eternity staring into those dreadful eyes, she dared speak to it.

"Who are you supposed to be?"

Marlene answered without turning her eyes. "You might ask who I was."

"I know who you were. You were my friend, Marlene."

For the first time, Marlene glanced up to Juliette, chilling her blood. "In life I was Marlene. But you were no friend of mine."

Taken aback, Juliette retorted. "What? After all those times we rode together, fought together, and bled together, how can you say that?"

"When the time came to die together, you left me to it and fled yourself."

Juliette's held her tongue momentarily. "We were split up. I couldn't help you."

"So you've chosen to believe, even if your own memory is a witness against you."

Juliette bit her lip. Of course a ghost wouldn't fall for that. But perhaps there were more important questions to ask of it.

"What are you doing here, Marlene?"

The ghost's eyes seemed to bore holes into Juliette's soul.

"You left me to die, and the time is close coming when your debt must be paid."

The color left Juliette's face, going nearly as pale as Marlene. "What do you mean?"

"You weighed my life in the balance and found it worth less than your own. For this your life is owed to me, and soon I will demand my payment."

Juliette's lip trembled. "What payment?"

Marlene's ghost rose up and stepped through her fire, unheeding of the infernal flames as she knelt face to face with Juliette. "A life for a life. My own life was in your hands, and was left for dead."

Juliette attempted a chuckle. "Is that to say my life is in your hands now?"

Marlene's hand shot forth, disappearing into Juliette's chest. Juliette could feel the cold grip of death over her heart, and found herself unable to breathe until Marlene withdrew her hand.

"Death is upon you, Juliette Monaghan, unless you can show me you are worth more alive than dead."

Juliette shook fearfully, her body numb from the icy sensation felt so deeply within. "And how will you decide that?"

"Do you remember the book your father gave you?"

"I do. An old leather book, he gave it to me before he died. But I've never been able to read it."

"You must take it to the castle on the mountain. There you will find a man who will tell you the meaning of the words inside."

"Well, I was heading there already..."

"He will either agree to help you, or he will kill you."

Juliette stopped short. "Then I'd better not go at all."

"Then you must pay what you owe."

Juliette knew she was being backed into a corner, but the memory of the phantom's claws over her beating heart banished all doubt of her sincerity. "How will I get him to help me?"

"Show him the book. He seeks it himself."

At this, Marlene rose to her feet and put one foot into the campfire behind her. With only this motion, the fire evaporated into nothing, and Marlene raised her hand in farewell.

"Until we meet again, Juliette Monaghan."

With that, Marlene flew forward as if blown by a gust of hurricane wind, sailing straight through Juliette and plunging her whole body into that horrific glacial feeling as if for a reminder.

Juliette shivered where she sat, and turned to see where Marlene went. The only evidence of her was the deathly glow that flew through the forest until it disappeared from Juliette's sight.

Thoroughly shaken by this ordeal, Juliette fell to her bed, plunged into sleep.

When Juliette awoke, she sat upright, searching for one anxious moment for any sign of a specter. There was none. It was still dark, and she noticed that it was once again beginning to rain.

She packed her gear quickly, then as she turned to scatter her campfire, she froze. There in the midst of the coals was the footprint of Marlene Jacobson.

Regarding this at first with fear, Juliette scowled and scattered the ashes with her own foot, obliterating the evidence of the ghost from last night.

But something else bothered her. She reached into her backpack, searching for her father's book, the only thing she had left from who she had been in the past. On its cover were two words she couldn't read, and a symbol she had seen on many things and in many places. A tall line intersecting with a short one to form a cross.

What could this relic of hers possibly have to do with whatever waited in that castle, or the impending doom promised by Marlene Jacobson?

The Castle in the Hills

Trudging through trees and over brooks and streams, Juliette kept the valley path in sight as she searched for the castle. Having traveled for nearly a day since crossing through the town, she knew it was close. By traveling on the hillcrests, she'd be sure not to miss it.

She reached the end of her trail, and realized that now she would have to descend into the valley. But she wasn't ready yet, for she hadn't sighted the castle and didn't want to head in the wrong direction.

By now it was midday, and the rain came down a steady drizzle. The tall pine trees obscured any view of habitation. At the moment, she was still in the middle of nowhere, even though the castle would be no more than a mile distant from her present location. Perhaps it was too well hidden from view of the hills; with no other choice, she grumbled as she began her descent into the valley.

As she followed a swiftly flowing stream downhill, she attempted to cross it to reach an easier slope. Then her foot slipped.

Soon she was down the hill, but soaking wet and bruised all over from the ride down the stony stream. In particular her joint at the hip ached the worst. As she stood, she winced with pain and realized she was injured.

She'd been injured before, so she wasn't afraid. Rather she was vexed, because a walking injury would slow her down badly. It might take her the entire day to find the castle now. She carried on, favoring her left leg.

Movement caught the corner of her eye, and she turned. A couple hundred yards distant was a wild feral hog.

There were many things to fear in this Apocalypse that were hardly threats beforehand, and the unchecked spread of wild feral pigs was near the top of the list. They could grow as big as grizzlies and nearly as dangerous, and traveled in herds. In the wild they were omnivorous, and though a hog's first instinct is to run from danger, the bigger ones favored live prey.

So when the feral hog in the distance lifted its head, Juliette's heart skipped. Three more appeared behind it, all nearly as large.

Juliette swung her rifle out and flicked the safety. Once they broke into a run, they would close the distance in seconds. She would have no time to reload. But perhaps if she fired first, they'd run. She took aim.

The Ruger Mini-14 spoke, and its thunder cracked throughout the valley. The foremost hog tumbled down, kicking at the dirt, while the others scattered. Juliette broke into a run. Maybe she could lose them, though there were certainly more.

Her run was a hobble, and she could only follow the narrow valley. But follow she did, desperately searching for the castle.

Shapes blurred down the hill to her left. She swung the barrel and shot twice into the brush, scattering a flock of birds into the air. Two hogs ran, but a third smashed through the brush, straight for her.

It bulldozed her to the ground and clamped its tusks into her backpack, thrashing her over the ground. Her rifle went flying. She managed to reach a tactical tomahawk she kept on her belt and hacked into the hog. The axe bit so deep that when the hog disengaged, it ran off with the weapon attached to its hide. Juliette retrieved her rifle in time to see five more shapes descending the hill to her right. She fired one shot over them and ran.

She ran and ran till her hip screamed and her lungs burned. She turned once to fire another shot over the hogs, but for every hog she spooked into running, another continued to charge for her.

Then as the rifle emptied, she saw the Castle. A tall, lonely structure that would be more at home in Europe if anyone remembered any such continent by that name. It sat nestled among tall pines with only a single tower reaching over the treetops. Were Juliette to travel all day, she might never have spotted the well-hidden fortress.

But she had no time to admire. She caught sight of a path leading to a bridge over a deep, fast-flowing stream, a perfect moat in this wilderness. She hobbled toward it with all her might, almost safe.

As she ran, a hog caught at her heel and she tumbled. It pinned her to the ground, and she felt its hot breath on her neck, its tusk tickling her ear.

Then all at once, something startled the creature. The breeze blew, and it seemed to smell something that terrified it. The hog jumped from Juliette so fast that it upended itself, kicking at the air until it could turn over and run for its life. Juliette stood to her feet, looking left and right. The hogs' pursuit was finally broken.

With the path in sight, she could now enter the castle.

She looked long and uneasily at the castle. She'd been told it was haunted, and even the feral hogs were frightened of it. As much as she felt she had seen it all, she grew anxious thinking about what may lie ahead.

She reloaded her weapon. It seemed safe for the moment, but the story might be different inside.

She crossed the bridge over the stream and passed through the remains of a wrought-iron gate, long since rusted out. The path wound through huge boulders, then cut deep through high rock walls. Some stretches were dark with shadow, forcing her to feel her way along the narrow corridor. When she emerged on the other side of the path, she gasped at the sight.

Juliette had never seen a tall building before, having been born to parents who spent their days living in the wild, away from dangerous cities. The largest man-made structure she had been in was a three-story country house her raiding party once took shelter in. As such, the Castle, with its towers stretching toward the heavens and its high walls proudly boasting against the wilderness beyond, seemed a monstrous, foreboding wonder. She reached the main gate, and with surprise found it to be unlocked.

Still hobbling from her injury, she opened the gate and looked in.

The castle courtyard was wide and open, and in old times would have been employed for outdoor recreation or establishing a defense behind the high walls. But postmodern warfare had long eclipsed the defensiveness of such places; a massive crater from a missile strike had nearly excavated the courtyard, creating a deep pit now filled with water. A majestic statue of a rearing elk, once the courtyard's centerpiece, barely protruded from the murky pool. A rope bridge had since been erected over the pit, spanning the water and reaching two ornate doors leading to the keep.

Juliette crossed over warily; she didn't like deep water, and the rope bridge creaked and wobbled as she skittishly crept to the other side. But the rain began to fall heavier, and she was tired and hurt from her dangerous journey. She hurried to the doors, threw them open, and disappeared inside.

The interior was grand and spacious, but dark and quiet. Vast hallways stretched in many directions, branching into corridors that turned out of Juliette's view. Somehow the grand entrance had managed to survive the missile salvo years ago, but as Juliette ventured further inside, she could hear steadily dripping water echoing throughout the castle. There had to be a blown roof somewhere, given the volume.

The air for the most part was dry, even with all the rain outside. As Juliette passed certain corridor entrances, she could feel the change in the air, suggesting which passages led to openings or drafts. For now, she wanted to be dry, so she moved along.

High windows allowed in a little light, but the interior was still mostly dark. While she could still see, she drew a knife and flint striker and prepared a torch. Once it was lit, its light illuminated the surroundings in a whole new way.

All around the grand entrance were tall shelves and tables, all lined and filled with treasures and trinkets from the past. Paintings, photographs, musical instruments, sports equipment, and all manner of everyday things now gathered in a sort of mausoleum of Americana.

Juliette looked over clear glass cases stretching over table after table. Some were filled with jewels - rings, bracelets, necklaces - while others were filled with baseball cards, pocket knives, and even full sets of automotive wrenches and ratchets. Collectible statues of pop culture characters Juliette knew nothing of lined a series of shelves on one wall, while the opposite wall was crammed with framed movie posters. Juliette could appreciate the color schemes and artwork of such things, but had no frame of reference for any of them beyond the posters themselves. All these things were coated in layers of dirt, corrosion, and even moss. Whoever brought them here had long since abandoned them.

* * *

As she wandered along, the torchlight finally fell on something useful to Juliette - a fireplace. She had seen one before and so knew how to use it, so with a sigh of relief she lowered her backpack to the ground and looked for wood. She found a pile nearby, neatly stacked.

The stack made her glance around thoughtfully. Specters have no need for wood, she reasoned, so the castle couldn't be haunted by ghosts. Someone else had to be here, someone who wanted people to think it was haunted, though she had yet to see any figure. Perhaps they would show themselves when they felt ready, or else leave her alone entirely.

But what about Marlene's threat? Someone lived here, that was certain, possibly the person she told Juliette about. If they never showed themselves, how would Juliette fulfill her charge?

Much as she wished to forget that encounter, she couldn't ignore the unpleasant and unfamiliar feeling that manifested in her - guilt. Marlene had called out to her when the raiders came, called out for help and Juliette had left her. She could have helped her, but she chose to run. There was no denying the truth of it now. Recalling that chill of Marlene's phantom hand on her heart, Juliette resolved to search the castle in the morning for whoever could help her out of this predicament.

Such was the conclusion she came to as she used some of the stacked wood to create a warm, cheery fire. She spread her soaked clothes near the flames, taking the time to put on dry clothes she had kept in a trash sack deep in her pack. In this day and age, rolls of trash sacks were as good as gold when they could be found, for that very reason.

As the light outside dimmed to darkness, Juliette settled down to sleep, warily clutching her rifle in her hands.

The Master of the Castle

Her eyes opened - some sound awakened her. In a moment she was alert. It had been a rushing sound, something passing overhead, as if some large bird had flown over the castle.

As Juliette attempted to home in on that sound, something else began to echo throughout the castle - a sort of scraping, almost in the rhythm of footsteps as if someone (or something) big and heavy were dragging their feet across the cold stone floors.

She rose quietly. Her boots were still hanging over the coals of her fire, but they would be too noisy. She carefully pulled a pair of leather moccasins from her pack and slipped them over her feet. Then with her rifle in hand, she crept forward toward the footsteps.

It was barely morning, and the castle was still thick with darkness. But Juliette had decent sight at night, so she moved without a torch.

Corridors led to stairs that twisted and wound their way further into the castle. She could hear running water as she drew nearer to the echoing footfalls, and a cool draft from deep within chilled her face.

Light became visible ahead, and she approached it with care. Once she could see better, she realized she was in an upper hall to a grand ballroom.

