

Impossible Worlds Creative Writing Journal 2022

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

The Warning

A figure in blue and white robes, with silver chainmail armour, gazed to the night sky admiring the constellations above. The desert seemed to offer superior clarity to the sky jewels, even more so than the grand star temple in Omta, he reflected. It was as though this was the birthplace of peoples, and where the deepest truths of the universe could be found. He exclaimed “Dal Zabora” which meant praise the heavens in the Jederi tongue. The Jederi were an ancient group of nomadic priests that worshipped the stars, and drew power from them.

As a habit, before entering town, the priest muttered a quick prayer and glanced to the skies again. A shimmer of green light ringed the Salamander crest in the north east, and then streaked towards the Tricker’s cup in the south, two constellations of note. This would have been indistinguishable to most, as the subtleties of the cosmos were only known to those with the gift of star sight.

“A vision, Romatez?” Asked a tall purple skinned figure with curled horns. She wore a grey robe and bore a staff which twisted near the end to surround an amber orb.

“More like a warning, Zeptoh,” the priest replied. “A green light from the Salamander cluster indicates a warning for this very evening, and the vessel of the Trickster was indicated, denoting transformation”.

“Do you think we should turn back?” Questioned Zeptoh. “We agreed to the caravan guard duty consignment with our companions because we are still in need of coin”.

“Nay my friend, but I urge us to be wary. We need to travel south although coin is welcome, it’s true.”

“Do you still surmise that there is trouble in Kermirg?”

“There is trouble brewing in more places than we can imagine. Portals are said to be well guarded and controlled in the Neitherati empire, but they couldn’t possibly know them all. Anyway, you have a knack for detecting rifts, being of the elder blood and knowing the eldritch ways.” Zeptoh was an Uldamot, which were descendants of an ancient being, in the early days of knowing.

“Fair call priest, shall we?”

The priest nodded and with the sorcerer, proceeded to travel the extra five hundred yards to enter Neithervon, the town proper. This was one of 14 towns that emanated from the capital of Netherat.

Romatez considered that his previous journey had largely been in vain, he had sent a message to the Sultan Molesha herself, but he was unable to secure funding or much assistance. He was determined however to find out more, and was at least given a sight stone – that could transmit images across a vast distance for a short amount of time. A vassal of Molesha had

informed him that if he could prove a malicious portal had opened, then aid would come. Romatez wondered however, how much aid, and whether it would be too late...

After a few short minutes, some distinctive words broke his pondering.

“Welcome travellers, the Sultan praise you,” a towering guard exclaimed in a low pitched voice, that was reminiscent of echoes from stone, as they entered the arched threshold to the town of Exil Den Neitherat, the old name of Neithervon. He was a mild green of colour and extremely muscular, and carried a Tulwar that was longer than most tent poles. *Obviously of Jinn ancestry, and likely of the earth type*, the priest mused. “Exil” meant earth in the Neitherese tongue, so it wasn’t surprising. Another half dozen guards in flowing robes and mail stood by, but remained silent.

“Where be the Griffin’s Gullet, Sir? Zeptoh asked.

“Mechant quarter, Ale Street” the Jinn boomed and pointed a giant finger to the south west.

The pair held up their hands curled upwards in thanks, and headed down sandstone paved streets. Most of the town was of red or brown brick, which contrasted from the yellowed path of squared brick. The streets were still bustling, despite it being close to dusk, and there was the faint smell of cloves and spice.

They wandered for another quarter hour, occasionally asking for directions, before crossing into Ale Street, and narrowly avoiding a scaled beast the length of four horses and as tall as an elephant. It had a small head for its size, and rows of hardened bone covered its back and clublike tail. The creature sniffed and its eye blinked as its head curled around to gaze at the priest and sorcerer.

“Teldo seems to like ya,” A stoat bearded man in thick leathers noted.

Zeptoh placed her hand on the creature’s head, and it nuzzled it slightly.

“A Gindermeb I take it, she’s beautiful.”

“She certainly is, and leads her pack with pride. Are y’all here for the trek?”

“That is our intention, but how would you know this?” Queried Romatez.

“I was told to be on the lookout for a priest with blue stars on his robe and an Uldamot. Not that many of either of them around. I’d probably count the number on one hand in the last month.”

“Good point, Zep – I would recommend going incognito for a while.”

The sorcerer pulled up her cowl and changed her skin tone to a deep tan as she stepped behind the Gindermeb. She added. “You mentioned pack.”

“The rest are out the back”. Despite the beast’s large size, there was still enough space for another to pass without undue trouble.

“I’m Burkunder, but can call me Burk.”

The pair introduced themselves to the dwarf.

After one more pat and accepting a lick, Zeptoh walked back onto the street. A stone sign board displaying a great bird with muscular foreclaws, auburn feathers and a wicked golden beak could be seen swaying slightly in the wind two doors down, hanging from a post outside a grand building. The structure was of grey brick and wood, with a peaked roof, similar to those found in the eastern kingdoms. A circular tangle of branches and vines could be seen atop the roof, and Romatez didn’t doubt that the griffon itself did reside above.

The priest paused momentarily before the large oak door of the Griffon’s gullet. He had been at places like it on his travels, and knew he’d be welcomed by his companions, but he still had the gnawing feeling from his previous star gazing. Two tall guards with halberds flanked the entrance and eyed customers as they approached, but there seemed to be no confrontation, or trouble from patrols. Romatez summarised that the night was young, and as the alcohol flowed, so would the ejection of disorderly patrons. It was Kingsday after all, which marked the end of the working week.

The door opened, and a large blue humanoid, with silver chain and a red turban grumbled “Ay, you better move your oliness or you’re gonna get squashed by the customers”.

It was clear that he was another of Djinn ancestor, although perhaps not quite as large as the one near Exil’s north gate.

The two travellers entered the bar, and were met with a roar of noise and the pungent aroma of bitter hops and tannins.

“May the starlight guide me,” the priest muttered as he stepped past the guard.

A jaunty folk song could be heard to the tune of a rapidly plucked lute and mellow tone of panpipes. There were over a dozen round tables and a row of stools, and the place seemed nearly packed to capacity.

A squat fellow in thick blue leather armour with a yellow cloak waved him over. “Roma, come ere’ good bro-da, there’s plen-ee of beer to be ad,” he gestured to a seat next to him.

A black robed figure with red skin and circular horns sat next to him. He had fine features and sparkling purple eyes. “Good evening Romatez and Septoh,” he uttered maleficently while raising a wine glass in the priest’s general direction. He was another Ultamot.

Bordarg and Fenris never change, Romatez thought, but they are surely reliable companions. Fenris should also disguise himself, though I doubt he will.

“Charming Dwarf!” A soft voice spoke from a green robed figure that sat at the end of the table. He had a hat with a frog pontiff and a goatee beard. His name was Krekvos, and he was an initiate of the Lord of Ponds.

“One must show appreciation to the bar keep,” Bordarg laughed. The others grinned and wood groaned as they shuffled side-ways to make space for their recently arrived companions. “Let’s see oo can drink the most.”

“Hey, not too much boys, we’re heading out tomorrow,” Septoh chimed in dulcet tones.

Conversation went back and forth between the companions for a few minutes before another dwarf arrived in at their table, who was dressed a bright red tunic and golden silk cloak. At first Romatez didn’t recognise him, but it was Burk, he had changed garb.

“Time to talk about our consignment friends,” the star priest stated.

The others nodded or grunted in agreement. Conversation and music continued to provide a friendly ambience. The piper was picking up the pace with his playing, and lilting notes started to rise in frequency.

