

Impossible worlds Creative Writing Journal 2021

Edited by Paul Bronson

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Note from editor: This publication is attributed to the efforts of writing students at Victoria University. This journal focuses on speculative fiction, more specifically, fantasy, horror, science fiction and dystopian. I hope that you enjoy the short stories within!

Paul Bronson

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Paul Bronson

Bars again

A robed athletic man walked confidently toward a large stone wall that towered over the surrounding street and blotted out most of the morning sun in the vicinity. The stone blocks in its construction were perfectly flat and a dull grey not unlike a building rain cloud, grey enough to inspire a sense of mystery, but not aversion. Every five yards there were two yard indentations in the wall, giving a somewhat fortress like appearance to the structure. Although at the peak far above was a shiny copper dome, that gleamed in the morning light.

The entrance must be near he surmised, even though he came here every week, it was an ever changing building. The shape and colour rarely the same, as this was the temple of enlightenment, the most holy of his order.

Larose was this figure's name, a monk of mixed decent. He has a slim wiry build, with a long face, short dark brown hair with a circular fringe, partly almond shaped orange eyes, thanks to his mother's Langwali blood, and despite having a rounded nose he had a prominent bridge, due to his Delmotian ancestry. He wore a black short sleeve tunic and knee length loose fitting trousers.

"Greeting brother Larose, a bit tardy it seems" an amused feminine voice stated. A lithe similarly garbed figure emerged from around the corner two alcoves across.

"Hardy tardy sister Kha-ling, it's not yet the seventh bell, I'm never late", Larose retorted, a slight smirk reached his lips.

"You're often pushing the time though, and you wouldn't want to fall further behind me in the accent."

He turned his head towards her, and smiled. She was an attractive woman he had long realised, with long shining black hair in a tight braid, gleaming dark eyes more distinct almond than his own and a wide full lipped mouth. She was a full Langwali. Larose considered that some would find her a little boyish due to her obvious musculature, that was similar to his own, but he often felt he needed to quell his own attraction. He had undergone a vow of chastity to focus his studies, and although it wasn't a mandatory measure for the order, it was quite common, especially amongst the higher orders. *Maybe it is a vow I will repeal one day*, he thought.

"I always like to keep things interesting, as you know, you need the head start".

She narrowed her eyes, and smirked “ha, you wish dreamer boy, it’s my tally of 19 to your measly 12.”

Kha-ling thought she saw a glimmer of longing in his demeanor. She had always suspected that he was more open with her than the other monks, but she also knew of his vows. She had been intimate with other men in the past, but considered his innocence somewhat endearing. *Maybe I can persuade him of other pursuits, besides the spiritual...* she imagined.

“I always keep hope,” he retorted with a chuckle.

He made the first stride toward the entry way, where a stretch of 100 yards was revealed with metal bars every six, and four rows of wooden circular platforms of three yards in diameter, were positioned between each bar. At the end of the avenue of bars were a series of wooden ladders that ascended at, least 50 yards, but were mostly obscured by a tall granite arch, that stretched as far as the eye could see. The walls of the avenue were lined with stone etchings temples surrounded by lakes, verdant forests or on steep mountain peaks. Between each etching were green vines and hanging ferns, that framed each image like a painting. Dozens of large cerulean hued Dragon flies darted around the vegetation, while a smattering of geckos clung to walls. Small glistening drops of moisture beaded in the air and a perfume of ripe flowers brought welcoming freshness. The morning light that filtered from far above made the temples emerge from the walls and provide a mystical sense of wonder.

Two more robed figures stepped quietly up to the pair and greeted them with a short bow. A long legged woman with broad shoulders and her hair in a bun, and a tall, muscular man with a shaved head and goatee. The woman was Kyrie, and man Valcorm. Kha-ling knew them well, as they studied Langwalian philosophy together in the same scholars school as teenagers. They both shared fairer skin and prominent features of Delmot.

“Bars again” stated Kha-ling, smiling warmly.

“That’s the second time this week,” added Valcorm in a bass voice.

“Good luck friends,” Larose offered palms up extended outwards.

“You’ll need it more than me,” Kyrie chimed. She half smiled, but it quickly dissipated.

The energy in the air seemed to charge slightly, and each of the monks tensed their muscles in anticipation. They knew it was almost time. A glowing white arc of light flashed at the top of the entry arch, indicating members could now proceed towards the summit. Moments later they sprinted into action.

Kha-ling touched the bars first, swinging skilfully from one to the other, while Larose was only slightly behind. Both of them pushed lightly on the intervening platform, while Valcorm pushed strongly and Kyrie's feet refused to touch the ground. Valcorm was able to pass Kha-ling after 40 yards, and Kyrie passed Larose at the halfway mark. Larose started leaping harder off bars, and managed to time swings more efficiently in the later half, but was still several yard behind as Valcorm and Kha-ling reached the ladders, followed by Kyrie.

Larose pushed and sweat pooled from his brow. He looked up briefly to see that the ladders extended at least 200 yards and that he wouldn't have much time to catch his cohort. Last was not an option. *I can do it, my body is trained for this.*

No chi powers were allowed in the ascent, making it daunting to even trained athletic warriors and gymnasts alike.

Larose took a deep breath, and hands and feet launched before him at a frantic rate. Wooden rungs were taken two, then three at a time. He passed Kyrie. *Ten yards to go.* Bars sped by as he tapped into his spiritual centre. He no longer looked up. He could feel his surroundings. The bars sped by as he focused only on ascension.

After 30 yards Larose passed Valcorm. He could feel that Kha-ling was within his grasp, but he had to keep focus. At ten yards, he took to lead, and then swung up to a stone platform. The temple was within sight. *I'm almost there,* he thought.

Only 80 more yards and he'd reach the temple White Torii, but first he'd have to swing past ten bars spaced eight yards apart with only a one yard platform between each. Leaf litter filled the gaps, so while a fall may hurt, it wouldn't be serious. Timing was crucial, and he tried to shut out the heavy breathing of his compatriots. He swung rapidly and seemingly kept his lead. eight yards, 16, 24 yards. The platforms and bars blurred before him.

Kha-ling emerged over the lip of the smaller platform in a flying leap. She saw Larose swing on the first bar, and quickly jumped with her arms outstretched.

Val and Kyrie were only yards away and she knew she had to renew her focus. Her muscles ached, but she drifted into a semi-conscious haze as her body took over. After one, two, three bars, she got her rhyme. After bar four and five, her pace sped. At the sixth she matched Larose. two more, she could only see herself and her goal. At the eight she swung with

simian grace through the first torii, which was one of five temple arches. *I won, I'm first*, she thought.

After half walking, half stumbling from her ordeal, exhausted both mentally and physically, she saw something. There was a figure, to her left, just as she passed the last torii to the sound of roaring applause that emanated from all directions.

It was her old friend of half Delmotian descent.

What? He has beaten me, she reflected.

It was later explained to her that he had swung right over the two meter torii at the end, which seemed unbelievable to her at first but she knew that competition could bring out the best in people. Besides, it was her friend.

I knew he had it in him.

Kaila Alinea

Y(our) Choice

The fluorescent lights flickered over our heads, constantly buzzing and filling up the heavily silent room. The only time that the quietness was interrupted was when the soldiers directed the person at the front of the line to move on. I counted the seconds between each flicker; One, two, three, four, five... twenty eight. Round that up to thirty - that's half a minute. After thirty rounds of that, the next person is usually called forward — fifteen minutes.

I didn't know how many more people were behind me. Nobody cared to look behind themselves as we only cared about what was before us, when it was finally our turn. Nobody bothered to shift side to side to peek over the shoulders of those in front. We collectively knew that it was best to stand still unless instructed otherwise. From what I could tell, the only things we had in common were that we were all teenagers, and that we all wanted to survive. I fidgeted and picked at the string on the hem of my sleeve, internally calculating how many more of those thirty seconds were left before I had to move.

“Move it, it's your turn.”

One of the soldiers nudged my hand with their gun which caused me to flinch slightly at the touch of its nipping metal chill. I seemed to have zoned out in the midst of my counting, and had not realised that I was already at the front of the line. The metal doors slid open, revealing a short hallway that lead to an uncovered entryway. As soon as I stepped through, the doors immediately shut, and somehow the silence grew thicker. I was on my own now. There was no use in lingering so I treaded on. The new room was bare, painted a harsh white that gave the illusion that there were no edges or corners, just an everlasting surrounding of emptiness. It was only the speakers on either end of the wall that gave away the rooms square shape. Awaiting instructions, I stood still; shoulders back, posture straight, and eyes looking forward.

“HELLO SUBJECT s1335375”, an electronic voice spoke out from the speakers.

“YOU WILL HAVE TEN MINUTES TO OPEN ONE DOOR, USING A KEY THAT WILL NOW BE SENT THROUGH.”

A hole opened up in the centre of the wall, revealing a robotic hand that stretched out to where I stood. Its mechanical fingers were curled into a fist that opened downside to drop the key in my hand. I glanced down for a moment and noticed that the key had a miniature book keychain attached to it. Something about it seemed familiar... had I seen it before?

As the hand drew back, I spotted something red on its mechanical fingers. The key head was also wet - I immediately knew what it was but I refused to show them that I was afraid. A soft whirring sound could be heard from somewhere above. I knew they were watching me.