Or perhaps it would have been in times past; the light shone in through a collapsed roof, likely from drone fire. The vast floor was covered with rubble, but far more alarming was the immense pile of bones in the center the room. A nauseous feeling came over Juliette. This looked more like an animal's den than the abode of any person except for one curious detail - the bones were neatly stacked.

Suddenly a voice called out to her: "Well, guest, I see you have arisen."

Juliette froze in place, her eyes instantly tracing the room for the owner of that voice. It continued, a voice with unnaturally deep but refined tones.

"I don't begrudge anyone shelter from a storm, but I should like to know your purpose here."

The voice seemed to be drawing nearer. Juliette drew back into the shadows, looking around with wide eyes, hoping to spot the mystery man before he was upon her.

"The shadows do you no good," the voice went on. "I can hear your very breath from where I stand."

A creeping sensation moved through Juliette; somehow the source of the voice felt very close, and yet she could see no man in the corridors or anywhere in the ballroom.

When he spoke next, he sounded almost upon her: "Now let us get a proper look at you."

A shadow from above drew her attention, and she nearly jumped from her skin at the sight of - what was it? It had a long snout filled with sharp teeth, dull red eyes, no feathers or fur, a long lithe body that moved like a serpent, legs with claws like spears on the talons, bat's wings that made the scraping sound across rock or stone, and two lines of smoke coming from its nostrils. It was clinging to the ceiling like it had just crawled through the opening of the roof, and it gazed at her upside-down.

Juliette had never seen a dragon, much less heard of them. But once she had opened a book of classical art and seen a painting that reminded her very much of the sight in front of her: The Great Red Dragon and the Woman Clothed in Sun, by William Blake. But this was no moment for artistic contemplation.

Juliette's limbs nearly turned to rubber. She raised her rifle to fire, but her fingers shook too hard to pull the trigger. A long, gravelly sound rumbled through the creature's body, ending with a hot, quick burst of smoke from its nostrils. The eyes flared redder.

That was enough for Juliette. She dropped her rifle and ran for her life down the corridors.

* * *

She had run down a long hallway when she found herself in another room with light streaming from above. Once it was a library, but the roof collapse here had let in so much weather than the shelves and books were rotting away where they stood.

Thinking quickly, Juliette noticed that the roof had fallen in such a way that the rubble pile extended nearly to the opening. Perhaps it could be climbed.

She heard the rushing sound echo through the hall, and the scraping sound followed. The creature was closing in.

That voice called out - where could it be coming from now? "For your own sake, don't go into that room!"

With no other thought than to flee for her life, she sprang like a rabbit to the pile and began to climb. But when she was nearly to the top, several stones loosened and fell cascading to the ground.

Her eyes followed the stones to an awful sight - the only thing that could possibly be worse than a long, scaly creature coming after her was the sight of a drone missile stuck in the floor of the library just below her. The loosened stones fell all around it. Juliette knew she could have been done for, and that if anything else disturbed it, she could be dead in an instant. Somehow she had missed it in her haste.

But then a shadow stretched across the opening in the roof, and the creature's nightmarish head snaked through the hole. It came within a yard or two of Juliette, and then the most stupefying thing yet occurred.

"Hop into my mouth if you want to live."

The voice from earlier had come from the creature's mouth.

Juliette's mind was a whirlwind. Here she was in a death trap, and the monstrous beast on the other side of it had just spoken to her. It was too much for her in that moment and she lost her balance.

As she toppled over, her eyes flashed from the missile to the creature. One or the other would get her now.

The dragon's head shot forward and plucked Juliette from thin air. Another moment and she would have fallen on the missile. Now she awaited the fatal clamp of sharp teeth on her body.

But the creature didn't bite down. Its jaws held her firmly but carefully, its sharp teeth uncomfortable but not forceful enough to bite down as it drew her up through the roof, out of danger.

The creature kept Juliette in its mouth as it lifted itself upward into the air. Being airborne was another new experience for her, but it became lost in the swirl of other recent events.

They emerged out of the castle, and Juliette could see the sunrise and the dew turning to mist in the valley below. But all this flashed by in moments as the beast turned with a beat of its wings and carried her toward the opening of the ballroom, to its den.

* * *

The creature descended to the ballroom floor amid a heap of rubble it evidently used as a perch, then gently deposited Juliette to the ground. She sat dazed with her hands spread wide on the floor, grateful for something solid beneath her.

The beast watched her curiously, wrapping its wings around its body like a cloak rather than simply folding them behind its back. It seemed to wait with patience for Juliette to say something, or to acknowledge its presence.

Eventually, and with no other choice, Juliette turned to gaze upon the monster. Though it was obviously intelligent, the very sight of it still terrified her, especially its red eyes that seemed to glow with interest.

"Allow me to introduce myself," it said. "I am the Master of this Castle. You may know me as Oscar, if you would like a name to call me by."

Juliette simply blinked at it. The creature had a name?

"You don't seem to be the talkative sort," said Oscar, "but I am fairly certain you are capable of speech. Who are you, and where do you come from, may I ask?"

She stammered as she spoke, but she felt she must reply. "I-I was lost in the woods, I needed a place to stay."

"So I gathered, and so I allowed. But that is not what I asked."

There seemed no way around it. "My name is Juliette Monaghan."

"That's a good start! And a nice name, if I may say."

Juliette's bewilderment about this creature was quickly turning to puzzlement. "I come from nowhere, really. I just wanted to get out of the rain."

"No one comes from nowhere, though all creatures seek refuge from the weather, I will grant you that much." He pressed on, still remarkably curious about her. "But where did your journey begin, and where did you intend for it to take you?"

Juliette was confused not only by his curiosity but his word choices. "B-back east... I started westward two full moons ago."

"Westward? Any particular destination?"

Somehow she felt comfortable enough to shrug. "Just anywhere better than where I came from."

Oscar seemed to laugh with a deep, throaty rumble. Though still wary, Juliette began to feel as if she could relax around this creature.

"Headed for greener pastures, I see," said he. "I'll not press you further on that. But now I must decide what I am to do with you."

Juliette's ease around the beast shrank within her. She wished she had her rifle.

"You don't seem to be properly attired for this cold, drafty castle," he said. "Perhaps you should like a change of clothing."

Well that was a relief. "I left my things to dry around the fire--"

The creature interrupted her. "Nonsense. In those rags, you won't be fit to be seen. If you will permit me, I will show you to where more suitable attire can be found."

Juliette observed that while Oscar's wings were long enough to wrap around his body, his legs were short, almost stumpy. This meant that when he walked upright it looked more like a waddle. He was evidently attempting a regal bearing, but somehow he hadn't quite gotten the hang of it.

When he reached the entrance to an adjacent hall, he turned his long face toward her. "This way, if you will accompany me."

Against all better judgment or sense, Juliette arose and followed him, taking care to walk near his side lest she tread on his long, dragging tail.

* * *

As they traveled through the dark corridors, Oscar lit the way by somehow keeping a small, steady flame lit from his nostrils. He could sustain it for minutes at a time, pausing only to draw in a breath once in awhile.

Juliette's mind struggled to make out everything that had happened to her. First she had been confronted by a ghost, then she had been attacked by feral hogs, and now she stood in the company of a fearsome but polite monster.

"If you don't mind my asking," said she, "What are you?"

Oscar turned to her with a quizzical eye. "What, haven't you heard of dragons before?"

So that was the term. "I confess I haven't," said Juliette. "I never knew there were such things in all the world."

"There used to be dragons all over, I believe," said Oscar. "Millennia ago. But many strange things have been appearing in this new age we find ourselves in."

Juliette pressed on. "Are there more of you?"

"I don't know. I have never seen another dragon before."

"What about your parents?"

The dragon was reluctant for a moment. "I never knew them."

Just then they reach a door that Oscar pushed open with his talon. Inside was an old furnished bedroom, as if this castle had once been some sort of high-end resort hotel. The dust hung thick inside, but it was obvious that no one, not even the dragon, had frequented this room in many years.

"There are garments in the trunks, plenty to choose from. Take what you wish... I have no need of such things myself."

Juliette couldn't help detecting a tinge of regret in that statement. Evidently he had been reminded of something unhappy.

"There will yet be more storms over the land for several days. You may leave when you wish, though I would not recommend it myself. You are welcome to stay as my guest for as long as you wish. And if I may..."

Oscar paused almost nervously, causing Juliette to prompt, "Yes?"

"I would like to invite you to dine with me this evening," Oscar finally said. "There is a banquet hall within the castle, and I should enjoy your company."

In all her years, Juliette had never been invited to a meal in that manner. She had been a brigand most of her life, taking what she could and eating however she wished. She hardly knew how to answer the dragon, other than to say after some deliberation, "Sure I will."

Her answer brought a glow to Oscar's eyes. "Excellent. I will return when the sun is shining through the window there." He pointed to a westward window in the back of the room. With that he pulled the door closed, leaving Juliette to herself.

An Evening with the Dragon

Juliette opened one of the trunks Oscar had referred to and gasped at the sight inside. There were perhaps a dozen formal eveningwear dresses, neatly folded and undisturbed for decades. Among the books she had found and looked through in the past, Juliette had once found a crumbling JC Penney catalog and seen dresses like these, which thankfully gave her some idea what to do with them now.

Juliette almost jumped at movement in the corner of her eye before she realized it was a wall length mirror. A strange feeling came over her as she looked at herself, unwashed and dirty from weeks of walking in the wilderness. She felt as if she wanted to wear one of those dresses, and to look well in it. She couldn't say why, but the desire was undeniable. She didn't even care to impress the dragon - or did she? He seemed such a genteel host, even if he resembled a gigantic, walking, talking, winged alligator.

She opened a door and found a bathroom with a large soaking tub. It was bone dry of course, and there was no running water. But Juliette had never been spoiled with such luxuries. She only knew she needed water and heat, so she set out to find them.

As Juliette ventured back out into the castle, the first thing she noticed was that Oscar seemed to be gone. She searched, but could not so much as hear a rustle of his wings or the low rumble of his breathing.

"That will be just fine," she told herself. She could prepare in solitude. After all, was there anything better to do with her time?

She ventured back to the fireplace she first encamped by and gathered her belongings, now all quite dry. She also gathered some of the wood and carried it with her to heat the tub with.

She was on her way back when she remembered her fallen rifle near where she first met the dragon. It was midday now, and the sun shone brightly through the shattered ballroom ceiling, lighting the castle brilliantly for a brief break from the rain.

For the first time she took notice of the grandeur of the place. She could not have known that it was merely an imitation of true castles, and more intended to be a resort and historical attraction, but she had seen pictures of castles before and had always wondered what they looked like on the inside. And while the drone missiles years ago and decades of

neglect had wreaked their particular havoc, the castle still had undeniable charm to it. Perhaps Oscar had done some restoration work, though how he could possibly manage with those talons was beyond Juliette's imagination.

The more Juliette looked around, the better she understood the layout of the castle. The fireplace she had first found was a small reception hall near to the front doors, while the library was revealed to be the east wing. The grand ballroom with the shattered roof was in times past the back end of the castle that was most visible to incoming guests, with a magnificent steel and glass ceiling that could shine for miles. The grand dining room was immediately next to the ballroom; it had a five-star restaurant in the glory days of the resort, and under the dragon's administration still maintained some of its old respectability. All the staterooms and suites were located on the western side of the castle to face the magnificent sunsets that shone in from over the distant mountains.

Of course for Juliette, the most important thing she needed now was water. A pool had formed in the floor of the grand ballroom from all the recent rain, and it seemed clear enough to bathe in. A bucket was all she needed now, and that was easy enough to find in a janitor's closet she discovered.

So Juliette spent her afternoon carrying bucketfuls of water to her tub. She found ancient bars of soap in the cabinets, something she had only used once in her life, and dumped several at once into the steaming water. Then she scrubbed away at the dirt, the grime, the sweat, the toil, and all the weariness she had carried with her for months. Only then did she begin to notice how much her bones stuck out from her lean form, and she was then grateful to be sharing dinner with such a host as Oscar. Surely a creature his size ate a generous meal, something she definitely looked forward to now.

* * *

The sun began to crawl past the back windows, and Juliette knew Oscar must soon return. She couldn't imagine what had kept him all day, but she must expect him now.

Juliette had selected a green evening dress with long flowing sleeves, though it fitted her rather ill she thought. The long skirt helped to disguise her lack of shoes, as there were none that fit and she was embarrassed at the weather-beaten condition of her bare feet. In her marauding days, she had learned to braid her hair before charging into conflict, and so she did now in an attempt to do her hair up fashionably.

She was finishing her braid, carefully watching her progress in the wall length mirror, when a cold, familiar chill went down her spine.