Soon after, a swirl of green-black mist started to emerge from the tip of his instrument – it was almost invisible as it blended into the general humid miasma of the room. People started to slur, and then drop as the strange vapour flowed into mouths and up nostrils. Before long, most of the occupants in the room were slumped over tables or breathing heavily on the floor.

All except Romatez and Bordarg. *And the piper!*

“Do something priest!” cried the dwarf as he grabbed his axe and scanned for enemies.

“I’m working on it,” Romatez muttered as he waved his fingers in a circling motion and called “Yelek Bettarni...” golden light spayed forth and formed a golden translucent barrier around the table.

A barbed dart shot across the room, slightly slowed by the magical barrier, and the dwarf jumped up and shielded the priest with the head of his broad axe. “Not on my watch!”

With a quick glance the priest noticed it was actually a tooth, and a foul black ichor could be seen at the tip. “Watch it, the piper –“ cried Romatez.

A creature with glistening skin morphed from what had once been the panpipe player.

The dwarf charged forward and slashed heavily with his weapon. A foot long chunk of quivering flesh dropped to the ground, but it seemed undeterred as it clubbed Bordarg with a pseudopod and held him fast. It spat two more bone darts from a wicked maw the size of a barrel, which shot towards the companion’s table.

Romatez held up a glowing hand and one dropped to the floor, while another deflected off a shield that he had managed to ready. He noticed his companions beginning to stir.

Two bolts of purple eldritch energy blasted forth and knocked the alien beast to the floor. Take that foul spawn!” Fenris yelled.

Meanwhile Bordarg secured a dagger and cut through the pseudopod and dislodged a tooth from its maw. At the same time, Romatez fired blue swirling stars into the creature causing its skin to bubble and pop.

The strange beast made a final flurry of motion, pushing back the dwarf and lurching menacingly towards the companions with five pseudo pods outstretched.

Suddenly a *boom* could be heard as an orange light exploded from the beast’s mouth. It collapsed, and changed back into the musician, then into a cougar sized cat, before dissolving into a putrid puddle of green slime. Zeptoh held an amulet, ready to strike again. But it was unnecessary, as the remains of the beast did not even twitch,

The priests started inspecting the group for wounds and checking the welfare of other bar patrons. A couple of townsfolk had been hit by barbed bone darts, but with some divine assistance from Romatez and Krekvos, they soon recovered.

“What does this mean?” Krekvos asked to no one in particular.

“The creature was a Rakshasa – the cat form confirmed it.” Fenris stated.

“As for what it means, well, chaos, tumult. I had suspected something might happen tonight, but not so soon. The stars only told me that much,” Romatez said seriously.

“So, what now Roma?” Bordarg asked, a new beer in hand.

“We’re off to Kermirg, that’s where the origin of the danger exists.”

“And I’m assuming that there are more Rakshasa to contend with,” Zeptoh added. The star priest nodded.

Soon after the companions set out to the south, in order to face the growing threat in the land. They were to be paid 100 gold pieces each by Burk, as wagon guards, and expected to reach their destination in a week. “Dal Zabora,” Romatez thanked the Celestial lights for their guidance, and knew that with the aid of his friends, they could make the Kingdom of Netherat safe once more.

The stars were on their side.

Bridget Akers

House of Memories

The woods were calling him forward, the fog covering his form, curling around him while he strides onward. The tall trees were towering above him, the branches extending out wide, blocking out any light that might have once filtered out from above, the foliage at the base of the trees seemingly forming a path deeper into the woods, only leaving small gaps to slip between. The only light guiding him through the wood being floating blue orbs, flickering ahead of him in a line, like dancing flames, urging him forward, however, as soon as he came close to one of the flames they disappeared before his eyes, leaving him to follow the next in the long line of orbs stretching into the dark woods.

Its silent, no wind rustling the leaves, no insects buzzing, no birds chirping, no water running. Just the steady strides of the man in the wood. Then, a low murmur, whispers, echoing out of the gaps between the foliage, unintelligible at first, growing in noise, growing in clarity, growing in urgency. The first gap that became legible sounded vaguely familiar, like an old school friend that he hadn't seen or heard from in years. It was calling him towards the gap in the foliage, reminding him of the good old days, of play wrestling and tag, of playful competition between young two boys. Looking through the gap, he doesn't see anything, only feeling a cold chill running down his spine, feeling like there are eyes watching his movements, he turns and continues, his strides slowing in his confusion. The second gap, the sounds of music, of his past, steps on a wooden floor, steps he recognizes, his first ballroom dance competition, with his then partner, in his late teens, her laugh echoing as they are announced as the winners, the cold feeling increasing. The third gap, the smell of books, the sound of pencil on paper, scratching of shading a drawing, the hum of a long-lost time with his best friend. The fourth, the sound of playing dress up with his sisters, memories of wearing dresses and makeup, happier times, the smell of the nail polish. By the fifth gap the sound had risen, echoing through the gaps, the ones he long past calling him back, echoing louder, urging him back, to walk down their path, into the dark. Walking no longer feeling safe, the eyes burning into his back. He breaks into a jog, running past gap after gap, hearing the calls of his past friends, memories, events, until down what must have been the 13th gap a figure, enveloped in the fog, his mother, calling him for dinner. He speeds up, more apparitions, his father, yelling, his brothers, arguing, his sisters, calling him to join them, his younger brothers last words before they ran away at 13, his favourite brothers final words at 17, his loves final words before they left to war, before they lost them, anger, the spirits gaining more solid forms, becoming angrier and more insistent the more he ignores them, running, sprinting full pelt down the path, following the flames, ignoring the tears dripping down his cheeks.

The flames found their destination, at the end of the path, a final orb of light flickering brightly, illuminating the glade in its blue glow. The glade was large, circular, surrounded by large pine trees, stretching tall, finally letting in the light of the full moon above, shrubbery at the base of the trees sealing any easy paths out, bar the one the man arrived on. In the centre

of the glade, illuminated by the light of the full moon was the rubble of what would once have been a large manor house, however it had long collapsed into itself, broken pieces of stone lay moss covered embedded in the surrounding ground, protruding upwards like gravestones in a long-forgotten cemetery. At the edges of the glade, just beyond the foliage, the spectres of his past, silent as the grave, all eyes on him, sounds no longer echoing along the path tempting him from his journey, just him. As he approached the final flickering light instead of disappearing like the others it flew forward, as if compelled by an unseen and unfelt wind, spiralling through the air slowly, before landing on the shattered remains of a front door, and seemingly being absorbed into the wood, giving the wooden remains a blue tint.

Striding forward cautiously, he approached the door, and gently lay his hands on the wood, as if trying to get a sense of why he was brought here. Upon touching the wooden remains, like magic, the blue tint spread out to the rest of the ruins, glowing brightest where his hand lay, sealing his hand into the woodwork, not letting him escape its effect. Broken and shattered parts of the house slam together, fitting together like a jigsaw, crumbling upwards, like the remains of the house were put in reverse, fixing the manor house, returning it to its former glory, fit for an old English lord, until the final piece slammed into place, giving one final pulse of blue light before his hand was released from its resting place. Turning to check his surroundings the man sees the glade had shrunk, the foliage has grown forward, barely three steps away, the spectres that once were spread around the glade, all clumped in a large group in front of him, watching, grinning, smiles with too many teeth to feel kind, silence.