The voice continued, “PLEASE SELECT CAREFULLY. THE DOOR YOU INSERT THE KEY IN WILL BE YOUR FINAL DECISION.”

Despite the electronic synthetic voice, it sounded almost like a threat.

“AND REMEMBER: YOUR CHOICE IS YOUR ONLY ESCAPE.” the voice finished.

The key dug into the palm of my hand as my grasp tightened around it. From my peripheral vision, I noticed that to my right, the empty wall opened up to a room of darkness. There was nothing they hated more than waiting so I made my way through. The light escaped with the closed doors. For a moment I stood there. The place was as dark as a moonless sky. I attempted to adjust my sight but could barely visualise anything. Suddenly, a bright red light lit up in the corner of the room. One by one, more lights lit up, each with a deep red tint. Now that the room was illuminated, I was able to see what was before me. Doors of various shapes and sizes covered the walls and ceiling, excluding the wall where I had emerged from. Aside from a lone, steel ladder that stood in the centre of the room, there was not much else. Another light flashed from behind me, evoking me to turn around. ‘00:00:00’ flashed on the wall, large, as if to taunt me.

A human voice commanded from the speaker, “BEGIN.”

As the bold red numbers of the timer began counting down, my heartbeat went up. I frantically scanned the room wondering how I was supposed to know which door to unlock. Each door was different. Some had frosted windows, some were made of wood and others of steel. Some were as short as a small child and others that reached from floor to ceiling. Wasting no time, I foot it to the first door to my left. As I ventured near, I heard whispers coming from it. I pressed my ear up against the mahogany wood and listened closely. I stepped back, surveying the room. The noises were coming from all the doors. I couldn’t even comprehend what was going on as the sounds got louder and more chaotic. It was then that I realised that each of them were calling for me.

“PICK ME. PICK ME. PICK ME.”

“HERE, COME HERE, HERE” “THIS WAYYYYYYYY!!! THIS WAYYYYYYYY!!!”

The voices began to increase and talk over each other constantly. I couldn’t think straight, and burrowed my head into my hands, wanting to scream. I looked at the timer which read, ‘07:48:16’. Just less than eight minutes left. I continued to run about, examining and listening to as many doors as I could. Time was ticking and I had to work fast. I shut my eyes tightly and attempted to drown the noises out.

Perhaps there was a clue that would indicate which door to choose, or at least narrow down the options. The masters always praised me for my analytical skills, they even referred to me as a ‘preferred pupil’ back at the education base. This was the exact chance for me to put those skills to good use. The key moved around as I fiddled with it between my fingers, as I paced about. The keychain swung around, only gaining my attention once I realised that something was repeatedly hitting my knuckles.

It occurred to me, “The keychain!”

I rose it my eye level and inspected it. It seemed to be a miniature version of a book that I recognised from my childhood, long before I reached the required age to go to the education base. A splitting headache struck me upon remembering where I had seen the object. I heard whirring sounds again, but this time in my own head. Were they watching through me?

Perhaps they were trying to intimidate me, to stress me out even more. This only motivated me to try harder. I turned the key about, examining it from all angles. The whirring got louder and the headache struck me again stronger. I yelled out in pain, slamming the key to the ground. I collapsed to the floor, groaning and writhing. Once the pain eased a little, I peered up, finding that the book keychain opened up as a result of the impact. My eyebrows furrowed in confusion, not realising it could open up. I swiped it back up and flipped through the pages.

It was empty, aside from the middle section which read, 'Make us proud.'

Something about those three words caused me to tear up, of which I didn't know why. Quickly, I pushed myself back up and turned to face the timer: '03:26:58'. Crap, I have less than five minutes now. I roamed the room, this time looking up at the doors I had not yet reached on the ceiling. They were completely random, I didn't understand the connection. That was until my eye caught onto a door with a single stained glass window on it. At first I didn't recognise it, until it hit me all at once. I remembered... I remembered the way my little fist would softly pound at the oak door when I would come home after tagging along with my mother at the grocery store, and having my father open up the door to gather me in his arms. I remembered the creaking of the rusty, bronze doorknob whenever it was twisted. I remembered the last birthday present I was given right in front of it as we sat on our front porch — the keychain that held the message that they always wanted me to remember. That same door was right above me on the ceiling. It was as if it was staring back at me. Abruptly, alarms began blaring.

"YOU HAVE ONE MINUTE REMAINING."

"What?! How—" I exclaimed.

I got too distracted, I got too far in my head. I had to hurry. Quickly, I rolled the ladder beneath the door and locked it in place. With each step I climbed, my heart pounded, and the sweat on my hands made it difficult to grip the steel. Once I had reached the top, I fumbled for the key. As I grabbed it from my pocket, it slipped from my fingers. I gasped as I seized it before it was beyond my reach. Throughout the chaos of the overlapping voices and flashing lights, I began to feel the floor shake as the minute had turned to thirty seconds. The shakiness made inserting the key much complex than it should have been. The ticking of the timer had also gotten louder.

"TEN, NINE, EIGHT," the voice began counting down.

At this point I couldn't help but cry from the stress. I wanted to see them again. I had to see them again. Finally, I unlocked the door.

"SEVEN, SIX,"

With all the strength I could gather, I pushed the door open, using one hand to keep myself stable on the ladder.

"FIVE, FOUR, THREE,"

Letting go of the ladder, I quickly gripped onto the doorway. I tried to pull myself up, causing my foot to launch off of the ladder which consequently fell.

“TWO, ONE.” the voice finished counting. All at once, the alarms began blaring even louder. The floor opened up to a dark abyss, revealing pools of blood, and the bodies of the unsuccessful students before me.

“CONGRATULATIONS. YOU HAVE MADE THE RIGHT CHOICE.”, the same robotic voice from earlier spoke but this time with a sense of cheerfulness.

My legs flailed about as I continued to pull myself up, eventually succeeding. Once I was up on the surface, I took a moment to gather myself, taking deep breathes. Through the doorway, I saw that the room I had escaped from was back to normal; the floor was closed, the lights were no longer flashing, and the alarms had stopped. Taking in my new surroundings, it was identical to the living room of my childhood home. Although, the only door present was the front entrance. It wasn't like the one I climbed through. It was a varnished wood, painted black. On it had a plaque that read 'The Real World' in gold. I stood up and lumbered towards it. It was silent which should have eased me considering what I had just gone through, but something about it made me feel uneasy. I reached for the doorknob, gently swinging the door open. A robotic voice greeted me.

“WELCOME WORKER #1335375.”

Juliana Byers

(Untitled)

The first thing I knew was the stench.

It was a heavy, vile mix of piss, shit, blood and unwashed bodies, along with a dusty, stale taste that filled my mouth and throat.

The next thing I knew was the agony.

“My leg! My leg!”

Strange hands pinned me down as I thrashed in the bed, twisting in unfamiliar, yellow-stained sheets.

“Give him morphine!” A heavily-accented voice shouted nearby.

“There’s worse than him,” said another. “Strap him down and give him paracetamol.”

Morphine? Paracetamol?

What language were they speaking?

I fought as they tied me down, struggling for release, before I saw my leg.

Except I didn’t have a leg.

Just a stump and a pool of blood.

I screamed anew and the world went black.

When I came to things were better, although not by much. The pain wasn’t as bad, but I was still tied down and my throat was so dry that, when I went to call out, all I could do was moan.

“You’re awake.” It was the same heavily accented voice I’d heard earlier; it belonged to a man with dark hair and a few days’ growth on his chin. The edge of the tattoo visible on his neck marked him as a non-insurgent local.

“Here.” He helped me up but didn’t untie me, then offered me a cup of water. I wanted to gulp it, but just sipping was exhausting.

“Where am I?” I croaked when I could speak again.

“You’re in a hospital,” he replied.

I looked around; it was not like any hospital I’d ever seen. It was a single hall, stinking hot and covered in dust, with rows of old beds. They had buckets underneath them, which accounted for the foul smell and were surrounded by clunky, electric machinery. Electricity was a filthy, out-dated energy source that I’d never seen except in museum displays. At the end of the hall, a wooden cupboard with glass-paneled doors displayed obsolete equipment: rolled bandages, manual syringes, metal instruments and medicines with strange names like

Nurofen and Panadol. There were no medi-bots, no medication patches, no sign of tissue regeneration printers or limb cradles to reprint and repair my leg.

At this thought, the pain returned with a vengeance.

“Can I have NervStun?” It was a common, topical pain-killer which suppressed nerve-endings for twelve-hours.

The nurse raised an eyebrow. “No NervStun here; I’ve got paracetamol -”

“Is that the same?”

“It’s a painkiller - but it’s not as fast acting and it’s older.”

“I thought you said this was a hospital!”

“Do you want pain relief or not?”

I took it, only because I was clearly not getting anything else. It was primitive; with no medication patch, I had to put two large pills in my mouth and then wash them down with water. The coating on the pills was vile and I gagged. The nurse gave me another drink.

“You gonna untie me or what?”

“That’s up to the doctor.”

“Where’s he?”

“She is busy with more important cases and will come and see you when she can.”

I bristled. “Do you know who I am?”

The nurse rolled his eyes. “Course I do: there’s a million of you in Tigris City.”

He turned away and I maneuvered myself back down onto the bed, furious.

The doctor took more than an hour to show up. She was a short woman with an olive complexion and dark hair. She had a sharp nose and a steady gaze, but no identification tattoo, so she wasn’t from this part of the world.