"You're looking rather nice tonight," said a hollow voice that she recalled with horror, and she realized that Marlene Jacobson was standing behind her. Juliette turned sharply over her shoulder to find nothing. The phantom was visible to her only in the mirror.

"I hope you haven't forgotten about your charge," said the ghost.

"I haven't," lied Juliette. It had been relaxing to forget about the threat of death for a change. "But you could've told me the person who lived here was a... whatever-he's-called."

Much as Marlene's presence disquieted her, Juliette felt indignation at this interruption of her day. "What are you doing here anyway?" she said. "I'm doing what you wanted, and I'm even having dinner with him. And I haven't forgotten about that book either."

Marlene ignored her comments. "I only came to tell you he is not what he seems," she said. "You must help him, and I will give you until the first day of spring to do it."

That was the better part of a year now from, and Juliette almost scoffed at the idea. "Is that all? Surely you don't have something harder in mind?"

The ghost's face was impassive. "As I said, he is not what he seems. He can be dangerous if you say the wrong thing."

"Suppose I tell him all about you," said Juliette.

"That would be most unwise."

Juliette wondered how, but also began to wonder just how much she could trust the dragon. Perhaps if she told him her problem, he would turn her out of his castle. Or worse - what if he simply ate her?

"He may have manners, but he is still a dragon," said Marlene. "But if you can help him and he receives your help, you will have proven your worth to me."

Marlene leaned close over Juliette's shoulder. Her hissing voice came shrill and cold in Juliette's ear, making her eyes shut tightly. "Because if you don't," said the specter, "you will surely join me in this hell on earth you condemned me to."

When Juliette opened her eyes, Marlene was gone. The sun was shining in the west, and it was nearly time for dinner. But Juliette didn't feel nearly as ready for it now.

Presently the dragon came to Juliette's door. He complimented her dress and offered his talon to escort her; the unfamiliar gesture momentarily confused her until eventually she got the idea and took his offer. It seemed unnecessary at first, but she noticed it did help walking with a floor length skirt.

He led her to the dining room and seated her at the end of the table. For a dragon with only large talons for hands, he set an excellent table - all the utensils, cups, saucers, and everything else that went with fine dining, and the settings that brought a refined elegance to it.

It was unfortunately lost on Juliette, but she had a ghost's threat on her mind after all.

When she was seated, she saw what must have taken Oscar all day to find: he had caught a bighorn sheep and brought it back to the castle. It was skinned, cleaned, spitted, and roasted to perfection. She was impressed; the dragon was an artist with his fire-breath.

Furthermore, his talons were the best possible cutting tools for this beast, and in a moment he served her the tenderest cut.

Feeling she had better use the utensils, Juliette clumsily but successfully cut a bite from the meat and tasted it. She had rarely been able to catch animals beyond squirrels, rabbits, or birds, and so the meat from a prime grazing animal was the best she had tasted in her entire life.

"This is so good," she said with delight. Oscar's reptilian grin was the best he could do for a smile, and then he sat down to dine as well. He also made the effort to eat his food elegantly, but being without molars he had to swallow his meat whole.

All in all, Juliette thought, this was an enormously pleasant experience. But Marlene's further threats were nagging in the back of her mind, and for the life of her she couldn't figure out how to begin a conversation with Oscar. He hadn't said much to her so far, he seemed to be lost in the enjoyment of the meal. Juliette also ate her fill long before he had, and he seemed reluctant to speak while eating. So she waited until he let out a contented sigh, then put forth a comment.

"That was really good," she said, hoping she sounded refined.

The dragon bowed his head to her. "My thanks. It has been a long count of years since I had a guest for dinner."

For just a moment, Juliette worried over what he meant by that.

"How long have you lived here?" said Juliette, in more of a blurted question than a thought-out inquiry.

Oscar stroked his long chin with his claws. "Oh, many years now... perhaps much of my life now."

"Oh," said Juliette, still bursting her brain for the right words. Then remembering a conversation she had had several days ago, she said, "I had heard this castle was haunted."

"Have you really?" Oscar seemed intrigued.

"Yes - on my way here, I met two people on the road who told me as much. In all honesty, I came here expecting ghosts, not you." There, that seemed safe enough.

"In all honesty myself," said the dragon, "very often it is haunted. Ghosts walk everywhere these days. It is the age we find ourselves in, when the dead are bound to walk the earth for one reason or another. A simple thing can keep them on the mortal plain for years."

Juliette's eyes darted around, expecting to see ghosts in the corners of the room. She had seen one already, so it wasn't hard to believe there might be more.

"What do you know about them?" asked Juliette. Perhaps he might be able to tell her something helpful about Marlene.

The dragon reflected soberly. "They are pitiful, but not altogether pitiable. Good and bad people can become them if leave unfinished business behind. If they walk the earth, it means they are trying to accomplish a task however they can."

This intrigued Juliette. "Like what kinds of tasks?"

"For some, revenge."

That sounded like Marlene.

"For many others, the chance to do good somehow." Oscar nibbled thoughtfully on a piece of meat. "It was written many centuries ago that man must in life create happiness for others, or be bound to do so after death."

Juliette wished with some bitterness that she could have had the latter type of ghost haunting her.

Again almost blurting her words, she asked another question. "You read then?"

That question seemed to give the dragon pleasure. "Indeed I can, and do. I have read nearly every book in that dangerous library, though there are several that are too near the explosive device for me to chance removing."

And just like that, she thought, I have my way in. She produced from the folds of her dress the book her father had given her, the one with the cross on the cover.

"Perhaps you can tell me what book this is," she said, seriously hoping that he could.

The dragon stood still, as if he had just laid eyes on something precious. He arose from his seated position and swiftly crossed the room beside Juliette. His move startled her, but his eyes were fixed on the book in her hands.

He extended a talon to her. "May I?"

With some reluctance, and yet feeling unable to refuse, she allowed him to grasp her book between his claws. He studied the cover reverently, and when he opened the pages, he began to smile with delight.

"This is the Holy Bible," he said with triumph. "I have long searched for this book. I have seen it referenced in hundreds of other works, but never have I been able to read the Scriptures in their pure form. I have long suspected that long ago there must have been a worldwide purge of these books, since I have been unable to find one myself. Doubtless the absence of these words had much to do with the collapse of the world as it was known."

He turned to her with wildness in his eyes. "Give it to me," he said. "Would you do that?"

It seemed almost perfect. Here was the opportunity to help the dragon, to give him something he wanted. Surely that would square Juliette with Marlene, and she could be home free!

But as Juliette considered his request, she realized that she longed to have the book back in her own hands. It was all she had left of her father. She had always wondered what the words inside said, and now would she just give it away?

Without ever knowing the wonders that even Oscar the dragon had searched the earth for?

This was not something easily parted with. It was her family history, something beyond being a simple key to her current predicament. To just give it away was unacceptable.

"I can't," was all she could say.

The look on the dragon's face changed. "Sell it to me then," he said. "There are riches untold that I have gathered to this castle, treasures of the ancient world that are yours for the taking, if you will only give me this."

"It isn't for sale," said Juliette. She was beginning to feel uneasy. Almost foolishly, she extended her hand toward her father's book. "Can I have it back now?"

A strange new light seemed to glow in the dragon's eyes, one that suggested he was not used to having his will crossed. "Surely there must be something you will accept in exchange for this," he said, though his voice betrayed his doubt.

"I'm afraid there isn't," said Juliette. "My father gave me that book, though I cannot read the words."

Though her hand remained extended, he showed no intention of giving it back.

"Surely then you have no use for it?" said Oscar, almost hopeful.

His persistence was beginning to worry Juliette, and she remembered what Marlene had said about him. Suppose his manners had a breaking point? If he so desired, he had only to kill her, maybe eat her, and the book would be his.

Looking at his long claws and jagged teeth only filled her imagination with ways they could dismember her. She began to wish for her rifle, and to curse the floor length skirt that would undoubtedly impede running. She was as good as a rabbit in a snare.

But Juliette was not so easily defeated, for when she could not fight or run, she used her mind. She didn't think herself particularly clever, but it had saved her in the past, and now it would be the only thing to save her now.

The dragon put one foot forward, closer to her, as if perhaps he wanted to either beg her for the book or perhaps cut her off from escape. There was intensity in his eyes that suggested he was actively working out what he might do to obtain the book. Maybe even murder.

Juliette stammered out the only solution that popped into her mind. "H-how about a deal? Why don't we help each other out on this?"

Oscar paused curiously. "A mutually satisfactory arrangement?"

The words were strange to her, but the meaning was obvious. "You've been looking for that book for years, right? Well I've been looking for someone who can read, who can show me what it says. I guess I've found someone, haven't I?"

The dragon's eyes glinted as he began to catch her meaning.

She continued. "So why don't we read it together? You let me stay here, with you, and I let you read it to me every night."

"For how long?" he asked.

She remembered Marlene's deadline. "Until next spring?"

The near wrath that shone in Oscar's eyes moments ago vanished. "Your proposal is acceptable. What frabjous day, callooh callay!" He chortled in his joy, and spread his wings out as if to express his glee to the heavens.

Juliette smiled widely with relief. Not only had she escaped being a potential meal, but just like that she had given herself the window she needed to complete the task hanging over her head. Marlene's vengeance would have to wait.

The Passage of Time

Juliette and Oscar began reading together that very night. A delightful quiver ran through him as he read the words, "In the beginning..."

At first Juliette held the book aloft while he read the words with his keen dragon eyes, deciphering easily what Juliette had never been able to. Eventually they found a stand for the book, and Juliette simply turned the pages.

* * *

Juliette could hardly believe that such a small thing could hold so much knowledge, or that the world was possibly so old. She had never given much thought to how the world had been formed, or who had formed it. Now her mind was awakened to things beyond what she could experience by sensation. She began to be acquainted with eternity, with heaven and hell, and with miracles. As the months passed and they had read through the Pentateuch and the books of kings, Juliette got to know Oscar quite well. He had been a lonely creature for many years, being something other than human but still very much like one. He had practiced his refined manners as a way of holding at bay the animal savagery

he could easily have sunken into. He was also an accomplished reader and scholar of the past; when he read certain prophetic passages throughout the Bible, he would nearly always open some historical book he possessed and show her where such a prophecy had been fulfilled.

"There you see," he said as he showed her a history of the Greek and Roman empires, "is the fulfillment of Daniel's prophecies. The he-goat that slays the ram was Alexander the Great conquering Medo-Persia, and his horn being broken into four parts signified his kingdom being divided by his four generals. Eventually Rome conquered them all, and ruled much of the world by the time the savior, Jesus Christ, was born."

"Who is that?" Juliette had never heard that name before.

Oscar smiled with the knowing look of someone who knew the full story already. "We will get to him, though he has been prophesied since Genesis."

Winter came to the castle, and yet there was always a warm hearth for them to read by, thanks to Oscar's fire-breath. Winters had always been hard on Juliette as much as anyone else in this Apocalypse, but with Oscar she had plenty to eat, and never had to worry about the cold. She seldom felt the need to wear her army fatigues, and noticed over time that she better filled out the dresses she had found in the trunk. Table manners became second nature to her, and the more Oscar read to her, the more she learned of the civilized society that predated her own world by mere decades. She had seen many American flags in her life, but never knew that they were once the standard of the most powerful nation on earth until it fell into ruin, decay, and war. The more she understood the history of the world, the more she began to be filled with a sense of melancholy. "I should like to have seen that," she would often say about places or events that Oscar described to her.

As winter wore on, Juliette began to worry about the time. Marlene had given her until the first day of spring, and Juliette knew enough about the seasons to know that it would be around the corner sooner than she wanted.

Once in a while, she had caught glimpses of ghosts wandering. Most of them passed her by without paying her any mind, while a very few would look at her mournfully and move on. They were nearly all desolate and sad, wandering for purposes known only to themselves, with seemingly no way to help or be helped.

Juliette felt they must be very wretched indeed, and a brief thought quickly became an ever-present anxiety that if she failed in her task and Marlene came to tear her soul asunder from her body, she might wander the earth exactly as they did. Marlene had threatened her with exactly that, and after she had heard Oscar's account of them, she realized the full extent of what such a life beyond death would mean. Trapped alone, unable to rest until heaven or hell finally came to claim her. Perhaps she could haunt the living, but that was an even more dismal prospect.

She hadn't seen Marlene in months, but that worried her more, since obviously she had not completed the task. What was she missing about Oscar? What had all the reading not accomplished?

One day Juliette asked Oscar a question that had long been on her mind, but had somehow been reluctant to ask. "Oscar, have you always been a dragon?" For some reason, that question made Oscar very quiet, as if it troubled him deeply. "I suppose I always have been," he said, and would say no more on the subject.