Swiftly turning from the ensemble of spirits, with a shiver, the man enters the house, looking to find his purpose, an answer. His steps echo in the empty house, no sounds but his feet and the fire crackling, wait fire. Following the sound he enters the dining room, on the far wall a fire roaring in the fireplace, lighting the room with an electric blue light, the same colour as the orbs he followed here. The only furniture a long wooden table with two chairs, one at either end, each chair had fine China set in front of it, a hot roast meal steaming on the dishes, a goblet of wine beside it, inviting him to eat. Sitting in the far chair was an old man, he appeared ancient, old age long since stolen his sight, yellowed teeth grinning at the younger man, a harsh laugh ringing out, a familiar laugh, his laugh, the man's own laugh. He had never met this old man, yet he was familiar. It may have been the laugh that clued the man in, or the fact the old man wore the same clothes as he was, or perhaps he caught a glimpse of a tattoo that matched his. He sat opposite himself, silent, feeling eyes on the back of his neck he turned, behind him the spirits gathered, they were solid apparitions, watching his every move, looking just as they had in their final moments.

Turning back to himself, he could only ask “*why?*”, silence, “*WHY!?!?*”

“Such a nice life we leave behind, such a nice life we led. Beautiful memories we passed by family and friends standing by our side on our journey, encouraging us, urging us forward. Calling us away from the light, yet we ignored them, turned away, walked our own path, one that led us here, just ourselves seated at this table, no one left to share a meal with but

ourselves. Was the journey nice? You didn't seem to slow down, you just charged forward, didn't spend much time listening, enjoying the journey, reminiscing, was it worth it?" the old man absently asked his younger counterpart.

The younger man sat and contemplated his answer, eating his meal in silence, when he finished, he finally said, *"I didn't realise that I didn't need to rush, that they weren't distractions, there only to entice me off the path, that the memories were not meant to hurt. What happens now? Is it over?"*.

The old man rose, shuffling over slowly, laying a wrinkled hand on his shoulder and whispered *"you tell me young man. Is the path gone? Can you not retrace your steps? Maybe try enjoying it this time."* He then released his hold on the younger man, before shuffling forward into the waiting arms of his loved ones, loosing their hold on the land of the living, the group of spectres returned to the beyond, fading from the young man's sights, taking the older man with them, leaving only a line of blue light flickering, encouraging the younger man down a path through the woods.

Amber Bradford

The cord.

four

“Please disconnect your cable now” the room announces. I feel around the back of my neck and yank the cord in annoyance, the sharp sting ripping down my spine. Wanting at least another hour of sleep, I yawn loudly in defiance.

Why do I always feel like I have not slept at all?

The room interrupts my thoughts with the morning announcements “Good morning 6127, we hope you slept well.”

My name is Petra you stupid computer, and when have I ever slept well? You should know this; you know everything else about me.

“You have an appointment with the doctor, be ready for an orderly to escort you soon.”

Great, time to get poked and prodded by some random asshole in a hazmat suit who reeks of disinfectant and ignores my every word.

I sit up, reaching out to feel the wall beside me for the indentations I have scratched into the cold wall beside me. Feeling the rough bumps where I have marked, I count *five, ten, fifteen* until I reach three thousand, one hundred and eighty-two.

Even though I anticipate the chiming, the loud vibrating sound shocks me every time. Once, twice, three times, four. I wince, wondering why the chimes must be so loud when it’s just me in this tiny cell. Then it hits me.

Only four chimes.

I remember when it was over a thousand and the chimes went for what felt like years. My mind races as I imagine every possible thing that could happen in four more days. I imagine being reunited with my mother, running towards her, my sight fully returned and out in the sunlight the heat stinging my skin lightly. I feel the warmth of my mother’s embrace, the smell of laundry detergent and rose scented soap filling my nose, her hair streaked with grey. I shake my head, scolding myself for imagining such a ridiculous notion.

I need to be realistic here.

They wouldn't keep me locked in a room for more than three thousand sleeps just for them to return me to my family.

No, it is something much more sinister than that. I can feel it, the evil in the air creating a thick cloud looming towards me.

Four more chimes.

Footsteps thunder down the hallway, the thick soles of the orderly's shoes smacking the linoleum floor, echoing towards me. I hear the beep from the orderly's key card and the cool breeze hits my face like ice as they open my cell. I walk towards the door, hoping I've oriented my body correctly or I am about to go head first into the wall. They grab my arm forcefully and yank me down the hallway, the air thick with bleach burning my throat and filling my nostrils with every breath.

As we enter the room, the doctor smelling faintly of cigarettes and mouthwash hooks me up to every machine possible, piercing my veins roughly as if I was a cadaver during a post-mortem autopsy. As quick as they hook me up they leave, rushing to disinfect themselves from my filth. I rest my head back, preparing for silence as an unknown poison burns through my veins however this time I can hear an animated conversation being had between the orderly and the doctor, loud enough that I can make it out faintly through the walls of the isolation chamber.

"UGH I HATE having to touch them, even with all the gear on I still feel disgusting being close to them" the orderly whines begrudgingly.

"At least you don't have to actually inject them! I take three showers just to make sure I'm contamination free before I can go home" the doctor snaps back.

A third voice then interrupts "have you prepared 6127 for the upcoming procedure?"

Huh, a supervisor perhaps?

Interesting...

“Yes sir, vitals are being monitored as we speak, and Exjade-0114 trial has begun in preparation for enucleation in four days” blurts the doctor.

Four days.

Four chimes.

“Excellent. The elite will be pleased to obtain a fresh slave after the past few years of unsuccessful attempts. By your calculations what is its rate of survival?” the supervisor queries.

The doctor hesitates, “Even if we can successfully enucleate the eyes, the mind may not survive the wiping and control process.”

“We estimate the odds are a 9 percent chance of survival sir” the orderly states.

Mind wiping?

Slave?

9 percent.

I must get out of here.

NOW.

three

I wake up to the grating robotic voice of the room’s announcement “please disconnect your cable now.”

I reach up and notice the heaviness of my arm, the inside of my elbow throbbing with pain from the orderly viciously piercing my veins. Feeling nauseated I pull out my cable, the motion overwhelming my body forcing me to projectile vomit, hitting the ground with a smack and ricocheting onto my thigh.

“Good morning 6127, we hope you slept well” The room announces.

They really did poison me.

The memories of the doctor’s visit snap me sober.

9 percent chance of survival.

The words swirling in my head, bringing back my nausea or perhaps creating a new reason to feel sick.

I must escape now more than ever.

I have to find my mother.

Suddenly I hear the orderly stomping down the hall towards me.

Not again!

Then I notice a familiar sound of bare feet hitting linoleum, moving with the orderly in syncopation. I hear a beep of the orderly's key card opening the room next to me as the barefooted person is thrown into the room, the door slammed shut with such force that the walls vibrated. As the orderly scurries off I hear a soft weeping, the voice husky and deep as though they had been already crying for hours.

"Hello?" I call tentatively, hoping that this isn't some trick the orderlies are playing on me. I hear the sharp snuffle of my neighbour.

"Hello? Can you hear me?" they answer back

I sit there shocked.

I haven't had a neighbour in over two thousand markings.

"Where am I? I can't believe they caught me, I just can't" my neighbour sobbed.

"I'm not entirely sure where we are" I reply, "but I can tell you that I have been here for over three thousand markings – uh days. Ever since I was infected with the virus and taken away from my home, my family, and dumped in this hellhole." "What is your name?" I ask, hoping that they won't start crying again.

"My name is Xane from Faction 3 of Zion, about 15 clicks from the dome. What about you?" He has calmed enough to get a full sentence out, with only soft hiccups interrupting him as he sucks in air.

Great, the first neighbour I get in years, and he's got a screw loose.

I probe for more information, "Faction 3? Zion? What dome?"