“Good afternoon,” she said. “I’m Doctor Rodriguez, I work for Médecins Sans Frontières.”

I nodded; I’d heard of MSF and knew they operated in this country, although generally they were a pain in the arse. They were the bleeding heart type who believed in human rights for insurgents as well as innocents. It was quite sickening.

She had me untied and told me that the Military Governor in Tigris City had been informed I was here. I then asked the more pressing question.

“What happened to my leg?”

“You stepped on a landmine.”

“What?” I was confused; the insurgents were not using landmines.

“A landmine,” she repeated.

“That’s impossible; my boots are mine-resistant.”

Mine-resistant boots were basic military gear. One of the best things about the Tech Boom of 2053 was the advances in weaponry; using magnetic charges, military scientists had been able to design landmines that posed no danger to their own side and could be laid without risk to combatants. There had been no accidents from landmines for the past thirty years.

“The landmine you stepped on was from the early 2000s,” she said and I flinched. “Mine-resistant boots are redundant on mines laid before 2053.”

“Well who buried it?!” My mind was in a tailspin. There was obsolete technology all over this country but none of it worked.

“You did,” she replied and I snorted.

“Like fuck we did!”

“Not you personally. Western Coalition troops laid it sometime after 2001; they’re fairly common out here.” She gave me a look at abject disgust.

“Well what happens next?” I wanted to know. This woman was clearly against me and the sooner I got away from this filthy ‘hospital’ the better.

“The Governor is sending an army medical team to evacuate you.”

“Well, they can’t get here soon enough.”

They arrived two days later. I wasn’t sorry when they loaded me onto a stretcher and I finally got NervStun on my leg.

“Not to worry, Corporal Jones,” the major said as we took off for Tigris City, “there’s limb cradles and tissue printers already being set up for you - you’ll have your leg back in no time.”

I settled back and closed my eyes.

A week after Corporal Jones was evacuated, a supposed insurgent strike on the ill-equipped mountain hospital left all patients and staff dead. The military claimed they’d been forced to nuke it, as the insurgents had explosive repelling technology. Dr. Rodriguez had apparently refused to leave her patients and MSF’s demands for an independent investigation went

nowhere. In his office in a heavily fortified building in Tigris City, the Military Governor of the Middle-Eastern Tigris Region, usually called METR, signed off on the cover story.

Corporal Jones never heard anything of it.

Why would he?

He was like most young soldiers, they'd never been told what had really happened here in the decades since 2001. They didn't know about oil, dictators or weapons of mass destruction. They didn't know the truth about METR and the days when it had still been called Iraq

Ryan Horner

En-jab-ment

You wipe the sleep from your eyes. Another late call. These usually make you dreary, but the duty is too important for you to give a resounding protest. Lately, you've become more used to these kinds of calls, the ones where the family members are cluelessly blabbering, lamenting over the choice to not vaccinate their loved ones sooner.

You sigh. You ask how long the symptoms have persisted. Only a few minutes, a woman's voice breathes. You slip out of bed and into your coat, out your gates and onto the TrainHub. The damn things can be troublesome, can't they?

You remember the last time the TrainHub malfunctioned. You were on a call just like this one, except there wasn't a jab to be administered. Your patient was a young boy, savaged by the Malachokians on his way home from ranger training. The motive wasn't clear, but that didn't matter to you.

The burns wouldn't yield from worsening the boy's agony until emergency treatments were done. Anyone could do these treatments themselves, if they'd like to risk a tormenting spiral to the afterlife. Even after the abolishment of free healthcare, the demolishment of every hospital across the scape, people rely on those like you. And where were you on that day? Running down Highway 77, the last road in the county, hoping your brittle legs would carry you away. You collapsed.

You exhale, hoping you'd be able to reach this patient on time. It had been years after all. *Surely the service had improved since then, right?* You begin to think about where this next patient is located, something you should have thought about before setting off. You tend to not plan anything in a timely fashion.

Luckily, your carriage happened to be heading straight to the district where you needed to be. Perhaps not so lucky for you is that the patient is far from the city, where nothing is off the table. *Great.* You won't be home till sunrise.

You gaze at the green hue-tinted interior before you, the fuzzy yet monotonous seat cushions with nonsensical patterns. *No matter how far public transport comes, it will always be hindered by inferior aesthetics.* You chuckle at the thought. The rattles and hums of the carriage consume the atmosphere. You begin to close your eyes.

You're jostled awake by a violent rock of the carriage. *Odd. It's usually quite smooth, even out of the city.* But what do you know? You've hardly been out of the city since you were young.

You slowly lift your heavy head to ogle at the window across from you, only to be met by an extended claw and an eager growl. It's one of those Malachokians! You cry out in fear. It takes a swing at you, as you scamper to the nearest door. Its claws dig through the plastic and steel of the TrainHub carriage, resulting in a thundering crash. It bellows in frustration, rearing its head, trying to hunt you down.

You're standing at a closed double door, watching the carriage surf high above the murky abyss beneath you. You grip the handles of the doors and pull hard. *It's no use!* Your measly twigs of limbs can't bear to force this door open. You turn your head to find an emergency exit, only to make eye contact with that blasted Malachokian once again. Its got your scent!

You decide to do something radical. You take a few steps back, keeping your eyes on the awful beast beside you. You assume a running stance as the Malachokian grumbles fiercely. You gulp. You break into a sprint, and the hungry alien lunges for you! Your sprint forms into a dive, and you crash straight through the doors.

You tumble into the smog below, the stench overpowering you beyond your knowledge. You're almost grateful. You'd probably feel sick, knowing what's below. At least that beast is free to roam that TrainHub without your intrusions.

Your thoughts immediately return to your mind. Did I really just do that? You begin to freak out. The draft of your fall begins to push into your chest, near tearing your coat from your back. You brace for impact, landing in a sludge like paste.

You raise your head, pausing for a moment to assess your surroundings. You seem to be in the Tartian Swamplands! Everything down here is surprisingly clear, once you're past the smog.

You spot murky green ponds, purple barked trees complemented by drooping blue vines. You pull your arms from the dark slew below you. Slowly standing up, you partially tear your jeans from the steaming ooze. You trod your way to the nearest piece of solid ground, stumbling along a road.

You look left and right, trying to find a road sign of some sort, even though you haven't seen one since you were a kid. On your streak of luck, you spot a form of civilisation! It's a brooding, tall castle, surrounded by a small moat. You've always wanted to see a real castle since you built sandcastles on the beach with your father. That was such a long time ago, wasn't it?

Despite the grotty surroundings, this castle appeared to be well kept. Just a single tower made of cobblestone, equipped with a small door and a few torches, like it was something out of an old children's book.

You make your way over the bridge, brushing yourself off as to not look like one of those street doctors on Evelyn Avenue. You bring your hand up to lightly knock on the door, only to be met with a fistful of air. Awkwardly, the door manages to open on its own.

A woman – probably a little shorter than you - greets you at the castle entrance. She averts her eye away from you at first, then she examines your coat up and down. She seems to recognise you.

'Thank goodness you're here!' She cries breathlessly.

Strangely, you recognise her too. She's the woman on the phone! You gather you've somehow made it to the patient's residence. Boy! Luck is really with you today, isn't it?

You swallow. You give the generic rundown of who you are and what your job is. You tell her your name is Hans Weber and you're an infection removalist surgeon. Your breathing harshens a little as you ask what the problem is.

She stammers a little, explaining that her brother has been screaming for quite some time, complaining that he couldn't open his eyes. 'Strange, that's not a normal symptom', you think aloud. Regardless, you're here and you have the equipment, you decide to take a look. You ask the woman to lead the way.

The woman hops up the spiralling stairs, and you follow, bleakly shoving your hands in your coat pockets. You both halt halfway up the daunting staircase, turning to a steel door with a lock. Without hesitation, Maria cranks a large metal wheel, slowly shifting the door open. With urgency, you both slip inside.

'He's behind the curtain, be careful not to disturb him.' she tells you in a near whisper.

Oddly, you don't hear any screams, you don't see any shadows beyond the veil of the curtain. That's not important, you believe. What matters is saving a life.

You brush the curtain aside, preparing your speech of generic greetings, comforts and know-it-alls. All words escape you, as you bear witness to the twitching and pain ridden patient before you. A dark blue Malachokian, eyes shut, writhing in pain.

You freeze, unsure of what to say or even do. Moments ago, one of these things was clawing for your flesh, and now you need to perform its life saving procedure. You turn to Maria, clutching the curtain. She half-nods in approval. You take a step forward and remove a small bag from your coat pocket.

The Malachokian grumbles like the mighty Earth. You shudder. You decide to proceed the only way you know how. You proceed professionally. You introduce yourself to this creature and inform it of what you're about to do.

It's completely silent.

Motionless.

What should you do now?

You ask it for its name. Agaroth. He... understands you? This seems to baffle you. You then ask him to open his mouth. Again, he complies. An entire chasm of teeth opens before you. You swallow.

Working your eyes beyond the teeth, you search for a black, bulging bile. You prepare a needle of X35, and you tell Agaroth that it should only sting a little.

Maria pipes up and tells you Agaroth is scared of needles. *Ha! How comforting. The world's most terrifying behemoth is a wimp to modern medicine.* You laugh a little, lowering your arm through the teeth.