Juliette sensed that there was something he was reluctant to tell her, and no matter how many times she elaborated on the subject in the subsequent months, he would either evade answering her directly or else change the subject. She began to realize that it was a deeply personal matter, one that cast gloominess over him whenever he thought about it, and that perhaps the story of Nebuchadnezzar's seven-year sentence as a beast might have something to do with Oscar's own life. For after all, how many beasts in the world had the mind of a man?

Of course. That must be it. He must have been a man once, and somehow he had been changed into a dragon. If princes could be changed into frogs, could not a man be cursed to bear the image of a hideous dragon?

All these questions and ponderings Juliette kept to herself, for Oscar never liked to discuss them at length. But then they began to read through the New Testament, and Juliette listened to the four witnesses' accounts of the life of Jesus Christ, and all his works. To hear stories of blind men seeing again, of the lame walking, of the dead being raised to life, and of men set free of demons filled Juliette with such hope as she had never known in all her lifetime of being acquainted with death and destruction. She also reflected on how wicked she had been in her life, raiding and plundering and acting solely for her own self preservation, leaving others like Marlene to meet awful ends. Sure everyone she had ever known had done the same thing, but what if that was merely the result of a world that had never heard the words "Love thy neighbor as thyself?"

As they read the Acts of the Apostles, and the miracle of the lame man by the gate Beautiful, she noticed sadness in Oscar's voice that made her speak up.

"What is it, Oscar? Please tell me. Something about this makes you sad, why?"

But he only shut the book. "I think that is enough for the day."

Juliette, however, would not give up. "Oscar, I insist. Tell me at once, what about that man's story touches you so?"

After much coaxing, Oscar relented. "I should like that man's story to be mine. Only I'm afraid to hope for it."

There! That must be it! "What should you be afraid for?" she asked. "A big, strong dragon like you? Didn't we read before that we are not to be afraid?"

"We did," he replied.

"But you are afraid."

"Yes."

"Don't you see that makes no sense? How absurd it is? If there is something you would ask of God, only believe! Isn't that what this book says?"

This was the most Juliette had ever played her hand in her entire stay at the castle. It had all come down to this, she felt. Surely now would be the breakthrough.

But the great dragon only put the book back in her hands. "I can't be helped. This was a richly deserved punishment, and I must bear it."

"You're talking nonsense, don't you see!" said Juliette. "All you have is unbelief - unbelief that a miracle could be yours, if only you'd give up your pride and take it!"

Oscar bore her words quietly, but turned away from her. "I will speak no more on this. We will read to the end of the book, then you are free to leave the castle."

He then spread his wings and lifted off, rising through the ballroom ceiling and taking to the sky, leaving Juliette alone with the book in her hands.

She felt sharp pangs of betrayal in her, hot anger she wanted to take out on something, and in her temper she threw the book on the ground.

The room seemed to go still. Seeing her father's inheritance to her crumpled on the ground broke Juliette's heart. She knelt down and clutched it to her heart, knowing there was no one she could apologize to for that action.

She felt very sorry for herself, but as she looked up to the sky, she realized she also felt sorry for Oscar. He had so eagerly sought this book, and passionately read it, that to see him come so close to grasping its very truth but falling short was utterly heartbreaking to her. She had never felt this way about another person in all her life - the feeling surprised her, the feeling of any kind of love for another person. In the readings, Jesus had seemed to talk all about love, and although Juliette's heart had been awakened to it, she had never before been so stricken by it.

In her wretchedness, she turned to the sky and spoke aloud. "Jesus, if you're still up there, please show Oscar that he doesn't have to hold onto the bad things anymore. Show him he can believe."

She paused thoughtfully, then continued. "Because I believe. Every miracle this book says you did, I believe. Everything it says you are, I believe. Please help me, Lord. Forgive this sinner. I don't know what to do."

She stared into space, wondering if her words fell on any ears beside the wind. She reasoned inside, however, that if she said she believed, then she would stick to that. Someone up there heard her, had listened to her, and loved her.

It was both a simple and earth-shattering revelation to her, one that brought unfamiliar tears to her eyes and made her heart feel ten pounds lighter. She felt a fire in her soul that she had never known before, all because she had dared to speak words of faith.

So she would read the rest of the book with Oscar, and she would give it her best shot. Even if he wouldn't, she would believe for a miracle.

As Oscar had commanded, Juliette never again brought up the subject of miracles while they read together, but every night she prayed for a miracle, any kind of miracle. Somehow the feeling of self-preservation became less and less her motivation, and more that she truly wished to see him believe and be transformed as Paul had said. She wondered what he looked like as a man before he was changed to a dragon. When had it even happened? Had he been a boy or a man at the time? Would he even recognize himself at this point if he were changed back?

Overtime, doubts began to gnaw at her. Perhaps Oscar was right; after all, he was knowledgeable, and yet he saw no way out. Perhaps God had punished him with something irreversible for some truly egregious sin. What if Oscar didn't even want to be a man again? What if he preferred to remain as a dragon?

But the more the doubts assaulted her mind, the more she recalled what was written in the book. She remembered how every time Satan tempted Jesus in the wilderness, he responded with the written word rather than a spur-of-the-moment comeback. Every time she recalled what she had heard, more fears were dispelled. She had never known such confidence, and when she remembered her old ways of thinking, she realized she was no longer the same person that walked into that castle all those months ago.

The only problem was that she kept believing and praying, but as yet, nothing had happened.

They read through the Letters of Paul and came upon the final book, the Book of Revelation. The dragon read this book somberly, because according to him, many of the events laid out in it had come to pass in the formulation of this Apocalypse. "People used to say all the time, 'The end of the world is nigh,'" he said. "But nowhere in all the rivers of history have we been closer to the true end of our world."

Juliette said, "Then I guess we'd best make the most of it will we can."

Strangely enough, Oscar nodded at this statement before he continued.

Eventually the final chapter and the final verse came to pass, and they had finished reading the Holy Bible.

As Juliette closed the book, there was a long silence between her and the dragon. The more Juliette comprehended that they had actually finished the book, the more she realized with sadness what was to come. No miracle had occurred, no matter how much she had prayed and believed. She wished it could be different, but now it was too late and there was no other way.

The Girl, the Ghost, and the Dragon

One day, Juliette noticed water running down the windows all over the castle. The icicles dripped until they vanished, and she could no longer see her breath. The arrival of spring would have caused joy to anyone else, but to Juliette, it was a death-knell that caused her courage to fail within her.

Once again she girded herself for travel. Perhaps she could outrun Marlene, hide from her, let her chase her to the ends of the earth. She certainly wouldn't give up and let her take her. If Marlene wanted her soul, she'd have to catch her first. She looked at herself in the wall length mirror, once again clad in her army fatigues, oversized boots and trench coat. She slung her rifle, though inside she reflected on the futility of traveling armed with a ghost on her trail.

Sunset was coming on what she feared would be her last day if she didn't escape fast. Juliette moved quietly to the front gates, tiptoeing carefully through the castle. She hadn't seen Oscar today, but she felt she had no time to say goodbye. In her heart, however, she knew she couldn't escape someone like Oscar so easily. As she crossed the rope bridge over the courtyard pool, she heard the familiar rustling, and Oscar's head poked through the gates behind her.

"Where are you going?" he asked, as if he already knew.

"I'm leaving," she said. "I can't stay here, I have to run."

"Run? From what?"

She was reluctant to answer. "It doesn't matter. I have no time."

Juliette reached the front gates and nearly put her hand to them when she was surprised to hear the dragon say, "Please - I don't want you to go."

A pang of sadness shot through her. As she turned to look back at Oscar, she could see in his eyes that his heart was breaking.

"I know I said you could. Maybe even I wanted you to once," he said. "But now it comes to it, and I don't want to be alone here without you."

Having listened to Oscar's voice for the better part of a year, Juliette could sense the desperation that for manners' sake he now tried to suppress. She herself had grown accustomed to his company, had even come to regard him as a true friend. No, it was more than that. Having read the Holy Bible with him, and having learned for the first time what love was in all its complexity and wonder, she realized that she loved him and didn't want to be parted from him.

A tear ran down her cheek, but as she lowered her eyes, she caught a glimpse in the pool below her, a reflection of Marlene's specter floating just above the water. She had come to collect her due.

Now Juliette knew she had to leave, to escape while she could. If anything, she didn't want Oscar to watch her die.

"I'm sorry I must leave you," she called back. "But I tried, and now it's too late. Goodbye, Oscar."

With that she pushed the gate open and fled down the path beyond, leaving Oscar to ponder the full meaning of her words in wretched solitude.

* * *

Juliette ran and ran, her mind racing on how she could possibly escape a ghost. She knew deep down that truly she had no chance, but she still wouldn't go down without trying. She held her final moments in the palm of her hand, and she would hold onto them for as long as she possibly could.

Eventually the sun fell. She had emerged from the high rock walls into the valley, exactly where she had discovered the path in the first place. It seemed a lifetime ago now.

As she stopped to catch her breath, her heart sank with the realization that there was nowhere in all the earth she could run to escape what was coming. She would grow tired, hungry, weary of pursuit. The ghost of Marlene Jacobson had no more purpose than to exact her revenge, to punish Juliette for her sin.

She reflected on that fateful day four years past, how Marlene had fallen in the dirt, how she had stretched out her hand to Juliette for help. Juliette had turned for a moment, but then she quailed at the sight of the marauders appearing over the hill behind them. She left Marlene's hand outstretched and fled to safety while Marlene was cut down behind her. Now of all days, she was receiving recompense, just or unjust, for her craven act.

As Juliette cursed that day and cursed her cowardice, the familiar phantom manifested before her. Marlene's face had no pleasure or sadness, only the hard expression of an executioner.

Juliette sank to her knees. There was no running now. There was only judgment. "Juliette Monaghan, I have come for your soul," said the specter. "Before I take my due, have you anything to say in your defense?"

There was no bribing a spirit, nor was there any persuasion to be made through tears. But in that moment, Juliette decided that if she was to die now, she would not join the ghostly congregation and walk the earth aimlessly, not if there was a heaven to be found.

She lifted her eyes heavenward and repeated the very words of Jesus himself. "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit." And with that, she closed her eyes and prepared to yield her spirit to heaven.

Who can say whether there was real malice or not in Marlene's ghost? But when she reached her hand toward Juliette's heart and felt it repulsed as if by a strange, incredible force, there was definite displeasure in her response.

"What is this?" Marlene tried again, and her phantom hand was thrown so quickly from Juliette's body that it seemed to sting her, something she hadn't felt since she was among the living.

Juliette opened her eyes, and to her shock she was still alive. Marlene had recoiled and shrunk away from her, as if the attempt to touch her had been seriously injurious.

"I do not understand," said Marlene. "I had a right to your soul. Who dares refuse me?"

Juliette was confounded herself, but something came to her mind. "Not I, but the spirit within me."

Feeling a surge within her, Juliette stood to her feet. With that declaration had come courage, and the heart of a lion.

"I don't fully understand it all," said Juliette to the ghost, "but one thing I do know is that my debt was paid long ago on a cross. This must mean that when I accepted this price for myself, you lost the right to my soul. That's what it says in my father's book."

Marlene began to back away. To her sight, it appeared that Juliette began to shine with a blinding light.

Juliette looked her straight in the eye. "Now leave me, and trouble me no more."

With a flash of sickly green light, Marlene Jacobson vanished. Juliette looked all around, but there was no ghost to be found. She was gone forever.

Just then it began to rain again. It fell gently, but flashes of lightning and rolls of thunder soon followed, and Juliette was caught in a storm again.

The realization that her burden had been lifted gradually dawned on Juliette, and when she turned to the sky with closed eyes and felt those raindrops on her face, she felt freer than ever before in her whole life.

Then she remembered something that made her eyes open. She had left a friend behind, someone she had grown to cherish.

Juliette stood in that valley path contemplating the choice ahead. Before her was her route west, a path to some nebulous idea of a brand new life. Behind her was the castle, and Oscar.

She had journeyed alone to escape people. Everyone she had known in her life had mistreated or abandoned her, leading to a deep mistrust of others. But Oscar was not so. He was different. And reading her father's book had made her different too. There might not be anyone else like them in the whole world, despite the fact he was a dragon.

Juliette smiled. If he was the only one in the world like her, why not share it with him?

Without a second more of delay, she turned back and ran through the rain back to the castle.

Juliette found the path with no difficulty, and no amount of rain could prevent her from opening the gates again and crossing the rope bridge. She threw open the front gates and shouted his name at the top of her voice.

"Oscar! Oscar, I'm here!"

She listened for him, for either a rush of wind or that familiar scraping of his wings and claws against stone. But she heard nothing.

She threw open every door and dashed down every hallway in search of him. He was not in the dining hall, or the library, or even the grand ballroom. There was not a sign of the dragon in the entire castle.

Juliette began to worry. It was storming outside, and he never went out in the rain. Where could he be?

She climbed to the high tower, hoping she might find him perhaps looking out over the valley. He wasn't there.