“Oh my god, if you have been here since the Trachoma Alpha pandemic you wouldn’t know of Zion, or the dome! Stupid...” Xane mutters to himself, trailing off. “One percenters, or they like to call themselves ‘the elite’ – the richest of the rich – decided that there were too many humans on earth and infected our waterways and air with a disease call Trachoma Alpha that blinded everyone that wasn’t in isolation, and eventually killed off 98 percent of the world’s population.”

He's joking right?

I thought it was just some silly virus and I got badly infected and then taken by some masochistic experimental freaks.

Xane continues, “they used biological warfare to create a mass genocide and then built an isolation dome to lock us all out. They didn’t realise however, that it wouldn’t kill off everyone.”

I feel like I’m going to throw up again

“So, you survived? How many of you are there? Do you have your sight still?” I exclaim, my mind racing.

“Yep, there’s thousands of us at Zion, we were all blinded by Trachoma Alpha though.” Xane went quiet.

Survived! I thought it was just me alone in this hell –

The ear-splitting chimes interrupted our conversation, one, two, three. Five seconds later Xane gets the same chimes, one, two, three.

“OUCH! WHAT THE HELL?” Xane screams.

“The chimes tell us how long we have left until the procedure” I explain.

Xane gasps “procedure?”

I go to explain when I hear two orderlies march down the hall, our doors opening simultaneously. I attempt to jump out of my seat, but the orderly is too fast and presses their remote, signalling the ankle and wrist cuffs to close. I hear a scuffle next door as a second orderly enters Xanes room to hold him down. My orderly connects my cable forcefully, holding my head back as I struggle.

There is a whole life out there

My body slumps.

two

My ears prick up as the low hum of the speaker starts. Here we go again. “Please disconnect your cable now” the room orders. I defy them, pretending to be asleep as the room bellows again, almost feeling louder this time “please disconnect your cable now.”

I sigh and pull the cable slowly, my body still aching.

“Good morning 6127, we hope you slept well.”

I whisper “Xane, are you there?” hoping he hasn’t been taken away or worse after our conversation yesterday.

“Yeah, I am” Xane grunts. “Hey what’s your name? And what’s this freaky cord connected to my neck?”

“My name is Petra” I laugh, “and it feeds us and puts us to sleep somehow would be my best guess.”

“Well Petra, we have to get out of here. TODAY.” Xanes voice cracks, anxiety seeping through his confident tone.

I’ve been here three thousand one hundred and eighty-four days and you think you can just hatch a plan and escape in ONE DAY!

He really is delusional.

Scratching yesterday and today’s markings into the wall I scoffed at the thought of even attempting an escape when Xane bangs on the wall “I’ve got it!”

“Quiet down!” I shush.

“Why don’t we bite our cords, damaging them so they can’t put us to sleep, we stay awake and escape while they think were out cold!” Xane whispers excitedly.

Hey that’s actually kind of brilliant.

– Insane and could get us killed.

But brilliant none the less.

“But how would we get out of our rooms?” I question, finding more holes in this plan than marks on my wall.

“I have a doctor’s appointment now, and let’s just say I have an affinity for stealing things from authority” Xane chuckled to himself. The daunting sound of stomping feet returned as Xanes’ door beeps.

“Hey! get off me you freak!” He snarls, as the orderly dragged him down the hallway, their footsteps getting quieter until there is only a faint echo left.

I pull my cord out to feel it’s rough exterior, examining it with my fingers as the chimes blare loudly again.

Two

One.

You don’t have any other option, Petra.

It is time to make a choice.

Risk your life escaping or forfeit your memories for the unknown.

I bite down on the cord as hard as I can, pain radiating into my spine as though I had activated all my nerve endings at once. The metallic taste of blood dripping down the sides of my mouth as I rip a hole with my teeth.

I hear a beeping as the orderly swipes open my room, being too focused on damaging my cord to even hear the footsteps. I let go of the cord in shock, it whips back into my neck snapping in place. I wipe my face quickly with my hands, praying that the orderly doesn’t see whatever mess I’ve made.

A second later the straps close and I’m trapped again for another night, the orderly hooking up my cord and swiftly leaving my cell, seemingly oblivious.

I wait for what feels like days for Xane to return.

one

I hear a sound coming down the hallway I have not heard before. The sound of dragging feet, scraping lifelessly against the floor.

“Please disconnect your cable now” the room orders as I hear Xane being dumped into his cell. I pull my cord out gently, its surface wet and leaking, the acidic smell filling the room.

“Xane?” I call out tentatively “are you okay?”

No response.

Maybe he’s just recovering from the pain of the doctor’s visit.

“Xane” I call again this time with a slight quiver in my voice.

“Hello?” he replies with a strange hollow tone I had not heard from him before. “Who’s there?” Xane questions.

“It’s Petra silly, did you get the card?” I ask, waiting for some quick-witted reply.

“Petra?” I don’t know a Petra, sorry” he replies blankly.

No.

This can’t be happening.

They can’t have done the enucleation on Xane already, It’s too soon.

There’s still one more chime.

Footsteps appear louder than ever. The hollow slapping on the linoleum drilling into my mind.

I’m not ready.

It wasn’t meant to happen this way.

We were going to escape.

The door beeps as the orderlies rip open the door.

“XANE” I half scream, half sob.

One last desperate attempt of salvation but no reply. The orderlies grab my arms, their grip of so tight I can feel my blood pooling above their hands, my fingers going numb with the loss of circulation. I kick my legs out hoping to make contact with an orderly and not the wall. A fast exhale of air followed by a pained grunt left one of the orderlies.

“If anything deserved to become a slave it would be this lump of infectious waste” the orderly snarled.

I refuse to become a slave for these monsters.

Have I damaged my cord enough?

Will I survive?

As I am pulled out of my cell I fight their grasp, digging my fingers into the hallway walls, pain stabbing under my nails. I push my feet back against the floor, the weight of the orderlies propelling me forward as I pull back. Feeling a cold snap of air and the unmistakably overwhelming smell of bleach I am dragged into the surgery room. The orderlies restrain me forcefully and connect my cord. Holding my breath, I wait to see if they notice the leaking fluid.

This is it.

I suck in air sharply, waiting for my body to go numb and my mind to go fuzzy.

Only this time I don't fall asleep.

I feel everything.

I hear everything.

My mind is awake as the surgery begins.

Marco Colletta

Mettle of Man

There are mad scientists, and then there are scientists that are just plain weird. Queer isn't the term used anymore, but Jane Mathers had to stop herself from blurting it out loud the moment she met her husband.

Ezekiel was a genius obsessed with finding solutions to questions that no-one had ever considered asking; "A God in bondage to his utterly useless daydreams," as her dramatic mother had mused once.

Glasses equipped with cutting edge digital displays and an out-of-this-world machine learning AI interface. What had he only ever used it for?

Finding out which neighbor's cat had been leaving dead birds in their front yard.

He'd tried pitching tofu that can be fed to fish, chairs for classrooms that can't be leant back on and unfoggable mirrors- that last one was actually quite good, in retrospect, but Jane still couldn't help but pinch the bridge of her nose and sigh in disappointment whenever she brought lunch to the basement and she had to wrest him away from his biosynthesizer so that he wouldn't create a new form of life that was undeniably illegal.

They were both socialites who had never needed to work a day in their lives, so it wasn't like he needed to be selling his inventions to the Department of Defense, but... at the very least, she often reasoned, he could put some of that energy towards solving world hunger.

Despite it all, she loved him.

She couldn't help but adore the way that his eyes shone with that mad glee whenever he solved a difficult problem, or the way that he ran his fingers through his hair when he was stressed, which admittedly was all the time. How when he finally asked her to marry him, the ring he put on her finger melted into a million microbots that crawled onto her body and took the form of a dress fitting for their special night.