You exhale through your nose, your right arm trembling, your left arm pinned to your side. You try to find the infection, that living void that can kill in minutes. At first, you don't see

anything. You begin to panic, your arm surrounded by ensembles of enamel. *It's got to be around here, right?*

You reach in farther...

And farther...

How big is this mouth? Surely it can't-

GAH!

Searing pain! You've been injured, but by what? Maria gasps. You force your eyes open and gaze upon a slimy, violet orb, grazing against your hand. Buttery droplets leak from its sides. *It's... leaking? This is a whole new breed of virus!*

As it leaks, it expels a series of thin, yellow legs. It's clamped onto you! You attempt to reel yourself away, but your patient panics! Agaroth closes down on your arm. Your screams rattle the chamber around you.

Maria rushes over to pry the jaws off you, but not before Agaroth relaxes, releasing you from his grasp. You carefully remove your arm to examine the damage, only to see that wretched orb is clinging to your hand!

As your blood oozes through your sleeve, the gelatinous creature at your fingertips makes a lunge for Maria. It wraps around her face. *What even is this thing?*

She shrieks, piercing the cold night air seeping through the cracks in the wall. You try to bat the horrible bug away, but it pounces onto your shoulder. Before you can react, you pound Maria straight in the face! She topples over, you stumble, bewildered.

Again, you try to brush the bug off, but this time it's got you! Its legs dive down into your arm, injecting you with the toxic bile you were trying to rid. The bug deflates, having spent what life force it had. It slides off your shoulder.

A cold breeze crashes into your face, and you become aware of the chaotic scene that had erupted before you. A fatally ill patient, a bruised bystander, and you, seconds from collapsing.

You clench your arm and bolt out the door, nearly falling down the staircase. You brace yourself as you storm out the front entrance, sliding in the mud, wincing in pain.

Gotta get help, now!

You feel what's left of your jean pockets for your TrainHub pass. Rats! You left it on the carriage! You slump against a nearby boulder, grimacing at your agony. You plunge the X35 needle into your arm. A sharp inhale cuts through your teeth. Your eyes well up.

The sun begins to rise.

Mark Kapitan

(Untitled)

My reality consists of many lives and many experiences. In fact, one may clearly state: one's lives continue forever. Just as the universe is broad – even so our lives never end.

The defining issue therefore is that in the laws of our universe – life after death is actually paradise. One may say though: I don't believe this. Well, if you don't believe in an afterlife then you won't have one, but if you do believe in an afterlife – you can have whatever you want within it. Indeed the possibilities are endless.

Just before I began my existence in this life I had an experience as a chemist. I was a very intelligent chemist. Indeed, I gave myself an injection of a type of poison that makes one have schizophrenia. And once I ended that existence I began my very own – a life living with schizophrenia. Yet this disease is a big burden. However, if you can conquer it – you change from a man into an animal.

David the chemist realised all too soon that his existence – and indeed everyone's existence - is merely a dream. There are no limits to how many dreams there are and every life is a dream. Also, David knew that dreams were valuable – dreams are free – they don't cost anything.

Therefore David really valued the importance of imagination because it was this essence that brought value to life.

“Are you finished?” she asked, as David ended his laboratory work.

“You must realise something,” David said. “This is an important experiment. If it happens successfully the life that acquires this disease will one day conquer it. Once that happens, that reality will be complete and blessed.”

One of my former lives was as Conan the Barbarian. Conan was a brave and courageous warrior. He came from the land of Cimmeria and became a rich and prosperous king.

“Crom is your god,” his father told him, as he embraced his five-year-old son.

“We have many gods and Crom is yours,” he said.

“I have lived many years, and I know that the gods favour us if we defend and worship them.

In your life Conan you will experience many things. But be careful because you must not trust anyone. Indeed you must not trust anything,” he said, “except for one thing.”

“What is that, father?” Conan asked.

“This,” he said – pointing to his heavy, broad sword.

“This,” he repeated.

“No woman, no beast, no wizard, no king. You can't trust any of these. But this you can trust!” said Conan's father as he pointed to his sword. “This you can trust!”

And so Conan grew up, well nurtured and complete with sustenance. And on his twelfth birthday he was given his first sword by his father. It was at this time when the evil villains of the Snake King came. They came to Conan's village and burnt it. It was futile – no one could defend themselves. It was at this time that the Snake King came to Conan's parents. Conan was with them and stood beside them as the king decapitated both of them.

Then after this came his slavery and so he was forced to labour underneath the Snake Empire. But as he laboured he grew strong and brave.

And then came the time that Conan became a fighter. He would fight well and hard and then came his freedom.

He found a girl and for the first time in his life he was happy. Yet after his girlfriend died he laid her body on a wooden platform and burnt her. At this stage his friend started to cry.

“Why do you cry?” a wizard asked him.

“He is Conan – the Cimmerian,” he said. “He will not cry. So I cry for him!”

Another life I have wished to inherit is the life of a soldier. This reality is truly blessed because one travels a life of adventure. In this life one must research, fight, fly in helicopters, jump out of planes and work with the natives to negotiate peace. Yet before this I must have conquered the life of a martial artist. The life of a ninja is full of benefits and I became a ninja at fifteen years of age. My master was Japanese and he had nourished my life with the existence of martial science. As a young boy I was very strong and brave. I became very skilled in karate. Yet I realised I had to sustain my existence with money. I therefore began my youth as a soldier and experienced many adventures. Towards my middle life years I became a general in the army and acquired a lot of medals. I died at age eighty-five and inherited my next life.

My next life was as a scholar. I wanted to be an academic because knowledge is king. I therefore started at age five to practice and master mathematics. I enjoyed mathematics and also computer science and philosophy. In my youth I experienced a lot of mathematical exams and tests and I obtained a lot of awards. I therefore devoted my life to knowledge and I became a scholar. Therefore, once I graduated from university, I received a Doctor of Mathematics, Computer Science and Philosophy. I hung my graduation photo on the wall of my lounge next to my piano. I wanted everyone to know this is what I had achieved.

After this life I wanted to devote my next life to music. I became an excellent pianist and I composed and conducted thousands of songs. My favourite artist is Ludwig van Beethoven and I made sure everyone enjoyed my compositions.

The next life I wanted to obtain is my very favourite. I have seen many sportspeople acquire trophies and prizes when they accomplish their potential in their sport. Indeed what sport is greatest but bodybuilding? Indeed, I love bodybuilding. It is my favourite sport and I want to be an athlete. The name is Michael. He is a tall and strong bodybuilder. He will win many prizes and attain a perfect, solid and muscular physique. Indeed, he will have many girlfriends and experience many things in his life because his life is blessed. This reality is an easy profession. This is because all one needs to do is lift weights.

Overall I sense that I have experienced a loss for the lives that have passed and greed for all the lives that I have lived.

“Are you finished?” she asked again. David told her one last time: “There are never enough lives. I want to dream - I want to live!”

Daniel Lane

The Siege

Ser Patryck had been born into this war. ‘It would probably be the thing that’d kill him’ Patryck laughed at his morbid thought. Patryck’s father, A Middle-Lord of Bezonia, often boasted that his firstborn son had been born the day after war was declared and that it would be over before his son could reach maturity. It was not to be the case. The fires of this war would rage well after he was dead. He had never known what the Elders described as ‘the before-time’. It was forbidden to mention it, punishable by death, even for noble bloodlines such as his.

Ser Patryck’s grandfather, Ser Nikolai mentioned more and more as his health deteriorated until the authorities executed him for sedition. Ser Nikolai muttered about how his father had fought in the great war of the before-time known as ‘the before-war’. The decrepit Ser Nikolai would rant and rave about mighty and wealthy industrialist warlords who had seized power from ineffective and flaccid world governments. These governments had responded with a declaration of war.

The war was allegedly so devastatingly violent that it had driven humanity to the brink of extinction and reduced them to a near-feudal era. Eventually, these warlord-like industrialists ushered in a new generation of peace and prosperity for the citizens of this world. Peace reigned for a time, but before the long greedy tyrant for Elonia had pushed for more and more control. Bezonia was the more significant state and finally had enough, deciding to push back.

‘My Lord?’ A raspy male voice came from behind Patryck that startled him as well as his horse. The voice wrenched him from his thoughts of the past. ‘My Lord, sorry to disturb you. I just came to report on the battle’ The voice croaked again.

It was Norris, a sergeant and his army’s siege expert. Ser Patryck had been sent to siege an outpost of Elona, and it had become a gory meat grinder. Tens of thousands of soldiers had already died face down in the mud, There was plenty of room for promotion in the Bezonian forces. Norris was one of the newly promoted men and one of the few conscripted ranks with the ability to read.

‘Very well, report’, Ser Patryck ordered. A slight morning breeze sailed up from the battlefield to his observation point on a nearby hill. The wind played in his blonde hair, caught his blonde locks but brought with it the horrid smells of the battlefield. The scent reached his horse’s nostrils; Stormfoot gave a panicked whinny and stomped a prosthetic plasteel leg nervously against the soft earth. ‘Easy, Girl’ Ser Patryck leaned forward and gave her a stroke along the neck, and she gave an anxious snort response.

‘The losses from last night have been catastrophic, My Lord, but we have finally broken through the gates. We could have the keep by dawn,’ Norris stated, his voice heavy with a sombre tone, likely due to the immense loss of life.