For a long moment she sat despondent, and looked off into the rainy darkness. What had become of him? Had he fallen into grief and done something mad?

A blinding flash of lightning caught the castle and the valley in bright light for the briefest of moments, and in that moment she caught a silhouette of a winged beast flying high in the air, far in the distance. He had gone to look for her! Perhaps all she had to do was wait for him. Surely the rain would drive him back to the castle?

But he showed no sign of abandoning the search. As more lightning flashed, the dragon's silhouette got further and further away.

Suddenly the next tendril of light that snaked across the sky caught Oscar mid-flight, striking him out of the air! In horror, Juliette watched as he plummeted to the forest below!

She covered a scream with her wrist and scrambled back down the tower. He could be miles away, and in these woods there was no time to lose.

* * *

Juliette flew through the castle doors and back into the valley with all the speed she could muster. She shed her backpack and trench coat as she moved, but as she was about to fling her rifle away, she thought better of it and kept to her course. She could guess the general area he had fallen, but in the dark and the rain he would nonetheless be difficult to find. The challenges of reaching and aiding him piled in her mind as her legs pumped across the ground, growing doubt in her mind, threatening to slow her down.

Finally she had to stop to catch her breath. The forest around her was dark and cascading with rain, and for one horrible moment she felt hopelessly lost and out of reach of Oscar. In desperation, she cried to the heavens with a loud voice, "Jesus! If you can hear me, help me find him!" That was all her breathless lungs could give out.

Suddenly she noticed a dark shape moving through the trees up ahead. A feral hog. She readied her rifle to fire, but strangely it wasn't coming for her.

Somehow she felt she must follow it, and so leapt after it.

She noticed a glow in the distance, the glow of fire. She raced toward it as it dimmed, but then it burst out again and soon enough she found him.

Oscar had crashed down in the trees, suffering grievous injuries. The feral hogs smelled his blood even in the rain, and he had been defending himself with his fire. He had barely succeeded, for now they covered him and would have entirely devoured him were it not for the arrival of Juliette and her Ruger Mini 14.

She emptied the magazine and then two more, blasting into the hogs with all her might. The rapid onslaught of the rifle fire, coupled with the redoubled efforts of the dragon's fire-breath, finally dispelled the hogs and they vanished into the night.

Juliette finally laid her rifle aside to attend Oscar. He was a bloody mess, with his wings twisted, his tail bent crooked, and many of his claws broken. Hot blood trickled from his mouth, and the lines of smoke from his nose were pitifully spent.

But when his great red eyes caught sight of Juliette, the light inside them turned to gladness.

"I went looking for you," said he. "But you found me instead."

"Lie still," said Juliette, desperately trying to figure out how to help him. He was so great and his wounds so severe, all her hopes of saving him dwindled within her. Oscar could tell by her expression that the situation was grave.

"I'm done for, aren't I?"

She shook her head, even though it was hopeless. "No, you're not. Don't say such things."

He tried to croak out a chuckle. "I always did like your spirit, Juliette."

At that, she turned to him and looked him in the eyes. She knew this might be the final chance to do so.

"Oscar - tell me now, do you believe in miracles?"

"That's what you want to say to me at a time like this?"

"Please! Jesus was always telling them to just believe. Can't you do that? If you'll ask him, he will make you whole again... he'll even make you a man again."

"Juliette, you don't understand. I committed the sin of Lucifer, the sin of pride, and as punishment I was cursed with his image. It is just punishment, and if I must die bearing this image, I will do so knowing it was God's will."

"Shut up! You're the one who doesn't understand, weren't you listening to what you read for all those months? If you would only ask for a miracle, and believe in it!"

Juliette cradled Oscar's head close to herself, and she kept his deep red eye focused on her. "If there's one thing in all the world I would have right now, it would be for you to give up this idiotic notion and cry out to God, 'Save me and make me whole again!'"

Even in the rain, Oscar could discern tears flowing from her eyes. "Do you wear that long face for me?"

"I cannot help it," she said. "I love you."

The declaration stunned the dragon, even as the light in his eyes began to dim. Juliette was close enough to him to tell that his pulse was weakening, he was fading. She held his head all the more tightly, squeezing more of her own tears from her eyes.

"Just believe," she repeated. "Just believe. Just believe."

Curiously, a numb, drowsy sensation began to take her over as she rocked the dragon's head, and she fell asleep.

* * *

When Juliette awoke, it was a bright, shining morning. The storm clouds had given way to blue skies and singing birds, and the air was cool and clear. She rubbed her eyes in the sunlight, and discovered Oscar was gone.

With a start, she jumped to her feet. He had entirely vanished. The impression of his form in the ground was there, as well as the shattered tree limbs from his fall.

But the dragon himself was nowhere to be found.

Juliette screamed loud as she could, her cry echoing through the forest. "Oscar!"

She called and called for him, but nothing answered her.

Just as she began to despair, she noticed something stir out of the corner of her eye. With shock she realized there was a man lying asleep in the grass. His arm had twitched, and then he began to turn over.

Juliette had never seen such a handsome face on a man. The Apocalypse had been hard on good looks, and most men she knew had scars, broken teeth, and pockmarks. This was a face untouched by any of that. The man's eyes opened, and he arose. He looked curiously at his hands, then at his feet. Juliette watched as he stood to his feet, wobbly at first but then strong and stout. He was tall and muscular, and somehow clothed in white linen.

He turned to Juliette, and she instantly recognized him as Oscar.

It was him alright, something about his defined jaw and cheekbones, and his deep brown eyes that reflected a little red in the sunlight.

He looked himself over, completely and utterly amazed.

"Juliette... I'm me again."

She rushed to him, almost afraid to touch him at first until she felt that he was real and not a ghost. Sure enough, he was flesh and blood, and she wrapped her arms tightly around, tears of joy flowing down her face.

They looked deeply into each others' eyes, each as astounded as the other.

"How?" was all she could ask.

"I felt myself leaving that body," he said as if remembering a dream. "A voice said to me, 'My son, do you believe?' I said I believed. Then I fell asleep, and I thought I was gone. But now..."

And as jubilation surged through his bones, he let out a shout of victory to the heavens, and turned to Juliette. The sun lit up every highlight in her hair and caught green flecks in her eyes that he had never seen in dim light of the castle. The smile on her face was more beautiful than any painting or picture he had ever seen in books.

"Juliette, I think I love you too," he said, almost catching himself for letting such words slip out. Juliette smiled at him and took him by the hand, and knew in her heart that this was the man she wanted to spend all the rest of her days with.

"I'd like to stay with you, Oscar, for as long we both have left to live on this earth." She reached into the one pouch he hadn't discarded in her run, and pulled out her father's Bible. "I'd like to hear you read this again. But this time, I want you to show me how."

And with that, they walked hand in hand back to the castle, never to be parted from one another again to the end of their days.

About the Author

Ian Harrup is a film director and screenwriter from Killeen, Texas. He has a degree in multimedia from Oral Roberts University, and is currently developing a first feature film to direct hopefully in 2020. His short film "Unlucky Day" won Best Director and Best Cinematography at the Tulsa American Film Festival in 2018, and can be found with all his other films on his Youtube channel, "iharrup." He has always loved high concept storytelling in fantasy, science fiction, and history, and his entry into this short story anthology seeks to combine all those elements into one powerful story. He is a committed Christian and works to infuse his storytelling with themes of faith, redemption, and transformation, even as his subject matter ranges from post-apocalyptic, film noir, biblical, and more.

A FOREST MEETING

Nathan Lundeen

An owl's cry echoes through the night. Hidden in the shadow of three old trees, a man stirs as he watches the forest. Twin moons give enough light to move without need for torchlight. Here a deer slowly moves through the woods. A pair of foxes move swiftly through the gaps in the underbrush. Still the man waits. All around him the buzz of insects and the croak of hidden frogs fill the still air.

The man takes quiet, even breaths. He remains still. His brown skin is marked by countless scars from past battles. His leather armor is equally worn.

Slowly he turns, his eyes studying the shadows. For a moment, his eyes linger on the distant light of a nearby village.

Abruptly the night sounds fall silent.

He carefully tightens his grip on a pair of daggers.

His dark eyes scan the forest, seeking anything out of the ordinary. Anything unusual.

Then he sees a shadowy figure move.

The figure moves carefully, silently, from one tree to the next. A black cloak gives him a shadow-like quality. The figure is hunched over, pausing every now and then. Little by little, the figure moves closer to where the man hides. The man keeps track of how slow time is passing by the shadows of the trees. An hour passes before the figure reaches his hiding place.

The man tenses, his hands gripping the swords.

"I smell you," The figure hisses. He straightens and faces the man's hiding place. "I smell your hatred. Your fear."

Slowly the man rises and steps forward. His swords remain drawn but at his side. The figure nods his head in understanding. He draws his hood back, revealing pale skin and an aristocratic face. The figure's black hair is pulled back and tied in a single ponytail. Despite his handsome human features, his eyes are little more than solid black orbs.

"Who are you, hunter?"

"I am Kal, Son of Anon of the O'di Clan." The man answers as he assumes a combat stance. "And you?"

The figure throws his black cloak aside, revealing black armor. A red handprint adorns the chest armor. "I am Krishna of the Line of Lucia."

For a moment, they stand in the moonlight eyeing one another. It is clear both have lived the life of warriors. And it is clear that both are skilled and seasoned by long experience.

"Why do you wait for me in the dark?" Krishna asks.

The question catches Kal off guard.

Krishna speaks again, louder this time. "Why do you wait to murder me?"

"You are hunting."

"Am I? Do you see any humans nearby? Do you see any others beside me? Do you see the so called war paint upon my face? The blood of our victims as your kind claim we do? Do you see blood lust or rage?"

"You are killers—"

"By those of you who hate my kind! You cannot listen to the words of those who hate us! Hear me! Their words are tainted. Look to your feelings and hear those who agree with us. That peace can exist between our kinds. That we can live beside one another." The figure pauses then continues in a low melodious pace, "Think, think I say! We need only to feed on animals. We do not feed on humans as needed."

A warning in Kal's heart gives him pause. He takes a deep breath and tightens his grip on the steel swords.

Krishna makes the first move. He becomes a little more than a black whirlwind. Red blades appear out of thin air. Kal barely has enough time to get his own steel blades in place to parry. In seconds, they are lost in the rhythm of the battle.

Silver blade against red sword.

Their blows strike hard enough to send sparks flying. Their clashes echo through the night. Back and forth, the two males battle. Back and forth they struggle. A momentary weakness gives the other the advantage but a mistake quickly shifts the balance of power back. They become black shadows. Faster than any human could possibly dream of.

A heartbeat passes and the two combatants split apart.

For a moment they pause to catch their breath. Kal's left leg sports a deep wound and is barely able to hold his weight. A blow to his ribs causes him pain with each breath. His arm and forehead bear lighter wounds. Sweat dampens his armpits and back. Fear dampens his palms.

Krishna is little better off. His chest is riddled with stab wounds. His right arm bears several deep wounds while his left kneecap is askew.

"Why do you hunt us?" Krishna snarls, "What have we done to you?"

"You are an evil that must be destroyed." Kal wheezes out. His vision is darkening around the corners. "That is reason enough."

"Evil? We did not choose this. None of us did. We became what we are because another was forced to do what they must to survive." Krishna stalks forward, "We do what we do must to survive! We have the right to survive and live as we please! As do you and your kind!"

"You are murdering innocents!"

"What innocents?" Krishna snaps back, anger giving him strength, "Have you heard of a man disappearing or a family found slaughtered? Have you heard stories where children vanish from their beds or whole villages disappearing? No! We are not murders!"

"Your kind has preyed on my people for ages. Only the War Clans have risen to stand against you."

Krishna scoffs, "You fool. Your War Clans fight amongst themselves. Was it not just three days ago where two Clans destroyed each other? And what of our deeds? Have we not lived in peace beside you? Have we killed or hunted the humans?"

Kal prepares to continue the fight.

"Put aside your blades and your hatred. Hear me and the truth I tell you!"

"Why should I listen to you?" Kal answers. "To anything you have said and done?"

"Tell me! What have we done to harm you? Have you seen us kill? Or maim? Or have you seen my kind react to you as you hunt us in our own homelands. As your kind kill us in our villages and homes. Have we not the right to defend ourselves?"

For a moment, Kal hesitates.

"You cannot think of an instance? Can you? Where we have hunted and killed humans. None because we have not acted so." Krishna takes a deep, labored breath, "We wish only to live beside you. I know you have heard our pleas and our cries for peace. We are not evil though we act out of defense. All that we have done we have done so because of your aggression. Your hatred towards us."

Kal's blades drop as the truth of Krishna's words take root.

For Krishna is right. No humans had been slaughtered. No lives had been consumed. Krishna and his kind were staying away from the humans.