Not needing him to be financially successful made it a lot easier. A week before Jane's forty-fifth, he asked her what she wanted, and she thought long and hard, trying to come up with an idea that would reign his genius into something practical. She settled on something simple - an extra set of hands.

Of course, it only took Ezekial a matter of weeks and several arduous calibration sessions to whip up a set of cybernetic implants that synchronized perfectly with her.

On the day of her birthday, she woke up to a pair of arms, and tentacles jutting from her sides, already twitching and writhing. In a panic, Jane had leveled her bedroom and thrown a lamp into an unfortunate neighbor's car across the street.

She loved him to death, but did he ever make it difficult.

“I’ve had it!” Doing her best to ignore the corresponding thrash of her new appendages, Jane did her best to cover up the tears that betrayed her frustration - frustration at the inventions that ate up hours of her week cleaning up after, at the looks she had gotten after she had told her friends, her mother that they were to married -

She stopped the ugly train of thought short. After a few deep breaths, she looked up at him. The invading tentacles seemed to have calmed down as well.

“Love. Thank you, but.. You could’ve at least waited till I woke up.”

He mumbled out an apology, doing his best to not handle his hair too harshly but failing against the impulse.

“And tentacles? Please, love, be reasonable. I know I didn’t specify ‘human hands,’ but..”

“No, you’re right. I’m sorry.” He planted a kiss on her forehead and did his best to smile. As he broke away, the tentacles detached from her side with a peculiar sucking sensation. Not a lot of damage done, but bright red marks remained on her sides.

“Your breakfast in bed is still on the way, sweet. I’ll get that now.”

He left, and Jane did her best to not feel too guilty. Sometimes he needed a talking-to. Her husband never returned- instead, a small droid on tracks held her breakfast aloft, a note on it promising a surprise at dinner time for just the two of them.

Dinner made Jane’s jaw drop.

No gimmicks, no unnecessary contraptions; Ezekiel had simply brought out their nicest tableware and lit the room with candles. *They Might Be Giants* crooned through the speaker system about how good the world would be if only people loved each other a little bit more. Her husband set out a platter of her favorite foods, dressed to the nines.

She had brought her tracksuit and pyjamas.

“I’ll just..” she turned to leave so she could change and prepare her makeup and was she properly shaved and -

“It’s ok.” Her husband held her by the arm to stop her from leaving. He turned her around so she could see how warmly he smiled, how -

He kissed her gently. “The food’ll get cold. Come on.”

Over dinner, the morning’s fiasco was forgotten, buried under wine, laughter, food... Much more wine toward the end. Only she had a plate set out for her. He sheepishly told her that he had sampled too much of the cooking and filled up, but that was okay. Tonight was about her, after all.

When they eventually went to bed, after they'd made love, Jane almost looked forward to his gentle snoring to lull her to sleep. There was none tonight, but it was always best to not look a gift horse in the mouth too closely. She closed her eyes, drifting off with a smile on her lips.

"Come on, eyes up - oh, wire!" They both woke up late, and Jane was still scrambling into her nice clothes as they walked up the terrace to her parents' house. The rush was so great, Ezekiel hadn't noticed a wire that had snuck its way into his sleeve - from one of his coats, no doubt. With some small effort, she plucked it from his sleeve.

"When did this get here? Love, tell me you didn't get up in the middle of the night to work!" she pouted, though there wasn't enough time to chatter. They had somewhere to be.

Jane's parents were glad to see her for her special day, which was much more than she could say for herself- her stomach was doing flips from the moment she woke up.

Her stomach had settled down, except now it felt like it was in a cold vice- her mother never approved of her marrying Ezekiel, and if he played up again today, there would be a hellish phone call to look forward to when she returned home.

But, to her surprise, the afternoon went by without a hitch. Ezekiel even pulled out a few jokes that made her father laugh. Just before they left, Jane's mother pulled her aside.

"You've done a good job, Janie."

"What do you mean?"

"He's finally shaping up into a proper gentleman. Still a little... odd, but compared to when you brought him to us the first time.." Her mother gave her that sardonic look she always did when talking about her husband, and what could Jane do other than thank her curtly and hug her goodbye?

"My mother likes you a lot more now, you know," Jane said as she tapped out an email to her stockbroker.

"You certainly won a few points with the both of them. Hub?"

Her husband had paused to look out the window. As Jane waited for a response, even a half-mumbled one, she realized something. His gaze wasn't distant, it was entirely vacant, as if his brain had just.. Paused. The sun filtered through his perfectly combed, undisturbed hair and bounced off his slightly off-color skin, and -

Oh.

Jane couldn't help but smile sadly. She twirled the stray wire she had plucked from his sleeve earlier around her fingers.

"Ezekiel?" she called.

Ezekiel Mathers turned toward her.

"I'd like to see my husband now, please."

He didn't say anything for a moment. "Are you sure?"

"Yes, I think I quite am."

Another pause, then he set off- into the house, down the stairs into the basement and.. At the far bench, surrounded by monitors, a man in a lab coat was hunched over in his chair. Negotiating her way through the countless new piles of junk, she eventually arrived at the desk. The man who had led her to the basement had stepped into a pod that flashed CHARGING when it closed on him.

"You silly, silly thing," she sighed. "You can't even remember that you married me for my looks second?" She bent to wrap her arms around her husband. Ezekiel quivered, holding her hands with his own.

"You couldn't seriously expect to stay down here without showering forever. I would've sniffed you out eventually, you know? Come now, let's get you clean. Then you're cooking me my birthday dinner for real."

Shannon Collinson

(Untitled)

Now

A searing, stabbing pain at the rear of Lotte's skull brought her back to consciousness. It was happening again, except this time, she refused to open her eyes. The pain in Lotte's head was so severe, it felt like she was laying on a pillow of hot coals. However, she knew this wasn't the case, given every other inch of her face and body felt ice cold. She clenched her eyes shut, tighter than before, willing the pain to stop. Or if that wasn't going to work, hopefully she could deny the new, unknown reality she was undoubtedly about to find herself in once she opened her eyes, for hopefully just a few moments longer.

A warm, liquid sensation seeping down her face stopped her mind from wandering any further, a sensation that was all too familiar. Lotte took a short, sharp breath in. The cold air stung the back of her throat, jolting her eyes wide open. Lotte's sight was so blurred, it was as though a sheer cloth had been draped over her in concealment. Her arms now outstretched; Lotte's vision was so distorted she could hardly make out a shape that resembled anything close to what her hand, or any hand for that matter, should look like. She sat up, hoping her upright stature might help to clear the groggy haze, but this only made things worse. The warm, trickling sensation continued, with the liquid suddenly streaming down her face, its recognisable viscosity setting off alarm bells within. Lotte began to wipe frantically, trying to find the liquid's origin, a panic rising within her, tightening her chest, suffocating like a toxic gas. Blinking furiously now, in an attempt to bring clarity to her sight, she pulled her hands away from her face, glaring down at them. Finally, Lotte's eyes focused; now fixated solely on the liquid smeared across her palms. A wildfire of dread surged through her body, her hands were covered in a blue liquid, the blue so vivid it felt other worldly. Rummaging her thoughts, Lotte frantically looked around trying to find the source of the substance.

Murderer... The word raced through her mind, the fear rising inside her had manifested itself into a monster, casting its menacing shadow over her body. Guilt sat heavy on her shoulders, the weight felt like the devil himself had perched upon her back, malevolently breathing down her neck. Yet, she was alone, in almost pitch-black darkness. Surrounded by an ocean of trees, wild grass, and nothing but an indigo blue sky above her, the nothingness so vast it began to feel claustrophobic.