‘Excellent! This is good news,’ Ser Patryck replied, clenching his fist tight as if to snatch victory itself from the air. ‘As for the losses, do not fear. Bezonian’s strength is her people. We outnumber Elonia Ten to one’.

‘Yes Lord,’ Norris looked down at his feet and replied nervously, ‘But Elonia has the tactical and technological advantage. They...’ Ser Patryck cut him off.

Ser Patryck glared at Norris and snapped at him viciously. ‘Finish that sentence, Sergeant Norris, and I’ll have you pick the man who’ll flay you alive for heresy.’

‘I...I...b-beg your forgiveness, my Lord,’ Norris stammered. He refused to look up and meet Ser Patryck’s scowl.

‘Prepare the footmen for the charge on my signal,’ Ser Patryck sneered the order as he drew his ancestral blade from the safety of its scabbard and held it aloft. It was a family heirloom passed to him by his father the day he had reached manhood. Patryck held it high and looked around at the hundreds of his fellow mounted knights around him. Together, they would storm the outpost and burn it to the ground.

Ser Patryck lowered his helmet’s visor and screamed, ‘Charge!’ His hot breath frosting in the cold morning air. He kicked his plasteel armoured boots into his horse’s flanks, and the animal took off at a run. A cacophony of thundering hooves drowned out the sounds of battle.

As Ser Patryck closed the distance between himself and the outpost, he now saw the battle up close and in detail.

He saw the wounded scratching around the muck, sorting through bodies in search of their severed limbs, and the maimed clutching at exposed organs waiting to die. They were strewn across the asphalt that surrounded the Elonian outpost. Ser Patryck looked down, and to his horror, he saw the mangled, grisly, rotting remains of fallen Bezonians. They died weeks earlier in the campaign and had been left for the scavengers. Stormfoot’s hooves struggled to find purchase as they pounded through the soft flesh of the dead. Weeks of exposure to the elements

had reduced the dead to churning pink slop with camembert cheese-like consistency. It was a testament to the brutality that humanity could deliver upon one another. The sight and smell of it made Ser Patryck violently ill, and he vomited inside his helmet.

Ser Patryck did not hear the cannon shot that brought his horse, Stormfoot, low. The steel projectile hit her dead centre. Stormfoot died instantly, exploding into chunks of meat and metal that tore across the battlefield like grenade shrapnel. Ser Patryck was launched from the saddle and sailed through the air, landing in the blood-caked mud. He bounced off the hard asphalt surface that lay just beneath the soft muddy surface.

Patryck howled as his pain seized his body with each tumble. The momentum from his fall dragged him to the base of the outpost's wall.

Patryck's blood poured from his broken nose, he licked his lips instinctively and as he ran his tongue over his freshly cracked teeth all he could taste was a cocktail of vomit, dirt and blood. He struggled up onto his unsteady feet and removed the plasteel helmet he wore before casting it down into the mud.

Patryck groggily looked up at the enemy's fortress and saw an ancient structure of blue and yellow. It was a sad old building that had been dented and burred long before his siege had arrived. Blue and yellow paint had been chipped away in places leaving room for patches of rusted down to form in their place. He noticed a colour shift on the wall. It was the distinct outline of a word. It must have been written on the wall in an age long past. He hadn't noticed it before.

It read 'IKEA' in big block letters.

That word meant nothing to him but his concussive daze drawn to it. Patryck just continued staring at the word.

'Die, Bezonian dog!' came a roaring battle-cry, the words laced with venom and spat in Patryck's direction. He whirled around to see the source of the sound.

Patryck saw a handsome and immaculately dressed Elonion Musketeer striding towards him. A vibrant red feather sat atop a wide-brimmed dark green hat. The Musketeer smiled and pulled the hat low, tipping it to formally greet his would-be foe. The Musketeer's smile twisted up into a twisted scowl, and hatred burned hot in his eyes. The elite warrior expertly brandished a rapier, and the shiny steel blade sang as it slashed through the air.

Patryck's reached for his sword and realised he'd lost it in the fall. His heart sank, and his blood ran cold. He turned on his heel and tried to run, but the concussion he suffered as a result of his fall stayed at his feet. He stumbled down into the mud, landing on all fours. His eyes darted around, looking for his sword in the muck.

Self-satisfied laughter erupted behind Patryck. He dared not turn around; he continued to crawl and forage desperately for his weapon.

The laughter closed in, and Patryck felt a slash across his back. It glanced off this plasteel armour. Patryck dug his fingers into the muck and rolled. He flung the sludge from his fingers into the eyes of the Musketeer. Despite Patryck's concussion, his aim was true, and the now blinded Musketeer recoiled with a hiss.

A sly smile etched its way across Patryck's face. He might have a chance.

'You honourless son of a Bezonian whore' The Musketeer cursed loudly as he retreated a step and attempted to clear his vision. His rapier whipped widely from side to side, discouraging any would-be attacker.

Patryck ignored the sledge.

'Sword? Sword? My future kingdom for a damned sword' Patryck pleaded with the universe as he crawled away and continued frantically rummaging for a weapon. Finally, his fingers wrapped around something familiar and heavy. He gripped it tightly and pulled it free from the mud.

His family's sword had returned to him.

Patryck stood up, and with his resolve galvanised, he turned to face his opponent. Now he had a fighting chance.

The Musketeer had finally rid himself of Patryck's underhanded trickery, and the pair locked eyes. 'Shame on me for thinking savages and barbarians might know something about honour'. The Musketeer spat the words as if they'd gone sour in his mouth.

Patryck readjusted the sword in his hand, gripping it tighter. 'Maggots will feed on that pretty face of yours once I cast your broken body face down into the slop', he retorted coldly through clenched and jagged teeth.

The pair circled slowly.

The Musketeer leapt forward and slashed, but it was a feint. Patryck released a breath he didn't realise he was holding.

They circled again.

The Musketeer surged forward again, and this time he meant business. His rapier aimed to pierce Patryck's jugular. Patryck reacted instinctively and parried the strike with his heavier blade. Patryck swung back in response, his family blade aimed for the neck of his enemy. He didn't want to pierce the neck of his foe; he wanted to sever it in two.

The Musketeer went under the strike easily, and the only thing Patryck severed was a vibrant red feather.

The Musketeer was fast, too fast he whirled around and lunged at Patryck. It was a clean strike right through Patryck's right breast. The metal blade bit into his flesh and robbed him of his breath. It was an expertly landed strike. He was dying.

Patryck couldn't breathe; the wound in his chest prevented him from securing the precious breath he needed.

Fury filled his Patryck's heart. He would not die alone. Patryck charged forward with a silent, breathless scream, his family's sword raised high. The Musketeer was caught off guard. A look of fear was in his eye, and he lunged again with his rapier trying to bring the dying man down.

The blade went straight through Patryck's stomach. Another lethal strike expertly landed. It didn't deter him. It just fuelled his rage in a blazing inferno, and he brought the sword down. Patryck released his wrath upon his doomed enemy.

The blade bit deep into the Musketeer, and Patryck put his full weight behind it, diagonally cleaving the man from clavicle to kidney. The man was dead instantly.

Patryck and the Musketeer were face to face. Although both men were doomed and Patryck would never draw in another full breath, The Musketeer had died first. He looked into the dead

lightless eyes of the Musketeer. He felt a smug sense of superiority as he let go of the corpse and watched the broken body crumple down into the mud. Patryck was a knight, a man of his word.

Patryck had won. He was victorious.

The victory was short-lived for Patryck. He looked up to the outpost wall in front of him and saw the Elonian archers upon it. They drew down on him, levelling their crossbows squarely on his chest.

Ser Patryck had been born into this war and now it would kill him.

Tash Lindgren

Grimstone Valley - Stabitha's Ordeal

"God. I hate the cemetery," Stabitha whispered to herself, glancing around cautiously as she loaded her gun.

Despite being a slasher fan, she loathed the paranormal. It was mere fallacy. She had zero tolerance for ghost stories. *Whatever dies stays dead. There is nothing to fear here.*

Fastening her police badge, she disregarded the strange chill in the air as she prepared to meet her old friend. Denying back-up, this case was personal. The groundskeeper was missing again. Already tangled up in the mess from the previous night, his circumstances were grim. *I cannot keep protecting him. If he is involved with these disappearances, I'll have to take him down.*

Creaking open the rusted gates, the graveyard was a hall of shadows. The gargoyles perched atop the mausoleums glared down with judgement. A passage of doom awaited Stabitha, sullied with unkempt headstones and neglected souls. Feeling a thousand eyes on her at once, she readied her gun and turned only to be greeted by hollow whispers.

"It's been a long day, Frank. You can come out of hiding now. I promise I'm not going to shoot you." Her voice echoed through the fields of the dead.

There came no response but the howling wind, swirling through the atmosphere like a widow's cry. It yearned for vengeance.

Judging from the wilted flowers, sodden plush animals and overgrown foliage, Frank clearly had not been doing his job properly. *No surprise there...* Turning the corner, Stabitha sighted rows of porcelain dolls, their hollow eyes pinned with needles. The walkway was littered with their dismembered limbs, besmirched with bite marks and mud. *God. This better not be some stupid prank. I would not put it past him...trying to scare me like this.*

"I'm not amused, Frank." Stabitha circled around the pavement, narrowing her eyes. "This isn't funny."