Krishna strikes.

He crosses the distance like a black lighting bolt, sinking his blade deep into his opponent's gut. Kal groans as he drops his swords. They hit the ground with a metallic thud as he sinks towards the earth. Krishna stands over him with an evil grin.

"You fool. This is why we vampires will win. You let our words blind you. You let your own doubts slow you. Tonight I shall dine on the blood of children. Because of you."

Kal watches the vampire step out of sight. Above him, two moons slowly pass out of sight. His heart beats faster. He wills his limbs to move but his body betrays him. Slowly, his body grows heavy and cold.

Krishna laughs at his fallen foe. He turns and begins moving through the woods.

About the Author

Nathan is a full time graphic designer who hopes to one day publish an original novel. A graduate of Abilene Christian University with a bachelor's degree in Multimedia, Nathan spends most of his free time writing stories and poems. As part of his goal to get published, Nathan is starting to submit his stories for publication. In addition, he is preparing to enter the freelance world. Nathan's other interests include deck building games, board games and photography.

FORESIGHT

Quentin Harrup

“If you could see the future ... would you want to?”

The card read: 24-Sight - June 14th, 3:15 PM. He checked his watch – 3:13 PM. Two minutes remaining. Frank hesitated to enter the store, knowing that there would be no going back after this. If he made the appointment, and if the rumor was true, then his entire future would be laid before him. He had been searching for so long, and now the moment was upon him, the knowledge was his for the taking. However, the lingering question in his mind made him reluctant to go through with it.

3:14 PM.

“These guys are strict about their appointment times,” he thought to himself, “I have less than a minute to make up my mind, but I need more time!”

Time, however, proved to be the same merciless force that had plagued him from the beginning. The seconds only ticked by, never ticked backward. Of course, he had tried that before, but scam artists, misguided physicists, and everyone else who promised him control over the clock had proven only to be a waste of his valued commodity.

“Can I choose not to? Or is it already set in stone?”

With that question, a woman burst out of the store declaring it was a scam, and that she only ever saw the same thing. This distracted Frank for a moment, but the minute struck 3:15 PM, and he was inside the door.

The clinic was well kept, but had obviously seen much use. This was his first time in this particular time clinic, but he was already familiar with the place. “Got an appointment?” The sleazy, middle-aged man asked from behind a desk, but Frank was ready with the card.

“This was given to me by a friend.” The clerk took the card to inspect it.

“I don’t see your name on our schedule. You sure you got the right branch?”

“This is the address on the card, right?”

“Yeah, sure.”

The clerk then slapped a piece of paper on the counter, “I need your signature there stating that you have not been to a clinic in the past twenty-four hours, under penalty of fines and imprisonment, blah, blah, blah.”

Frank leaned closer, and with a lowered voice said, “I’m here to see Patmos.”

The clerk’s expression froze, clearly stunned. This was not the type of request he expected to see from the young man standing in front of him.

“First some assurances. I gotta know you’re not here with the feds.” With the confidence of familiarity, Frank stated, “You got my name, you got my card. Look me up.”

The clerk paused to check his computer, and after a brief moment of searching, opened the door next to the counter and told Frank to go in. But before leading him to the machine, the clerk locked the front door and flipped around the open sign to indicate an early closure.

As the clerk closed up, Frank asked him about the lady who had just left.

“That lady comes in every day, and every day ends with her seeing herself right back here. Some people just don’t have a life, am I right?”

After a silent chuckle, the clerk asked Frank to follow him down the hall.

They walked past the regular stations to the end of the hall and into a spare room where, behind the repair equipment and spare parts, sat a large machine, similar to an MRI scanner – the word **PATMOS** written in bold letters in the side. The primary distinguishing feature between this machine and the other commercial use models was that, rather

than a full circle surrounding the patient, only three-quarters of the loop were present. The fourth quarter was replaced with an IV system, complete with hanging tubes and needles, as well as an unusual looking headset.

"This thing is government-grade, government-regulated, and government-owned property. At least that's what they think." The clerk explained as he powered the machine up. "After the election, they made these things illegal for the public. 'Only the utmost discretionary and trustworthy souls should be permitted access to such knowledge. In the wrong hands, this power could tear apart the fabric of our reality.' or something like that. The truth is, I've seen dozens of customers use this machine before, and none of them leave with any great plans of world domination."

At this, the clerk chuckled to himself. Frank was still unsure about going through with the procedure, and the clerk's constant talk of the illegality of the machine, as well as the descriptions of the previous customers' feelings of regret all only added to his uncertainty.

Uncertainty, he remembered, was the very reason why he was going through with it in the first place. His hesitation was only due to his anxiety about the outcome. Would it really work? Would his life really improve? Would he get caught? Questions raced through his mind as the clerk prepared the table.

"Alright, sit here, please."

The clerk beckoned for Frank's left arm, and in an instant had a needle in his vein.

"You've done this before, but since we're going further than twenty-four hours, I feel obligated to warn you there will be more adrenaline than what is commonly used. You may experience light-headedness or other symptoms, but I assure you it will pass very quickly."

The speed at which the clerk was preparing this procedure was alarming to Frank; "Surely such a phenomenal experience as seeing the entirety of one's future would be prepared with a little more care," he thought. But Frank soon realized that the intensity of the preparation was elevating his heart rate – precisely what the procedure would require.

"Put this on." Stated the clerk as he passed Frank the headset. "It'll feel a little snug, but it's supposed to." Frank slid it on his scalp and adjusted it so it would not pinch his ear.

"Other clinics don't use a headset, why don't you just use the sticker pads like everyone else?" Frank asked.

The clerk replied with a canned response, clearly he had heard this question before, "At twenty-four hours the adrenal resonance is pretty clear on its own, so you only need mild neuro-stimulators to picture the images, but after a few weeks the signal weakens. This will enhance the image from the faintest adrenal signals so you'll be able to see farther. I should note that the further out an event is, the less of it you'll be able to pick up. You will likely only see crazy life events after a year or two. You know, the stuff that really gets your adrenaline pumping."

Frank leaned back on the table to settle in. "Do you think I'll see my own death?" He asked with great curiosity.

The clerk had heard this question too, "Depends on how exciting it will be. I've had some guys get off the table in a panic because they saw themselves getting shot."

"Did they?" Frank asked with nervous hesitation.

The clerk paused what he was doing, "If this machine wasn't so accurate, they wouldn't have made it illegal." And with that, the clerk flipped a few more switches and powered up the machine. Loud clunking sounds, followed by the whirring of electronics filled Frank's ears.

"Ok, whenever you're ready I can administer the sedative." The clerk said, as he stood ready next to the IV controls. Suddenly, something came to Frank's mind, and he began to check his pockets.

"You okay there? Did you need something?" The clerk asked, surprised that the routine was being interrupted.

"Do you have a notepad somewhere? I need a notepad and pen!"

"Whoa, whoa, whoa! You're not seriously thinking of writing any of this down are you? That's the whole reason this stuff is illegal!"

"I'm only going to write down the stuff important to my life, nothing to do with anyone else." He frantically searched until at last, he found it stuffed inside his chest pocket.

"If it makes you feel better, I'll let you look through to make sure it's not too much."

The clerk backed off after that, "No sir, your life is your business. It's a policy of mine not to know anything about a client's future, intentionally anyway. After this, you and I will never see or speak to each other again. Got it?"

Frank nodded in agreement, "Fine, no details then? Just the important bits?" The clerk resigned to this and went back to the controls.

"You ready?" The clerk asked.

"Ready." Frank replied. Now it was true. No more uncertainty, this was his point of no return.

The clerk pressed the button for the IV pump, and within seconds the sedative came rushing into Frank's veins; after only a few breaths, Frank was unconscious. The clerk then twisted a knob to increase voltage, removed two small pads from the machine, and placed them on Frank's torso. Another press of a button and Frank's adrenals began to pump like never before. Frank's eyes opened out of his unconscious state from the sheer shock of the charge, but rather than being woken up, his mind went to another place entirely. Frank could feel the headset tingling his scalp; something was going on. Within seconds, he knew what it was.

Images began to flash in his mind: crystal clear as if he was seeing them with his own eyes. At first, brief glimpses of himself writing in his journal, then paying the clerk, leaving the store, and walking home. In an instant, emotions came and left: disappointment, excitement, fear, joy – each one corresponding with an image.

For the most immediate future, there was nothing worthy of note – a simple daily routine without any interest. However, in the clearly discernable near future, Frank saw himself at a park bench near a footbridge. Nervousness flooded his mind, but as he turned around his worry changed into that of love. A woman approaching the bench had caught his attention, and Frank saw himself at her side. Something had fallen to the ground and he was helping to pick it up. Frank knew there was something special about her.

In the next instant, his heart fluttered with nervousness as he found himself standing next to a car. The sun had just set, he was dressed for dinner and was holding a bouquet of roses. The picture was crystal clear; so clear, in fact, that he could just barely perceive the address on the apartment he was waiting near. A door opened and the woman from the bridge came towards him. It was obvious that the bouquet was meant for her.

Images of a nice dinner, a romantic stroll in a park, and returning the woman to her door all flooded his mind. The images seemed to repeat themselves, changing only clothing and the occasional location. For a brief moment, Frank began to worry the machine was stuck in a loop as the images began to fade and become less detailed.

That all changed with a sudden shock of adrenaline, and another crystal clear picture. Frank stood outside a door, nervous energy mixed with determination filled every fiber of his being. He entered the office and found himself speaking with his boss at work. The image faded until emotions of joy and relief came rushing in. Frank had succeeded in something. A pay raise, perhaps? He tried to discern the importance of that moment, and noticed himself scribbling something on a piece of paper. He tried to read it as best as he could, but the paper was too blurred to discern. Frustrated at his failure to note the important message from his future, Frank nearly woke from his sedation, but continued on with the hope that things would improve.

The following few images were too blurred for him to note, but Frank began to notice a few key things scattered throughout the vision. Ring shopping, house hunting, and spending more and more time with the woman. Only after a few flashes of that did one of the clearest pictures come into mind. The clarity of this picture was so intense that he could actually hear what was being said. He heard the name "Irene," followed by the words, "Will you marry me?" He noticed a shining ring in his hand, and tears in the woman's eyes. Irene embraced him, and every nervous emotion left, replaced with pure joy.

The next image to flash in his mind was their wedding. Strangely, the picture seemed less clear than the engagement. Frank was unable to hear what was being said, but could easily observe what was happening. Only one moment caused

his heart to flutter with anything other than joy, and for a brief moment he heard the words, "Irene, do you take this man to be your lawfully wedded husband, till death do you part?"

The moment seemed like an eternity, and the image lasted longer than any other. A slight feeling of dread came over him, but Irene's smile relieved any nervousness. Her lips motioned "I do," and the image faded. Frank was delighted. He now knew who he was supposed to marry, and how to find her. Again he nearly awoke from the sleep, but decided to continue with the vision. Perhaps there was more to see. The next moments were a blur, and Frank began to notice that there seemed to be fewer and fewer clear pictures. He began to grow worried that the vision was ending, when a sudden anxious feeling flooded his mind. He saw Irene, standing in front of him, holding a small white object. The image became more vivid than any other when he heard a single word.

"Pregnant."

Every emotion known to man raced through his mind, and the moment seemed to hang for an eternity. Frank's heart raced, and with every beat the moment became more and more clear. He finally began to feel the weight of the endeavor, as before his eyes he was witnessing the moments of life that were meant to be spread throughout time. He had succeeded in gaining the upper hand on time. Finally he could plan for the important things. That idea filled him with excitement and joy.

However, joy soon turned to sorrow as the next image saw him standing by Irene in a hospital bed. Irene looked ill, and a doctor uttered another word, this time every triumphant feeling was utterly crushed, replaced only with the dread of a single word.

"Miscarriage."

Again, such a moment of strong emotion made the image linger for longer than Frank would have liked. He wished for nothing more than that image to go away so that he may see something joyous again. But the sorrow lingered, and Frank began to rethink his choice.

The moment offered him an opportunity to observe, and to reflect. He noticed the report from the doctor detailing the issues with the pregnancy, as well as the date and time. Frank committed this to memory, intending to change everything. If he could find a way to undo this moment, then perhaps he could change the future? The moment finally began to fade, and he vowed to himself that this would not come to pass.

More images rolled passed, fueled by strong emotions of sorrow, melancholy, and even anger. Irene didn't smile anymore, and soon the vision was becoming unbearable. Frank began to sense that his determination was failing, and that all other attempts at pregnancy ended only in sorrow and grief. He nearly tried to wake himself up to escape the misery, but suddenly a moment appeared clearer than anything he had seen before.