Lotte patted her face now, more gently than before. Fear and instinct drove the cautious rhythm to how she ran her hands across her skin. As she hovered towards her left cheek, a stinging sensation swelled down her face, flinging her hands back as to not make it worse, Lotte grimaced in pain. Her hand outstretched in front of her, strangely warm from the liquid that was covering it. Lotte stared down at her palm once more, her vision more precise than ever before. In that moment, it felt as though a million bees had injected every inch of her skin, each sting piercing sharper than the one before. As the panic prickled across her body, a short, desperate gasp of air allowed Lotte to vocalize her impossible assumption. She let out a croak "it's my blood...blue blood".

Then

“With great power, comes great responsibility”, Lotte cynically muttered under her breath as she mind-numbingly flicked through the never-ending news broadcasts and vaccine rollout updates.

As much as she hated the current state of affairs, Lotte was a self-proclaimed history buff. She was somewhat a ‘fanatic’ when it came to the life cycles and power struggles that humankind had themselves stuck in since the beginning of time. From studying the rise and falls of civilisations, Lotte had almost convinced herself that her superfluous historical knowledge meant that she could *somewhat* predict the future. This delusion of grandeur had manifested at an frightening rate in the past few weeks as Lotte found herself glued to various screens, waiting for the next news bulletin to hit, just like junkie waiting for their next hit.

Lotte’s theory was that the demise of civilisations always stemmed from one narcissistic, sociopathic individual that believed they were ‘*the answer*’, so she was always on the lookout for just that. Throughout all the books, documentaries, and podcasts she digested, Lotte knew that it was these same individual’s greed and desire for power that had the capacity to grow like an insidious disease, often unbeknownst to those around them and sadly, ultimately leading to millions of people dead and the world as it was known, changed forever, vowing to never let it happen again.

It was the early months of 2112, and what was unfolding in front of Lotte’s eyes, blanketing the screens she starred at, was no different, history was about to repeat itself but, on this occasion, there were irreversible consequences. Another highly contagious virus had rapidly spread across the world, a world already in an extremely fragile economic and environmental state. The five years when the virus began to surge through populations felt more like decades; millions of people dead, with no cure or vaccination in site and its variants on the rise by the minute. In stepped the pharmaceutical giant *Alexon*.

As Lotte put it, Alexon was the ‘*evil brainchild*’ of a well-known ‘*tech genius-turned billionaire-turned richest man in the universe-come again messiah*’, Richard Blue. As the world sat defeated, upon the brink of extinction, Richard via his company Alexon concocted, and campaigned for *The Cure*. Much to Lotte’s dismay, this ‘*Cure*’ was not the 1970’s British rock band she admired, rather, it was a global movement, that ultimately attempted to control the entire population through medical advancements and what was later discovered as a categorical ranking system that divided the world into three ‘categories’: red, white, and blue.

During the initial years, presidents, prime ministers, and world leaders urged their people to do what was in the best interest of their country and ‘*Get Immunized!*’. The information surrounding the vaccine professed of its healing benefits. Luckily for Alexon, through the privatization of health systems globally after decades of COVID-19 wreaking havoc on hospitals and health systems alike, Alexon were in prime position to roll out *The Cure*, with almost all government bodies providing them the power to not only vaccinate but also categorise their citizens, as Lotte and much of the world initially understood it, the categorisation was ‘based on the immunity and risk of spreading the virus, so as to protect the vulnerable and help heal the world’.

Regrettably the world's fragile state had the masses clutching at straws, praying for anything that would bring back normality. But alas, there was a much darker motive at play. As the virus ravaged on, millions more died and the population began to not only decimate in size but disintegrate in morality, it became very evident there was a global purge happening at the hands of Richard Blue. People classed in the Red Category and originally 'at risk and requiring the most care', later told a far more sinister tale, this red classification was in fact symbolism for the grave danger they were in, or in Richard Blue's eyes, the danger they posed to the world. They were all but left for dead, no assistance or support, outcast from society. Next was the White Category, who were herded as the 'working' class, primed and polished as the bones of this new, bleak world, living and existing only to serve and aid those in power: the Blue Category.

The irony struck like a heavy blow for Lotte, as a well-known pattern contextualised in front of her eyes. Richard Blue, an American tech magnate had managed to turn the world completely upside down, where only the people he deemed as *worthy* were granted the privilege of living a somewhat normal life, they were the ones so lucky as to be classified by his namesake 'Blue', while the two other colours of the American flag were left to rot, recluse or work until death greeted them at their door, like an old friend.

Months and then years went by, as Lotte witnessed her very own civilization crumbling around her. The air was dark and reeked of desperation to rot the system. People, as people do, began attempting to find their way around these archaic, inhumane tiers they were trapped in. Lotte sat and watched claims to fame and any connection worthwhile in the book thrown around, just to gain a level up; from Red to White, or White to Blue. However, this didn't last long, Richard with the help of Alexon managed to work their way around this unassuming revolt of hierarchy, through even more devastating medical advancements. Alexon unleashed a new level of control upon the world, their new ruling meant individuals could only be recognised within their category by '*Medical Investigation and Authorisation*', meaning, your blood. The colour of your blood now defined your ranking in the system. The year 2113 rolled around and the world had grinded to a halt, standing horrifyingly still under the ever-powerful thumb of Richard Blue and Alexon.

Lotte (amongst others) were somewhat relieved when it became apparent that it wasn't all smooth sailing for Richard in the months after his reign of terror took its sinister turn, as it was soon discovered there were some... complications. Fortunately for Lotte, she was one of these complications. Mutations formed in various ways as a result of tampering with the genetic make-up of mankind, luckily for Lotte her mutation had worked in her favour. As Lotte fondly explained it, she wasn't your typical '*textbook mutation*', Lotte's mutation was complicated. Complicated in the way that she hadn't quite worked out exactly what it was or how to utilise it at first. But Lotte didn't care about the semantics, it was a dream come true for her. Her mutation had miraculously granted her the gift of time travel, she was leaping through not just centuries, but through walls and across oceans.

As the years melted into one another post 2113, Lotte a white blood by nature, had somehow managed to continuously find herself moving further and more frequently through time and space. The sparkle of her newfound gift never truly wore off, as Lotte knew how lucky and advantageous her mutation was; no one that Lotte knew of held a similar skill, nor could any

other soul observe her mutation in action, she was safe from prying eyes and safe from Richard Blue... For now.

Now

As the bleeding began to subside so too did Lotte's panic. The redeeming relief that she was in fact not a blue blood murderer, but rather a blue blood herself, soothed her racing heart as well as the stinging from the wound on her cheek.

In that moment a thunderous roar shattered through the nothingness. Every muscle in Lotte's body contracted, alarmingly still yet perfectly alert. The sound whirred toward her; it was close to deafening. A bright light flickered across the night sky, catching Lotte's gaze. She cranked her head upwards toward the piece of machinery hurtling towards her in the darkness. Lotte had lined up her vision to the object above like a missile to its target, watching with precision as it glided through the air above. A light bulb went off, she knew exactly what it was. Only weeks earlier she had watched a documentary about it, although she had never seen one in the flesh seeing as the last one took flight in early December of 2072. "Aero-plane..." the word fell out of Lotte's mouth almost as a stutter, she was in shock.

Lotte had never travelled so far back in time before, but she knew what this meant. A tingling of excitement shivered through her as the gravity of the situation she had found herself in began to sink in. She whispered softly but purposefully "with great power, comes great responsibility". A small smirk crept across her face; it was just a shame she had no idea where she was.