Noticing splotches of red caked in one of the doll's hair, she crouched down and brushed her fingertips against the dried liquid. *Blood? No...* Beside it was a jar with what appeared to be the foetus of a rodent trapped inside.

Losing her patience, she prepared to call her deputies but was caught off guard by a loud crack. Creeping around the overgrown ferns, Stabitha aimed her pistol. *Frank had his nephews here...and his brother Conehead. Perhaps this is their doing.*

Despite living among the dead, they were a rowdy bunch. Out of all places, Stabitha never understood how Frank could live here. *He had always been an odd one...even back in high school. Frank does have his secrets though. If he is experimenting with drugs in the mortuary again...*

Tensing up, Stabitha was certain she was being watched. A doll's head suddenly dropped from one of the trees overarching the yard. Hitting the mud before rolling to her feet, its empty sockets stared up at her, smears of blood and nails protruding out of its skull. Reluctantly picking it up, there was a bloodied hole carved into its skull.

Something is crammed in there...a note or message of some sort. In her periphery, something darted across the burial grounds and into the shed.

"Frank!" She yelled over and over until her phone began vibrating. An unknown caller.

Answering, she was met with heavy breathing.

"Who the fuck is this?" Stabitha demanded.

The line went silent, then she heard the familiar muffled laughter of Conehead. Disjointed, the call buffered. Before she could speak, loud static blared then cut back to silence.

"Enough!" Stabitha stormed toward the shed when something gripped the back of her neck, dragging her to the ground.

Leaning back, she fired at the figure, rolling to her side before looking up to see that no one was there. Her phone was on the ground, sinking into the mud. *Someone is messing with me.*

The doll head rolled out of her grasp, revealing a message written in blood. *'IT IS TOO LATE. THEY ARE ALREADY HERE. THERE IS NO SALVATION. THE END IS UPON US. THIS TOWN WILL DROWN FOR ITS SINS.'*

Drown for its sins? Stabitha hissed as she reached for her phone. Hysterical laughter erupted from the speaker before it died, despite being fully charged upon arrival. Broken static echoed from her radio as a raindrop slid down her cheek. Storm clouds gathered, obscuring the crescent moon as thunder rumbled in the distance.

God. This was meant to be an interrogation until Frank went missing. Now this?

Across from the graveyard, the entrance to the forest loomed. Sealed off with police tape, the previous night was marred with bloodshed. A teenager's remains were found near the abandoned church ruins. Three others had also gone missing. Until now, Stabitha had deemed it a coincidence. *This could still be an elaborate prank. Frank is a dumpster-diving witless goon. Certainly he would not be a target for anything like this...*

Squinting through the darkness, Stabitha spied a shadow swaying above. She unsheathed her flashlight to find Conehead's dismembered body dangling from a rope. His limbs swung around him like a musical crib rotary. Swarming with maggots, his chest had been clawed out

along with his eyes, his bare ribs exposed. Somehow his signature parking cone was still attached to his head at an angle that overshadowed his malformed features.

This is bad. I need back up immediately.

As Stabitha reached for her radio, her heart skipped a beat. It was missing. Turning to retrieve it, her sight blurred and her head began to pound. Overcome with nausea, the world spun as the trees spiralled, twisted branches splintering out. Conehead seemed to be grinning right at her. She reached for her gun and shot at him, but to no avail. *Something is up with my aim!*

Losing her sight, Stabitha swayed to the shed, shoving the door open with her body. The stench of cigarettes, stale meat and rotted flesh permeated the air. Frank was crucified to the back wall, encircled by the dismembered parts of his nephews. All marked with esoteric sigils, she could not turn her gaze away nor find the strength to move.

The sink overflowed, two decapitated heads bobbing against the ridges. Water pooled beneath Stabitha's feet and as she peered down, her reflection was an unrecognisable dark abyss.

Hearing the signal of her radio, she froze to see it clutched in Frank's cold hand.

"Chief! Stabitha, do you copy?! Over!"

As much as she wanted to scream, her body was paralysed.

Footsteps approached behind her as she waded in and out of consciousness, unable to defy the emerging dark presence. Reality receded as something seized her throat, draining the life from her.

The last sight Stabitha glimpsed was a sinister smile and strange dancing lights.

This is not over yet, she conceded as she dropped to the floor and surrendered.

Campbell Mckenzie

Core State 3021

Planet earth 3021. Humankind have been forced under the surface, subjugated by the oppressive power elite of Core State.

In the year 2098 the planet earth had reached the brink of human sustainability. World powers introduced global marshal law as they sought to cleanse the population of those deemed by the power elite to be a burden on the planetary resources required to maintain their existence. Millions of innocent lives were lost in the brutal first wave of cleansing. This action lit the fuse, and the people rebelled in stark defiance to the oppressive regime triggering the ten-year war. The state eventually put down the resistance with sustained deadly force and the remaining population were subjugated once more. This saw the rise of Core State and a systematic classification of all citizens by their very D.N.A the one thing impossible to change.

In a devastating twist of fate, in the year 3009 a massive solar flare was detected leaving the remaining population with a harsh choice to make, join Core State and retreat to the relative safety of the subterranean or certainly die as the planet's surface succumbs to the scorching solar radiation. They had just three weeks, millions joined the queue for classification and entry to the Core State.

A harsh voice, a voice devoid of emotion, a voice without a soul boomed from the loudspeakers atop the giant concrete and steel entrance to Core State.

"You will maintain an orderly line. You will be evaluated to assess your suitability to enter Core State. Sacrifice for Core State. Together we survive."

A man and his ten-year-old son inch towards the testing station,

"Dad I don't want to go in there."

"It's okay son, I'm here."

The man kneels down and hands the boy a silver locket.

"It was your mothers. Keep it hidden."

"I wish she were here."

"Me too kid, me too."

At the front of the line a couple submit for testing. The man-green the woman-red. The man begins to protest, he pulls a boning knife from his jacket and grabs a test official holding the blade to his throat. Two shots echo in the vast and oppressive entrance. *The man is dead. The back of his skull blown to bits. The woman also lays dead as blood seeps from her shattered skull pooling in a macabre halo. Her eyes are caught wide open in a grim lifeless stare. Two technicians in green unceremoniously drag the bodies away. The voice booms from the speakers once more,*

“You will maintain an orderly line. You will be evaluated to assess your suitability to enter Core State. Sacrifice for Core State. Together we survive.”

The boy looks to his father in shock. His Father has a grim expression as if resolved to some fate the boy could not comprehend. Somehow the strength he saw in his father was a comfort to the boy in spite of the horror he had just witnessed. As they reach the testing station a technician orders them to roll up their sleeve. The technician sees a tattoo on the man's forearm and instantly calls a sentry on his voice comm. The Father looks at his boy,

“I love you son, you must survive.”

With that he turned his palms upward and looked to the sky as two shots hit him in the chest, but he does not fall he turns to his boy and smiles,

“You're welcome.”

A third and final shot. His head explodes as the boy looks on in horror. The technician looks at the boy.

“Your Father was not suitable for Core State.”

He scans the boy's arm, green.

“In you go. Sacrifice for Core State.”

In the twelve years following the scorching, Core State continued to expand its subterranean empire. The power elite consuming the rich resources afforded them as the menials toiled deep under the ground. The subjugation of the many serving the few. The Earth would not be so easily overcome and in time the radiation subsided, the water began to flow, and the trees returned. The power elite of Core State had no intention of relinquishing their strangle hold on the power they wield over humanity.

* * *

The sentry took a sharp, deep inhalation and sat bolt upright in his bunk. Cold sweat beading on his forehead his sheet soaked. He frowned and dug his thumbs into his temples. He reaches beneath his pillow and retrieves a silver locket engraved on one side with three small lines each with a small circle above. It is the same symbol his father had tattooed on his forearm the symbol that had gotten him killed. On the other side simply the words ‘You're welcome xx.’ He quickly closes his hand around the locket as the door to his quarters opened. It was the duty Sargent.

“What the fuck! You're on the wall 642 in zero five. If you're even a second late, I'll have you! Just get there 642.”

“Yes sir, sacrifice for Core State.”

“Move it 642, together we survive.”

Mendral, number 642 stood upright with perfect posture at the sentry post staring at the Wall. Thirty-foot-high and ten-foot-thick with a fifteen-foot gap between it and the clinical steel outer surface of Core State, the wall was all that protected the remains of humanity. He gazed at where it met the clear blue sky. The sky accentuated the wall's oppressive drab greyness with the stark industrial concrete absorbing any joy, beauty, or hope like a giant sponge. Steel rungs jutted out of the surface of the wall casting shadows like depressing sun dials that told time in mind numbing minutes turning into excruciatingly mundane hours as the sun passed slowly overhead. The same sun that had led to the cruelty of Core State started to set turning the sky a myriad of orange and pink as if ironically mocking the sentry at his post.

'Nothing ever comes in, nothing ever goes out,' he thought as he wiggled his toes inside his boots and took a deep melancholic breath.

Mendral had only been a boy when the cataclysm had hit. Apart from the recurring nightmares of his father's execution and shadowed splintered memories of his mother Core State was all he had ever known. Growing up in the system all genetically approved males from the age of ten were conscripted into a life of harsh military servitude. Although harsh it was far better than the misery inflicted upon the menials whose lives were considered property of Core State. Menials deemed to be genetically inferior were condemned to an existence of never-ending hard labour in the underground labyrinths of Core State.