His hand released a needle stuck in his thigh, and he could see, hear, smell, taste, and even feel everything in the vision. The smell was foul as he found himself standing near a dumpster. The taste was strange, almost metallic. The sound of rain falling, and the feeling of raindrops on his scalp made him cold. Pain filled his leg, but the thrill of the moment seemed to trump everything else.

The vision had become lucid to the point that he felt as if he was controlling his future self. The moment lingered as he walked to his car, drove to his house, and woke Irene from her sleep.

"Irene, I know how to control it!" He found himself saying, "I can change our future!"

Irene looked unhappy at this revelation, and bitterness filled her words.

"You promised..." she fought through tears of anger, "you promised you would stop."

"But this time it's working!" Frank exclaimed, almost shouting to his future. "It's working because I remember this moment! I remember everything we're saying!"

Irene opened her mouth to speak, but Frank cut her off, "You're about to tell me you wish we had never met. I know because I remember myself saying what I'm saying now!"

Irene seemed shocked that he knew the exact words she was going to utter. Suddenly he found his journal is in his hand.

“Look, Irene!” He said, “This is the journal I wrote the future in. See this page...”

The lucidity of the moment shocked Frank; before his eyes were the very words he was speaking. As if reading from a script, he found himself saying, “This is exactly what I saw. I’m saying exactly what I wrote I would say!” Triumph, even pride, filled his emotions, but those feelings fled with Irene’s next words.

“You said you could change the future. You said you could save our baby. All this proves is that you can’t change a thing.”

With that, Irene stormed out of the room. The moment lingered, and a profound sense of failure overwhelmed Frank.

Eventually the vision passed to a new image. Once again there was a sharp pain in Frank’s thigh, and a syringe sticking in his leg. Frank looked around trying to determine what was so special about this moment. A bright screen illuminated the dark living room, with numbers sprawled across the screen: 24-29-11-20-03-67. Frank looked down and noticed a lottery card in his hands with the same numbers: 24-29-11-20-03-67.

Also written on the card were an address, date and time, and a message: 3RD FROM THE END. Frank instantly understood the gravity of that moment and committed the sequence of numbers to memory as quickly as he could. With the drug in his veins, he had several minutes to memorize the number, location, date and time, and the message written on the side. He had won the lottery, but could not even celebrate as he was too focused on memorizing the details. The moment faded, and after he had committed everything to memory, he felt a sigh of relief, victory even, leave his lungs.

Fleeting images spattered with emotions of joy and delight ran through his mind. With the money he had just won, his life changed completely; yet strangely, he noticed that the emotions were not as strong as before. Yes, time was progressing and the images were growing dimmer, but the emotions themselves seemed to be less than he would have thought. Suddenly he realized, nowhere in the fleeting images did he see Irene. He saw exciting moments of high thrills followed by revels of victory, but she was nowhere in sight. This made the victories seem empty and vague.

He seemed to win again and again, but he could only get glimpses of what he was winning. The occasional moment of clarity would pass, accompanied by a needle in his thigh, and this would give him another minute to commit an important event or number to memory. Yet all of it, the victories and the thrills, they felt less vivid than before – it all felt like a counterfeit of the real thing.

Suddenly the images began to fade. Fewer moments came by, and what did was barely discernable. A spattering of fear from the shock of a car accident, a brief moment of excitement as his team won a sports event; he noticed he was growing old – and lonely.

It was dark for a while, and Frank began to feel trapped in this state of unconscious limbo. Until, at last, a final image appeared.

A light came flooding into his mind, a red-orange glow. He looked up and saw the setting sun over a body of water. Looking down, he saw his feet dangling over a ledge. He was sitting on a bridge, ready to jump into the cold river below. The moment was tinged with sorrow, grief, and regret.

Surprised by the clarity of this moment, Frank looked for a needle, but found there was none – this was pure, raw emotion.

His journal was in his hands, open with a message saying: WALK AWAY – 3:15 PM. He watched as his frail, wrinkled hands closed the book and tossed it into the river.

After that, he saw nothing. The rushing sound of wind filled his ears, followed by a crash of water. He felt cold. He felt alone. He felt nothing.

Then he woke up.

Rising from the table, he blinked a few times before reaching for his journal, but to his surprise, it wasn't there! Frank looked around frantically. He had committed so much to memory and was determined to write it down, but it was nowhere around. As he rose out of the machine, he made an even more shocking discovery – he had no needle in his arm! There was a small band-aid where it would have been, but there was no IV on the machine.

“That clerk is trying to sell me out!” he thought to himself. But as he stumbled out of the machine, he made an even more surprising discovery – the machine was not the illegal, government-issued PATMOS at all, but rather a standard commercial-grade machine.

Frank left the room in a hurry, only to find himself in an entirely different office. He made his way to the lobby to find the clerk, but instead of a sleazy, middle-aged man, it was a young, professionally dressed lady.

“How was your experience?” she asked, “Was everything to your satisfaction?”

He could not answer, too shocked by the state of things. He stumbled out of the store without a word. Frank walked out into a completely unfamiliar parking lot, and turning around, noticed the sign on the door said Tomorrow-Sight. He stood in confusion for a few moments, then began to check his pockets. He found an appointment card, but instead of the note saying: 24-Sight – June 14th, 3:15 PM, the card read differently: Tomorrow-Sight – June 13th, 3:45 PM.

Frank stood in shock. He felt relief, disappointment, victory, fear, and everything else one could imagine they would feel in that moment. How could he have forgotten? The vision he saw was not from the actual appointment, but rather from the previous day, less than 24-hours before. Frank had finally found what he was looking for, but it was not what he thought he wanted.

He returned to his home and found his collection of business cards from every foresight clinic in the vicinity. Scattered across his table were other appointment cards, each with similar scribbling on them. He sorted through the cards until he found 24-Sight. He hesitated for a moment, but as if in surrender to the fates, proceeded to write down the appointment from his vision. Time was a dangerous, unrelenting force, and if what the clerk said was true, there was no changing it.

The next day, before going to his appointment, he stopped at a store to buy a simple journal and a pen to record everything he would see in the vision. He continued to walk through the busy street market until finally stopping in front of 24-Sight.

The card read: 24-Sight - June 14th, 3:15 PM. He checked his watch – 3:13 PM. Two minutes remaining. Frank hesitated to enter to store, knowing that there would be no going back after this. If he made the appointment, and if the rumor was true, then his entire future would be laid before him. He had been searching for so long, and now the moment was upon him, the knowledge was his for the taking. However, the lingering question in his mind made him reluctant to go through with it.

“If you could see the future ... would you want to?” Frank knew the answer to that question, and dropping his appointment card on the ground, walked forward to a new future.

About the Author

Quentin Harrup is a writer, cartoonist, and evangelist of the gospel of Jesus Christ. It is his desire to see God's nature reflected once again in every aspect of western culture, including the arts. Quentin has traveled around the globe preaching the gospel, and has seen thousands saved and healed under the anointing of the Holy Spirit. As a minister, much of his work requires him to find new ways to communicate the plan of God, the fallen nature of man, the redeeming work of Christ, and the hope of eternal life. However, it is his opinion that not every story needs to have an obvious gospel message. In following Christ's example, his stories reveal the heart of man, as well as the heart of the Father. Quentin currently resides in Orlando, Florida, but hails from Texas. He grew up writing stories with his siblings, including Marshall and Ian Harrup.

AMARANTHINE: DIVINE DESCENT

Arron Steep

The Contest

The gracious Anthine looked down from her perch at the Citadel. She was dressed in the fairest gown of pearl. Her hair, as dark as the night and ornate with twinkling points like stars, flowed in tight curls over her shoulders.

“When shall your foolish pining cease, dear sister?” Destin joined her upon the veranda and gazed out over the plains of Kar. “Our kin long ago abandoned the mortals to their idle ways. What use have we, masters of the Citadel, to care for such lowly creatures?”

Anthine eyed her brother sympathetically. “There is more to the race of men than you give them credit, brother. You see them as weak: and yes, they are. But there is more to them than this alone. Weak they may be, but in that truth also shines a profound strength. I do not expect you to grasp my meaning.”

“Strength amidst weakness? You are right to say I grasp not your meaning. There is no profit in such words. Men are born of the dust. Their lives are as brief as a flowering bud that withers after a short season. Men return to where they began—to the earth—and are none for the better.”

“A fleeting beauty is no less profound, brother. One day I hope you see as I do.”

After a moment of reflection she resumed with vigor, saying, “Perhaps if I were to prove my case? Bring to you evidence of my belief? Were I to bring before your counsel, to judge him, a man of valor and integrity, a man worthy to stand at the Citadel—would you then hear me?”

“You will find no such man,” Destin laughed. “A good man is a rare enough breed, let alone a creature worthy of any higher aspiration.”

“I will find him,” Anthine insisted. “This I swear. By my own stars, I swear it.”

Destin’s mocking smile turned to one of gentle amusement. He observed his sister watching him. He noted her certainty: her eyes that burned like twin suns and the granite fixation of her countenance.

“Your challenge is set then,” Destin relented. “Bring to me a man of worth, and I shall renounce my words. This likewise, I swear. By my own stars, I swear it. Though I severely doubt, dearest sister, that such a feat can be made.”

“Just you wait, brother,” Anthine replied. She took her brother’s arm as they together left the veranda. “Before the Light sets upon the Edge of the World, I shall bring to the Citadel the very man you doubt to even be!”

Anthine was most eager to begin her quest; however, in proper wisdom she first sought the aid of her allied brethren, her dearest friends of the Citadel.

The first she sought was the god of wind and storm. Anthine asked of Seraph (for that was his name) a means by which to traverse the earth. Therefore did Seraph give to her a powerful chariot that was adorned in opal and sapphire, glowing of rainbow’s light, and driven by the four winds of heaven.

“The best of transport is by this chariot called Tempest, which rides upon the exalted empyrean heights! No passage is more sure, nor swift than this!” So said Seraph proudly. “If indeed there is such a man, this gift shall lead you true!”

Anthine thanked Seraph graciously. Then she set out to meet her second allied brethren, those of her dearest friends of the Citadel.

The second of allies was the goddess of sight and truth. Anthine asked of Libra (for that was her name) a means by which to search the earth. Therefore did Libra give to her a dainty looking glass of purest crystal and glowing, polished brass.

"The best of sight is by means of this looking glass called Wisdom, from which none can hide or disguise." Libra insisted, "If indeed there is such a man, this gift shall see you true!"

Anthine thanked Libra graciously. Then she set out to meet her third allied brethren, those of her dearest friends of the Citadel.

The third of allies was the god of peace and order. Anthine asked of Justin (for that was his name) a means by which to secure protection against the evils of the world. Therefore did Justin give to her an elegant bow and quiver of arrows, crafted of hardy ash wood and trimmed with sleek ivory and silver.

"The best of protection is by means of this bow called Reckoning, from which no foe may overcome or challenge," Justin declared. "If indeed there is such a man, this gift shall see you safely to him."

Anthine thanked Justin graciously. Then she said goodbye to those of the Citadel. Being now well prepared—with chariot, looking glass and bow—Anthine set forth upon the winds to look for her prize: the Man of Kar.

There was one among the gods of the Citadel who despised the very hope and fond regard that Anthine held for man. The goddess of death and chaos, Halla, set in her heart to come against this quest with all that was in her power.

As Anthine traversed the vast stretch of sky in the chariot called Tempest, so it was that Halla plotted against her. As Anthine gazed intently through the looking glass called Wisdom, so it was that Halla cast her lot with the foul powers of the air. In every way possible Halla came against Anthine and prevented her progress.

For seven long days, they battled in the skies over Kar and through the darkening clouds. For seven long days Anthine shot upon her enemies with the true-aimed arrows of Reckoning. And after seven long days, the power of Anthine now proven greater than the power of Halla, the enemy fled in defeat.

The Man of Kar

Amar of the Southern Doud was a man of lowly birth and accolade, a quiet soul that lived beside the river Marandi in Kar. He lived alone, simply and quietly, while keeping careful watch of his flock. Amar often walked in the woods about the Marandi, even as the pale moonlight lit upon the trees and danced on the gentle waters. There was a peace in the quiet of night, a solace that Amar relished above all things.

Amar walked among the poplar trees and listened to the lapping water with an enlightened smile, but his solace did not remain. The looming threat had returned.

Possessed of most foul appearance and vile intent, the rakkishi were the bane of Amar's existence. From the mountain heights of the deepest night, the rakkishi would descend to wreak havoc upon those who lived in the mountain's shadow. These beasts were driven by a ravenous and insatiable hunger. Coming with quick and silent steps the rakkishi would fall upon the wood of Amar's favor.

The rakkishi were silent in their hunt, not known until they struck their victims—be it a stray herd beast or unfortunate, weary traveler. With a terrible, unnatural cry as of the anguish of devoured souls the rakkishi would fall upon the chosen and consume them without a trace.