Laura Jayne

(Untitled)

Bzzz.

The keycard reader sounded its warning note, and the barrier opened up to let her onto the station platform.

Concrete walls and steel turned her footsteps into echoing cracks in the cavernous dark. Across the tracks on platform two, another figure stood scrolling on their phone, but her own platform was empty. The hollow ‘click, click, click’ of her shoes, reverberating outwards, told her the shape and size of the emptiness, much of it unseen in the ill-light, and she softened her steps as much as she could, until she had stopped walking completely.

The distant sound of a train’s horn drifted through the station, then all was silent.

The woman ran her hand over the back of her head, watching her shadow as it mirrored her movements on the concrete before her. The lights on the wall behind her flickered. Her shadow lengthened gently towards the lip of the platform, as one of the bulbs sputtered out, the dark edges of her shape fading, blurring, as the shadow slipped down and across the tracks.

Harsh laughter broke the quiet space, and she flinched.

Through the barrier came three men, crass voices cracking off the walls as her footsteps had done. She drew closer to the edge of the platform to let them pass. One, staggering, flung his arms out with a guttural ‘Boo!’ as he came near, and laughed when she flinched again.

She took another step closer to the platform’s edge as he passed behind her, blushing and keeping her gaze firmly to the ground, watching her shadow’s head and shoulders stretch further across the tracks and touch the metal rail...

Two eyes glinted in the steel.

And a mouth tore open.

She stepped back in shock, and her bag slipped from her shoulder, falling at her feet and making her break her gaze from the face in the steel. She bobbed down to grasp it back, and turned straight back to the tracks.

No face was there.

Breathing hard, she reached into her bag for her water. As she sipped, shivering, she recalled the way the glint of light on metal had morphed into two agonised eyes, and an empty mouth, right where her shadow crossed the tracks. She found herself struggling to replace the cap on her water bottle, and scoffed, willing herself to stop shivering. Her jaw set, she shook her head. It was the light. It was a trick of the light. Nothing there when she’d turned back from her bag. Nothing would be there now when once she looked again.

The bottle lid jittered in her grasp. She rolled her eyes, and forced herself to look back at the tracks.

The face stared up at her in glinting agony, and this time it screamed.

Water sprayed everywhere as she flung the bottle at the rails, her own throat closing over a strangled cry. She was half aware of the person on the opposite platform looking up in mild surprise, and of the men calling over jeering comments, one saying to the rest “she’s a jumpy little bugger.” The metal water bottle clanged off the tracks and glugged the last of its contents away, and the face in the steel still twisted and contorted with inhuman shivers. She scrambled back away from the tracks, until her back was pressed against the station wall, and she couldn’t see the rails...

But she could hear them.

Whispers drifted to her from the tracks below like cold air seeping under a door. She rubbed her face with her palms, looked at the others on the platform. The person across from her had gone back to their phone, and the men now ignored her as she hunkered into the wall. They couldn’t hear it. They mustn’t be able to hear it. Couldn’t possibly, else they’d be like her, afraid, afraid to look at the tracks, to listen to the whispers –

“Skin, skin, skin...”

She gulped. Not real. Mustn’t be real.

“It’s coming. The pain. Help, HELP, before the wheels come for my skin...”

The whispers grew louder, as the sound of the approaching train began to drown them out. She clutched her bag, desperate for a sip of the water she’d thrown away, as the whispers started screaming again, the train almost at the station.

“Help! Save me, you can save me if you try, no, NO, it’s too near – “

The moment the train drew in the voice became a shriek, a shriek of anguished steel, piercing through her as she held back a sob and leapt forward to board the train, refusing to look down at the face she knew would stare at her from the tracks.

The electric doors slid shut, and muffled the scream. Passengers already onboard the busy carriage looked at her with raised brows. She made her way to a seat, and tried to calm the hurricane of her breathing. As the train pulled away, she pushed her palms to her ears as from outside the turn of the wheels rent screams of pain once more from the rails below. Then, the sound of the engine grew to a steady beat, and the talk of the passengers hummed, and her breathing slowed.

The whispers were dulled by the sound of movement. But at every station at which the train slowed, and the doors slid open, and passengers crowded in and out of the train, she could hear them. Heard the shrieks beginning as the train pulled away. The doleful whimpers as it stood idle, doors open. Station after station.

Her body sank lower in her seat, and she shut her eyes.

Finally, her own station. As the train doors slid wide, she braced herself against the moans... almost didn’t hear the silence.

The train pulled away behind her, and she looked around.

The platform was empty. Of people, and of sound.

She stood still, in the quiet. Clutched her keycard to her chest. Let her breathing begin again. She turned, so slowly, to the tracks, and looked down to where the rails lay, faceless and silent, in the glint of the moon. The hair on her neck softened, and lay down. She walked away from the rails.

Her keycard was almost level with the reader when the whisper came.

“Please.”

She barely knew what she was doing. She dropped her bag as she knelt at the edge of the platform, and let her legs swing down, pushing herself off, her feet crunching on the gravel between the tracks.

The face in the steel looked at her with impossible eyes.

“That’s it. Thank you. You can save me...”

...Come closer.”

She knelt again, knees pressing into the rails. A little way off, a train sounded its horn.

Her heart beat at her painfully as she scratched at the steel, scooping at the glinting face, scraping, trying to prise it free, as the tracks started to rumble.

“Come on!”

“Come on, come on,” she sobbed, fingernails ripping as she tore at the rails –

Harsh metal cut her palm.

The glinting face twisted into a wicked, wicked grin.

Cold steel closed over her fingers, she pitched into the tracks as nausea broiled. For a moment everything was grey, grey, rusted, she tried to gasp for air but nothing, nowhere to put it, and there were the stars shining right above her, and the rim of the platform leering down, and the pores of her skin felt stretched and burnt with cold. All her edges were gone, replaced. She could not move.

She was steel.

The train horn sounded again, and behind it the faintest trace of a wicked laugh.

“Hello?” she called, though her voice... wasn’t quite a voice.

The tracks rumbled. *She* rumbled.

Instinct hit her like the train would. Her skin. Skin, stretched, and cold and metal, would be seared with twisting wheels, she tried to struggle but nothing moved, and all the time she could feel the train barrelling closer. Panic flooded her mind. Her un-body shivering with the effort, she strained to see the edge of the platform, but no one was there to help her, though all she wanted was to sob and cry for help. But there was only the train, coming closer. Closer.

Her shriek rent the air as the first wheel hit.

Braydon Magee

End Times

WARNING: The following story contains adult themes and references to rape, dismemberment and brutality. If easily offended, please do not read the following text.

There's no purgatory for war criminals.

As I clambered up the ladder, a fierce wind struck my fingers. I'd never encountered such a chill before. Emerging from the bunker, my eyes focused on the snow-capped peaks of a distant tree line, adjusting to the drab and lustreless light of the outdoors. In spite of the apparent cold, I was able to discern a radiant warmth, as if I were sitting in front of a fireplace on a frigid winter day.

Arriving at the top, I grew wary of every breath I inhaled; fearful of the fallout that consumed the air. I'd lost track of the days spent in the pit - the rations growing smaller and my hunger only augmenting. Taking my first step outside, I felt the snow seeping into the soles of my shoe. My feet, numbed of all feeling, made it difficult to tread the uneven ground.

Trudging through the slush, I observed the chestnuts, enveloped by thick sleet that trickled from the barren wood. In the absence of life, I felt surrounded by a grave, not unlike the mass burial sites that formed during the war.