'Sacrifice for Core State! -Together we survive!'

As the doors to the landing opened with a hiss, Mendral lifted his rifle and held it perpendicular in front of him and stood to attention. It only ever meant one thing when those doors opened, someone was going to die.

The Executive Commandant cut a menacing and sinister figure wearing his uniform of polished knee-high boots, pressed jodhpur trousers and military dress jacket all in black. The delicate gold wreath of office perched on his bald head glinted in the sunlight. In his left eye he wore a monocle of red glass. He vigorously marched to where Mendral stood at attention. The Commandant snapped a dynamic ninety degree turn to face him and with a sharp click of his boot heels crossed his right hand to his left shoulder.

'Sacrifice for Core State!'

'Together we survive!' Mendral returned the salute.

Following the Executive Commandant were two Core State Lab techs dressed all in white but for the red collar squares denoting their attachment to the execution squad. They flanked the prisoner, a girl of eleven perhaps twelve. One carried a metal tray with a large hypodermic needle the other held tightly to the end of a chain attached to the prisoner's neck restraint. As they led the prisoner past Mendral, time seemed to slow, the girl stared straight to the heart of him and turned her wrist. Mendral saw the same tattoo as his father's, the same symbol engraved on his treasured locket.

The Lab techs forced the girl to kneel as the Commandant paced with deliberate and menacing steps back and forth behind her. His thin pursed lips turned down in one corner giving his sallow pinched face the appearance of a permanent sneer. *As the helpless prisoner wept, her head bowed the cruel Commandant whispered into the helpless girl's ear,*

‘Stop your whimpering menial, today you will actually contribute something valuable to the State.’ Then in his harsh bitter voice barked,

‘Sacrifice for Core State!’ Clicking his heels and making the State salute.

The little girl choked back her tears stared straight ahead and with defiance in her large brown eyes, ‘Together we survive!’

Mendral clenched his eyes shut, cold sweat formed a single drop that run down the length of his spine. His thoughts racing, ‘ Father, the locket, the tattoo, the sun, the wall, Mother...’

Ffft, ffft, ffft, with clinical precision three rounds from Mendral’s service rifle hit their mark. All service rifles had been fitted with silencing technology post cataclysm. The only sound was the targets crumpling to the ground. The two Lab techs lay dead as blood oozed from the perfectly centred bullet holes in their foreheads. The Executive Commandant lay on the ground clutching his shattered knee.

‘A quick death was too good for this insidious scum.’ Mendral would let him suffer the same fate as the thousands of innocents he had condemned. As he lay there writhing, his bald head turning crimson he spat,

‘How dare you!’

‘You will not survive this sentry; I’ll see to it that you suffer.’

Mendral picked up the hypodermic and coldly drove its point into the Commandants neck. His face void of emotion as he stared into the shocked bloodshot eyes looking back at him and depressed the syringe.

‘Sacrifice for Core State, you sick bastard.’

He freed the girl and took her by the shoulders.

‘We have to go, now!’

The girl looked at Mendral with an expression that seemed a strange mixture of relief and terror. Mendral took her by the arm and pushed her towards the steel rungs of the wall.

‘Go, go, up the ladder, faster! Don’t look back.’

As they reached the top, ffft, ffft.... ffft, a bullet grazed his left shoulder another whistled by his ear. They raced across the top of the wall to the far side. There lay a thick coiled rope Mendral flung it over the edge. He threw the girl onto his back, and she clasped her arms about his neck.

‘Hold on tight,’ they zipped down to the ground into the world beyond the wall and sprinted for the tree line. As they made the first tall thick trees Mendral stopped running.

‘They won’t follow us here.’

He turned to look back at the menacing oppressive wall and with a sense of foreboding destiny he couldn’t help but feel that this would not be the last time he would see it.

The little girl looked up at him as she took his hand, her expression had changed. He couldn't quite place it. It was the same expression his father had had in his final moment. With her big brown eyes, she gazed up at him, and in a soft voice,

‘Thank you for saving me, the keepers call me Dawn.’

‘Dawn, I’m Mendral, you’re welcome.’

Awakening

Josefine Willadsen

The blue light from my computer screen is making my eyes feel dry and tired so I squint to clear my vision. I turn my head away from the screen and look out my window. The quiet, grey street lies empty outside my pod. The only discernible sound is the quiet hum from the air cleaner on my desk. I look at the clock. It's 11:56 AM. It's time.

I roll out my chair and get up to walk across my living space and into the hallway. My boiler suit and mask are hanging from a hook in the wall. I take down the suit, step into it, and meticulously zip it all the way up under my chin, taking care to tuck all my long hair down into the suit before I place a mask over my face. The boiler suit is made from a thick, plasticky fabric that makes me sweat like a pig and wearing the mask gives me a nasty headache, but I can't afford to get caught without them. I raise my arm to look at my wristwatch. Ten more seconds. As the clock turns 12:00, I push the button next to the entranceway to slide the first glass screen to the side. I walk through it and as it closes behind me the second one slides open, and I step outside.

My 15 minutes of outside-time are the most exciting part of my day; for better and for worse. Being slightly exposed gives me a thrill that easily turns into anxiety if I actually see another person in the street. The government tries to allocate different time slots for people living in the same street to avoid human contact, but sometimes there's a slight overlap between the slots. I prefer to wander the streets alone, staying safe. The simple sensation of movement in my body makes my mind finally go quiet. My Mindhelper has warned me against this; best to keep the thoughts spinning to avoid cognitive decline.

I take a turn and walk past a vast block of brown and grey rubble. There used to be a huge shopping centre here many years ago, but it grew redundant as the pandemic escalated and

was eventually torn down. Long and coarse strands of brown grass grow between the rubble now. My Mindhelper has advised me not to spend too much time down here; being in nature isn't healthy for the brain. But I can't help it. *Fascinating, how something can be so determined to breathe freely that it refuses to stay under ground but relentlessly penetrates layers of gravel and stone to take in the air*, I think to myself. Despite knowing better, I can't tear my eyes away from the grass as I walk.

A loud yell tears through the silence.

"Out of the way!"

I instinctively jump out of the way, just in time to avoid a collision. A man runs past me so close that his suit brushes mine as he overtakes me. I'm shocked to see that he isn't wearing a mask. He's panting hard. My heart starts racing. I hold my breath and squeeze my nostrils with two fingers to avoid breathing in his exhale.

"Stop right there, you fucker!"

I look to my left side and see two Hygienists in wild pursuit of the man without the mask. An overpowering smell of sanitizer and alcohol engulfs me as they race past, zappers in hand. Further down the street, to my right, the maskless man is about to turn the corner and disappear out of my sight. He looks back over his shoulder to gauge the distance between himself and the Hygienists. We lock eyes. The corners of his mouth turn upward in an unfamiliar grimace as if he's exerting all his facial muscles to pronounce a difficult word, but not a sound escapes his lips. Then he's gone, and the Hygienists too.

I sit down on the ground to stop my head from spinning. I'm terrified to have been so close to another human who wasn't wearing a face-covering. The thought of inhaling another person's bacteria sends shivers down my spine and makes me feel nauseous.

A persistent thought soon overcomes my nausea; I can't stop thinking about that grimace the maskless man made at me. I've never seen another person's face uncovered, not that I can recall. I was just a young child when the pandemic hit. It's causing something to stir deep inside my chest; a call, a yearning, that I can't identify. I wonder if my Mindhelper can explain this to me: *Surely the government bots still have data on the meanings of facial expressions?* Asking something out of the ordinary is risky. The therapy bots are programmed to pick up on any sign of unhygienic thoughts.

I bend my neck and look at the ground while taking some deep breaths. Something on the ground catches my eye. A glossy sheet of paper, a flyer of some kind. It wasn't there before. I look both ways to make sure no one is around. I pick it up. Bold letters are written on it:

A WEB OF LIES

Oppose government oppression. The pandemic is over. Unite against isolation and depression. More information at 'the happy place' tonight at 7pm.

This is forbidden material. I know that the right thing to do would be to leave it. Tear it up and let it scatter in the wind. But I'm intrigued. This is the most exciting thing that's happened to me in years. I make sure again that nobody's watching as I quickly stuff it in my pocket. I look at my wristwatch; I'm running out of time. I start walking back towards my house with quick, long steps to make it home in time and avoid getting a government fine.

Back at my house, I tear off the boilersuit and mask and hurry to the bathroom to plunge a Q-tip down my throat so far it almost makes me gag. I anxiously tiptoe around as I wait for the little patch on the test strip to turn either yellow or blue after I held the Q-tip to it. The patch turns blue. Negative. I sigh in relief, but the result doesn't resolve my feelings about my

encounter with the maskless man and the Hygienists. I've never seen or heard of anyone who would dream of flaunting the mask mandate so blatantly, not while the virus is still out there. We've all seen the horrible footage of piles of bodies covered in abscesses on the news. But the flyer is making me wonder... *So, someone out there believes that the pandemic has ended, that the government is lying.* I could never discuss the flyer with my Mindhelper; questioning the public hygiene safety protocols carries a prison sentence. But I want to know about the maskless man's grimace and asking Mindhelper is my only option. Body language has been lost on us, the post-pandemic generations. I concentrate hard on bringing my thoughts under control for a few minutes before opening Mooz on my computer for my scheduled appointment with my Mindhelper. I put on my mask as beeps from an incoming call sound through the speakers.