With resolute strength and courage, Amar had defended his flock against the rakkishi many times before. This time would be no different. To many the rakkishi were the unseen death but Amar was no normal man. He was so well attuned to the nature of the wood, of the river, and the vale surrounding his home that Amar could hear the rakkishi's presence like a discordant melody upon the air.

So familiar had the song of the Southern Doud become to his ears (and in his very heart and soul) that Amar quickly knew of the rakkishi predator.

Taking up his hardwood staff and girding up his tunic's hem, Amar crouched into the brush and awaited the approaching rakkishi. The hunter became the prey that night and with a fearless cry Amar came upon the beast. A strike of

the staff burst a curse from the lips of the rakkishi. Amar then leaped upon it, one hand holding firm in the dirty mane, and the other striking severe blows until vitriol flowed like blood from the soulless beast. At last the creature turned away and fled back to its mountain den.

Thinking nothing of his victory—only thankful to find peace once again—Amar resumed his walk in the moonlight. His heart was full, as the woodland song seemed to call his name.

* * *

All the while, the kindly goddess Anthine observed the man from afar. She was struck by Amar's joy in the simple life: in his appreciation for the beauty of the vale, by his courage against the foul rakkishi, and most of all for his humble heart that derived no pride from his achievements.

"Surely, this is the man that I seek!" thought Anthine happily. "He is one to whom I shall present to my doubtful brother. If there is any good man among those who dwell in Kar, it is he!"

As wise as she was gracious, Anthine felt the matter fit to investigate further. For to herself she said, "Though he works kindly and good-hearted deeds toward the wood and creatures of his care, how then does he act in proportion to his fellow men?"

Saying thus, Anthine deemed it well to take the form of a maiden of Kar, a simple child in appearance and manner. She clothed herself as a vagabond and set to come upon Amar's home some way down the river Marandi.

The night was yet full. Shadows cast where demure moonshine fled. Anthine listened as she walked, loving quickly as did Amar the beautiful song of the vale. The leaves rustled in a fair breath of wind. The river water lapped softly like kisses upon the bank. Thick, tender grass caressed Anthine's bare human feet as she walked. Doves cooed from branches above and crickets spoke in turn, each a measure of the nightly symphony performed in the Southern Doud.

The House of Amar

Anthine was soon upon the place where parting trees gave up residence for a most humble dwelling. The house was built at the upper end of a gentle hill topped by stone like a misshapen crown: sturdy logs and stout boulders were its form. The sodded roof was adorned with wildflowers, the walls with hanging moss and vines. Lazy smoke rolled out from a hollow tree at the dwelling's heart. From a small window glowed a cozy, orange light. All in all, the home of Amar seemed to say that the woods itself was the architect and there was no question of his right to live there.

To the side of the dwelling along the slope of the hill was a wide, stonewalled paddock. Within this enclosure slept the gentle herd beast of Amar's keeping. The calm and quiet sleep of his herd suggested absolute faith in their master's protection.

Anthine shivered in the cool of the night and pulled to herself the tattered shawl that held her. In this guise as a daughter of man, she longed for the warmth and comfort hinted from within the house. So she came upon the door and rapped lightly with growing expectation.

* * *

Amar opened the door of his home. At first, he appeared surprised and uncertain. No doubt, this was an uncommon sight: another human in this secluded wood. Upon noting the sad-looking maiden who trembled upon his threshold, Amar's heart was filled with compassion. "Child, what brings you to my door?"

"I am lost," trembled the maiden. "I am cold and hungry. Please, sir, may I come inside?"

"Gracious Divine, yes, come in—come in quickly!" Amar led the girl toward the hearth fire at the center of his home. He retrieved a heavy-woven blanket from his bed and carefully laid it upon her shoulders. From over the fire, within a small stoneware cooking pot, Amar served the maiden the savory stew that was to be his own evening meal. "Here, child, eat and be well."

The maiden ate the stew voraciously. From time to time she would look upon Amar with timid eyes, but just as quickly turn back to her meal. Amar simply watched her, waiting to offer any further aid as may be required. Soon the maiden had ceased to tremble, the stew bowl resting upon her lap. Heavy eyelids drew her to a sudden sleep before the enchanting embers at the hearth.

As she slept, Amar reflected deeply. There were no other settlements for many leagues around, so how could a young woman such as this come to be so far away and alone? Eager was he to know whence she had come. What had brought her to the wood? Even so, he let her sleep; and carefully, he took her in his arms and placed the maiden in his own bed. Amar then laid his garments upon her, for fear that her chill might return in the night.

Amar watched the dancing fire dwindle to meditative embers and was soon asleep in his lone, oaken chair. In the night he dreamed of the woods he loved, and a sweet young maid come upon it from the very heavens. Little was he to know that this dream was an oracle, the truth of the maiden being that she was the goddess Anthine manifest.

The next morning Amar awoke to the smell of spiced porridge. The hearth fire had been rekindled. The home itself, he noticed, was well swept and clutter put to order. The maiden smiled at Amar with eyes dark and wise; the timidity of the night before replaced by a calm, sure presence. He was bemused by his dreams and freshly intrigued by this wanderer's purpose and simple beauty. There was something inexplicable that tipped his heart to love her.

The maiden hurriedly brought to him a bowl of porridge, a cup of the vine and bread spread with honey. Gratefully, Amar ate. His eyes, however, could not tear away from her. The maiden likewise ate, each in silence save for the wordless glance shared between them. When the meal was finished, he spoke.

"Tell me, child, what is your name?"

She smiled demurely. "My name is Minara, kind sir."

Amar (being a man of earthy lore) made comment of how she bore the name of the bright eastern star that was said to watch over men. It was a most beautiful name, fit for a most beautiful woman.

Minara blushed with pleasure.

Even as they spoke, the sun championed the horizon and broke through the window in triumph. The timing of the sun's appearance Amar took to be an omen, though he did not know its full meaning.

"Indeed, this maid is born of heaven," said Amar to himself. He recalled the tales of old: the creation of the cosmos and the powers of the sky. Wrought forth from these came the guiding lights, as such as the one for which the maiden here was named. So Amar loved her all the more.

"Minara, from where do you travel? How do you come to be in this place, so far removed and alone?"

The maiden looked longingly out the window and sat down with a sigh. "My home is far, far away from this wooded glen and river land. You would not know the name and I could not justly describe to you its beauty. I left with a purpose to find a precious thing. No one else would believe me, but I knew it was out here... somewhere."

Amar asked her what it was that she sought. "Tell me only what you seek and I shall give aid in every way I might."

"How kind you are!" Minara said, beaming with joy. "Oh, I think I have found what I seek, kind sir, but there is more to come that must prove my confidence..."

The Rakkishi Attack

Amar adjured Minara to stay as long as needed. So Minara remained in the vale of Southern Doud in the company of ever-loving Amar, until she could better grasp the nature of his character; thus, fulfilling the quest of Anthine the wise.

Then one evening the sky was darkened above the mountains afar: ominous plots were brewing, and Minara knew it to be the workings of the vengeful Halla. Even so she asked aloud, "What do my eyes see?"

Amar looked to the darkness and was burdened with knowing concern. "That yonder darkness, mountain born, bodes not well for all beneath its shadow. I wager the rakkishi are in a terrible uproar, meaning to overtake all that lives within the vale. We must not linger in the wood tonight but to the safety of indoors." And so saying, he took up Minara's hand as to lead her away.

"Do you mean to hide?"

"No, not I," he replied. "But you I would see spared the sight of such foul creatures. You shall be safe within. I must make my defense."

Here Amar turned his eyes to heaven. "Oh, Gracious Divine, I pray. Hear me now. Grant me this night the strength required to vanquish my enemy."

Indeed, that night his prayer was heard by one of heaven.

The night was long and yet the foreboding evil hung upon the air like a lecherous spirit. Amar kept Minara hidden safe inside while he stood careful watch among his flock. His eyes peered into the shadow of the wood, his ears strained to hear the song of the vale and any falseness therein working.

The sky was clear overhead. The stars shone brightly like the keen eyes of heaven drawn to watch the enfolding drama. Amar, for his part, resolved himself on the task of keeping well the lives in his care.

At last from the trees came the phantoms—silent to natural hearing, but straining the song of the vale. One by one they crept, teeth bared and eyes burning red. Taloned feet strode upon the air, heads low and tails still as death. The rakkishi had come with united purpose: to kill the man called Amar, the very same who many times before had driven them back.

Yet this night was different. The ghoulish beasts were driven by darkness even worse than they: by the very hate of Halla. The rakkishi pressed up the hill, prowling the edge of the pen. Long, serpentine tongues rolling around in razor-toothed mouths.

The flock trembled in the wake of the oppressive dark. They struggled to flee, but came only together with greater proximity: panting, groaning and paws stamping uneasily. Amar took up his staff and pressed through the flock, to the edge of the paddock, and braced himself boldly against his foes.

"Come forth, cursed mountain spawn; come then, if you dare! I have fought your kin before. I have driven you out every time. I have ruined your every threat. Were there blood to spill in your soulless forms, yours would fill this vale complete."

The rakkishi continued their slow and taunting approach, hissing and snapping at his words. Yet even so, the righteous Amar grew bolder in his speech.

"Do you not know whom you come against? Am I not the bane of the rakkishi? Lest you forget it—I am the spoiler of your passions, the counter to your demand! Am I not the one from which your kith flee in terror, finding no rest? Am I not the one that holds this vale in my hands, guarding the wood and river from your infesting and rotten clamor? Do you know me not?"

The monstrous beasts were giddy with bloodlust. Their pacing increased, limbs trembling with anticipation and their ungodly growls and moaning driving to a horrendous crescendo.

"I am Amar of Southern Doud—a servant of the Gracious Divine! You come before me, to my home, to challenge me. Pray you know, therefore, not I alone do you disregard, and you are gravely mistaken."

Blind with rage and instinct, consumed with their own fury and that of Halla, the rakkishi attacked.

The Saving

Minara heard Amar's prayer. With a silent but potent blessing she empowered his defense. His staff burned with every strike against the rakkishi. His skin became as hard as iron, talon and tooth breaking as they struck. Neither did Amar tire all the night as he fought back the relentless scourge.

As the dawn's light broke upon the heights of the wood, the amethyst night exchanged itself for brazen gold and beryl. The rakkishi faltered in their attack and not even the fear of Halla's wrath could persuade them to remain. So they fled, groaning and howling, back across the vale, out from the Southern Doud and up into the dark of the mountains.

The blessing of Anthine was now faded. Amar rejoiced aloud and honored the powers of heaven for his victory. His flock crowded giddy about his feet. Minara came forth from the house and embraced him, kissed him and praised his mighty deed. "Here is a hero of Kar, a man of true virtue!"

"No, no—please, do not say so," Amar retorted. "This victory was born by greater strength than my own. The Gracious Divine alone deserves the honor and praise you offer me. Assuredly, my prayer was heard and answered; I found favor and was gifted the power to overcome the evil assault."

"You speak wisely," replied Minara, smiling. To her observance, there was no doubt to the worth that Amar demonstrated. "You are brave, true, honest, and humble, Amar of the Southern Doud. Surely you are the greatest of all men, and rightfully so to have received a potent blessing."

Minara took his hands. She gazed into Amar's eyes, which were as deep green as the woodland he lived. Her face glowed with happiness and his in turn with love and wonder. With a strength she had yet shown, Minara spoke. "Amar of Southern Doud, Son of the Men of Kar... I have found what I was looking for."

"And what have you found then?" He asked incredibly.

In that moment, Minara was transformed before him. She was once again called Anthine, the gracious and enchanting goddess of the Citadel. Her ebony hair enshrouded her like elegance, and a circlet of diamond and yellow topaz topped her head. Her dress flowed about her feet with shimmering points of starlight. Her golden eyes were sharp, brilliant, and as deep as the cosmic sea. Her skin, ruddy and smooth glowed with pure radiance.

So seeing this awesome change, Amar immediately fell to his face in reverence. But she, having compassion—and, yes, even love—took him up and set him before her. She smiled at him, her kindness overcoming his trembling. "Who are you, my lady?"

"I am the gracious goddess Anthine of the Citadel; I am also Minara Kind-Light, bright star of the High Heavens and Watcher of Kar. I have come to find a man of worth and integrity, one that might stand before the rulers of the Citadel as proof to your kind's profit to this world. You have proven yourself most clearly, dearest Amar. Come, let us visit the masters of the Citadel."

About the Author

Arron Steep is a mercenary of the arts, an educational acolyte and a royal chronicler of imagination. When not training his latent powers of creativity, Arron enjoys absorbing booklore through osmosis and exploring the alternate realities of board and console. Arron lives in the domain of Iowasota with his dazzling space princess bride and an unruly menagerie of pet projects. The complete works of Arron Steep can be found at the online depository called <http://www.reidapeterson.com>.

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