"Hello. What's your state of mood today?", Mindhelper 4389 asks in her slightly robotic tone of voice. She's convincingly humanlike in her all-white doctor's clothes. She sits just a little too still on a chair in the same grey, sterile, concrete room as always. Her face is perfectly pale and indifferent and blends seamlessly with her mask.

"I, ehm, have it under control now," I reply and gather my courage as I continue. "Something happened earlier during outside-time that threw me off," I admit. "I had some very strong, uncontrollable emotions." Mindhelper's eyes narrow mechanically.

"What happened to cause these terrible fluctuations?" she asks harshly. I swallow hard, knowing that I've messed up by not being able to control my mood. My voice is trembling slightly as I say: "I came into close contact with a person who wasn't wearing a mask. He was being chased down the street by Hygienists and he was breathing hard when he ran past me." My Mindhelper's eyebrows lift in aversion.

"You've been exposed. Did you take a test after you came back?" she asks.

“Yes, I did,” I reply quickly. “It was negative. But that’s not all that happened during this encounter...” Mindhelper’s expression has turned into an indifferent mask again.

“Go on,” she says.

“This person... he made me feel something strange,” I start, hesitatingly. “He did something bizarre with his mouth. Like he was trying very hard to pronounce something, only he didn’t say anything. The corners of his mouth turned upward and then just stayed there.”

“A *smile!*?” Mindhelper exclaims before she can shut down the response triggered from her hard drive. *I’m not familiar with that word. Smile?* Mindhelper 4389 quickly returns to her indifferent expression. “Look,” she says, her voice hard as stone. “This man was obviously a criminal, putting everyone at risk of exposure. Don’t waste another second thinking about your encounter with him today. Staying away from all sources of contamination, mental and physical, is the only way to stay in control and keep healthy.” Based on her reaction, I have a strong feeling that I shouldn’t ask any more questions.

I close down Mooz and stand in the dark for a few seconds. I feel as if pure energy is circulating through my veins; I feel very alive. More alive than I’ve ever felt. I start walking around in circles in my living room, thinking about the maskless man, my Mindhelper’s response, and that yearning I felt in my chest. ‘Smile’, is what she called it, the strange grimace the maskless man made. My Mindhelper clearly has data on this; knowledge, that the government doesn’t want us to have. I walk into my bathroom to look at myself in the mirror. I try to move the corners of my mouth up, just as I saw the maskless man do. I watch my facial expression change in the mirror; I look like a different person. My eyes sparkle and I feel lighter.

I contemplate the extremist messages in the flyer; *could there be something to them?* None of us enjoy living this way, isolated, only allowed out for 15 minutes a day. We're making these sacrifices only to keep each other safe. If there's another way, I need to find out. *Maybe I should search out this 'happy place'?*

A sudden sound from behind startles me and I leap closer to the wall to hide in the shadows. My breathing is quick and shallow. Cold sweat is running down my spine. Two Hygienists appear in the cold light beam from a streetlight. I hold my breath and take care not to move a muscle. They walk past me a few meters away, unaware of my presence, and disappear into the darkness again. I continue my tiptoeing down the dark alley. Rays of dim light shine through the crevices of an old-fashioned doorway at the end of the alley. I sneak up to the door and put my ear to it. It's dead silent behind it. I weigh up my options. *I'm out of my mind! This is too dangerous!* The anxiety deflates my courage for a few seconds. I rest my body up against the door and close my eyes. *NO! I've come this far.* I inhale deeply and push the door open.

Then everything happens very fast. My arms are twisted, pinned behind my back. A mouldy hood is pulled over my face as strong hands grab my neck. I feel the cold, sharp edge of a blade against my throat.

"Who are you?!" a deep voice asks brusquely.

"I'm no one!" I cry, terrified. "I'm just looking for a happy place."

There's complete silence for a few seconds. I sense someone moving closer to me and I wince in fear. My hood is removed. The light is blinding but I can just make out the silhouette of a man standing very close to me. As my eyes readjust, I realise that his face is uncovered. It's him. The maskless man. He's smiling at me.

Safiye Yasar

(Untitled)

The moon glows bright beyond the trees. It was once white and warm. Now, it glows an eerie green.

The sound of Ryo and Hira trudging through the mud behind me is all that I can hear.

‘How- do you- have- so much- energy?’ Ryo pants.

‘She’s not- human,’ Hira exclaims, also out of breath.

I pay no mind to them. Ryo and Hira, young twins I saved from execution at the nation’s capital. I told them I was off to join the Secret Order and they haven’t left my side since.

I look up at the mountain, clutching my dagger.

The cool handle is a comfort as I gaze up at the monstrous structure.

The Reitzands Castle. Lit up like a fiery beacon overlooking the world.

For a moment there is utter silence. Even Ryo and Hira’s panting stops.

This palace, built at the start of the Regime, houses a horrid Leader. One I intend to kill.

I take a deep breath, steadying myself for what lies ahead.

We march on.

We reach the castle walls, scale the back terrace, and make our way inside.

Unlike the exterior of the building, traditional and glowing, the inside of the castle is sleek and dark. We head down the hall toward the spiral staircase where shadows dance below. It is the night of the Regiment Soirée, where officials from the nations join in ceremony for a night of entertainment.

The perfect opportunity to overthrow a Leader.

At the third-floor landing, we veer right, down the hall to a hidden parlour. As the door closes, we see a figure standing near the fireplace. The fire glows vicious green.

‘Princezzsein,’ the man across the room says. His eyes meet mine. Then he bows.

Ryo is frozen, Hira behind him, processing what has just been said.

I look up at them from under my lashes. It’s like a switch flips and Ryo stands at attention.

The twins bow in unison. I initiate them into the Secret Order.

Ryo does not utter a word, though Hira peers at me anxiously.

‘You’re going against your father?’

‘You had a father, too,’ I direct at Hira, ‘and a mother,’ I direct at Ryo. Their faces tighten. It had been a month since their parents’ executions. ‘I had a friend.’

The shadows blur in the back of my mind.

I don’t speak further. Whatever we feel stains the room walls and mingles into resolve.

The sun does not rise. Not in this world. Not anymore.

We get changed and prepare.

Under the disguise of service garments, the twins hover around the main event area.

I observe the crowd from above the ballroom.

My outfit, layers of loose-fitting black fabrics, so at odds with the golden tones of robes seen worn by the crowd below. I don’t dress for parties. I dress for war.

Ryo appears at my side. His quiet darkness, the only familiar thing in this estranged world. I never questioned where he came from. Grief was our ally.

We spent time gazing at the crying nation. It was labelled a Regime, but there was no order. It was a world overruled by the disorder that power gives. A mess of greed and corruption. A military faction beyond human. At the heart of it, the Leader, my father.

Someone needs to do something. Siu had said that once. My friend.

And then my father killed him.

Ryo places a gold cloak over my shoulders and retreats.

A familiar scent leaves with him. Mint and wood. A smell so tender to me. I am paralysed by the visions in my mind. Soft brown hair and dark lashes.

The castle bell chimes midnight. The images in my mind fade in an instant, but what remains is the torment of feelings I could never forget.

I have not spoken to my father in a year. I plan to speak to him tonight.

As I make my way toward the central area, I glimpse my reflection in a faded mirror.

Black eyes stare back at me. They used to be green.

I observe the Leader’s movements.

After a while, I see his gilded robes appearing smaller as he retreats into another room alone. I follow, noticing that it's the way to the indoor garden. I signal Ryo and continue on. The twins must maintain order among the officials as I assassinate the Leader. There is no room for error.

Rows of plants adorn the greenhouse I enter. I have not been here since Siu died.

I arrive at the cherry tree where my friend had built a wooden seat for us. I see my father on the seat, his back toward me. The sight of it consumes me with rage. My feet move before I notice, and I am a breath away when—

‘Hana.’

I freeze.

The dagger at my wrist stings against my skin.

He turns to meet my eyes. I push the blade up against his neck, where he wears a layered golden collar, studded with emeralds.

He simply raises his eyebrows. The nonchalance is infuriating.

Then that familiar scent is back. Mint and wood. My blade draws blood on the Leader's neck and I unintentionally pull back.

That smell...? Why?

I notice my father's face change for a moment, eyes darkening, lips pressing together. I grab him by that insufferable golden collar, and break it.

‘You shouldn't have done that.’

In an instant, ash blond hair turns soft brown. Under dark lashes, familiar dark eyes meet mine.

I collapse at the sight of Siu in front of me. Wearing my father's clothes. Blood on his neck.

The golden collar... *A tool of deception?*

My breathing is shallow.

‘W-wha-why-wh,’ I stutter.

He kneels down.

My head spins, erratic.

Was it a trick? All along, was I fooled? Was it my father who died instead? What was even real?

Among my spiralling sanity, I feel the warmth of Siu's hand on my cheek. I stare at him.

No trace of green in either of our eyes left. He smiles.

‘Goodnight Hana.’

And then I see my dagger flash in his hands.
The world goes black.

‘She failed again.’
‘Test subject 1. Dismiss.’
‘This is the eleventh time now. How many more left?’
Voices I don’t recognise fade in and out. Except for one.
‘Just one.’ Ryo says.
I open my eyes.