Death was a common sight in Kurzikstan. Corpses lined the streets as artillery shelled public buildings. The restraint that once existed within the Libar military was quashed by dissenting officials who grew impatient with the slow progress of their annexation. Following the successful assassination of Libar president Alexi Kozlov, defence minister Taros Pavlovic was appointed Commander-In-Chief. Under his regime, the rules of engagement changed, prompting one of the largest genocides in world history.

I once came across a harrowing sight proceeding a failed attempt by a residential militia. For some, the occupation had proved detrimental, prompting the extremist group to attack a convoy making its way from the east. Hoping to disrupt their fuel supply, they managed to destroy a sub-tanker but were quickly outflanked by a patrol converging from the west. Although they pleaded for their lives, the army wasn't so quick to grant them a quick death. While it's unclear what happened during their detainment, it's widely believed that the POWs were tortured, with the army attempting to gather information regarding covert "terrorist cells." That's to say that the men were beaten with blunt instruments while the women were raped within an inch of their life. Instead of keeping them imprisoned, however, the military decided to set a precedent. Each prisoner was dismembered and hung from the overpass for all to see - across their flesh, a message that read "No Martyr."

Like many others, I was appalled, but couldn't help but stare at their blank, expressionless faces. The crowd was struck with horror by the sight of loved ones desecrated in an animalistic ritual that seemed, in all manner, inhuman. Brothers, sisters, neighbours; as we stared into the eyes of death, it became clear that we would have to comply or endure a similar fate.

Responding to the discovery of war crimes by the foreign press, the occupiers started to stockpile warheads, fearing the retaliation threatened by the east. In my ignorance, I failed to realise that the conflict would come to instigate more than just empty threats. The day came when the sirens blared. You'd think that the allies would make every attempt to ensure our safety, but you'd be wrong. We were nothing more than collateral damage in a game played by the powerful elite; pawns on a chessboard. Most of the army had vacated by that time, having received the intelligence in advance.

I was in the street when the sirens rang. People rallied in what could only be described as mass hysteria, with mothers clutching at the arms of their children - uncertain of where to go. On the sidewalk, an elderly gentleman dropped to the ground, extending his arms to the smoke-riddled sky and murmuring a prayer:

“God our Father, your power brings us to birth, your providence guides our lives, and by your command, we return to dust. Lord, those who die still live in your presence, their lives change but do not end. I pray in hope for my family, relatives and friends, and for all the dead known to you alone.”

He may have been devout, his faith pure and everlasting, but the dead do not speak of god, as they cannot.

Food became scarce as people turned to looting supermarkets and scouring local bodegas for canned goods. Once depleted, neighbours assailed each other in an otherwise desperate display, extricating some of the most primitive, beastly instincts known to man.

I was afraid, but accepting of death. Lacking a contingency plan, I made my way into the forest and traversed the thick undergrowth, figuring that if I were to die, I would rather do so surrounded by a serene, tranquil landscape. Having no family to speak of, this seemed ideal.

As golden hour passed, I stumbled across a hatch among a scattering of green and brown leaves. It was a fortunate stroke of serendipity that the hatch led to a damp hole enclosed by reinforced concrete. It is here that I waited out the nuclear blast. Perhaps if I had foreseen the destruction caused by the warhead, I would have tried to save more lives than just my own.

Silence. An unnatural silence. Traversing the beaten track, I tripped on something rock-like and opaque. Falling flat, I quickly pulled myself up and used my hand to reveal the obstacle: Two burnt cadavers, embracing in what appeared to be a hug. There was barely anything of the couple remaining - the facial features eroded and the skin black from necrosis. Stumbling back, I fell into the snow, entranced by the unyielding hold they had of each other. They knew their time was coming, but chose not to let death consume their love. My eyes welled up, for it seemed such a pure experience, an opulence only felt by humankind. I coddled up next to the bodies, a pang of discomfort crawling up my spine.

All there was left for me was to seek out what remained, all while surviving the nuclear winter. I probably won't make it, but at least I'll perish knowing that the human spirit was not lost.

Dunkan Parkes

Absence

It was a very gloomy day in June. I hate June. I hate winter; especially Melbourne winter because it's about as schizophrenic as its inhabitants, hot and humid one moment then hailing and freezing the next. Actually... On second thought I'm being unnecessarily cruel to Victorian weather. I just don't like Melbourne. But it's where the work is so you gotta do what you gotta do.

The work in question; a loving Catholic Mother had tasked me with cleaning up after her daughter's tragic suicide. She couldn't conceal the suicide – that was public knowledge, and she did make a bit of a mess when she jumped off the top of her 8-story building – but the circumstances surrounding it... *that* needed me. She had been a cultist of some kind. The Mother was blubbing uncontrollably when she spoke on the phone so I couldn't get all the details; it was pagan apparently, not that that narrows it down. Since the 60's everyone and their mother (not this mother) was a Odinist this, Molochian that. This pretentious bullshit had sort of faded a bit since the 90's until the internet came in and gave these half-assed cults a new lease on life. It was all bullshit of course. Catholicism too, but I knew better than to say that to a client. There are a couple of people in the city who do what I do; not as well, mind you. Professional *paranormal investigators*. Or as I like to call myself, a *bullshit detective*. What differentiates me from them is I know *it's all bullshit*. All of it. There is no God, no Jesus and no fucking Odin either. Just rackets, big and small. There is a lot of cults though, so that's where I usually come in. Cleaning up a crazy daughter's apartment so that the extended family is none the wiser about her heterodox religious beliefs is a much easier job than I usually get. Just last week I was investigating a Voodoo shaman who turned out to be a nutjob Indian guy pretending to be from Haiti.

Worked for Elijah Muhammed, I guess.

The apartment block was ugly. But then so are all apartments. At least it was concrete. Brutalist concrete looks practically cosy compared with those modernist gleaming towers of glass. It was seven stories up. The carpet in the hallway was a mustardy yellow and frayed, nicotine oozed from the walls and the air was humid and thick. Despite having the key, the door was difficult to unlock; it took some hip action to finally get it open.

“Huh.”

Sometimes you can't do anything but grunt when you are this confused. The apartment was small and very clean – there was a small kitchenette as you walked in, a reasonably sized lounge room, bathroom and bedroom to the right of the entrance. But what made it peculiar was the colour. Everything was white, and I mean *everything*. Every surface, every object, literally everything was white. A bright white. The kind you associate with artificially whitened teeth; so bright that the glare alone gives you a tan. I started with the cupboards, white cups and plates. Immaculately clean. Cutlery was similarly themed and appeared to be

made of a high-quality plastic. The loungeroom was filled with books, white anonymous dust covers. Hundreds of them. Stacked in some spots, strewn about in others. None had anything written in them with words, but every page had tiny crosses barely visible on the surface, as if it had been pressed into each page by a leadless pencil. The windows were painted over, letting but a sickly hospital type of light seeped through. There was a small seat, looked to be of the cheap-ass Scandinavian variety, same colour, or *lack of*.

I moved into the bathroom. Small shower, American style shower head. Large sink, decent hot water came from the oversized tap. What was peculiar was the mirror; the entire surface was painted over in a thick, chalky bone-coloured paint. Standing there, staring at what should have been my reflection made me realize that the entire apartment was devoid of anything *but* a matte surface. No reflection, no refraction and no distractions. Just monochromatic white surfaces and black shadows. Maybe the woman was an aesthete and not a cultist. Though the mirror thing struck me more as mentally ill than Avant Garde. This place was starting to really give me the creeps. I could feel my heart and pulse rise; unusual for me, since I deal with disturbing shit daily.

Moving into the bedroom I caught a strong whiff of bleach and ammonia. I could taste it on my tongue.

Unpleasant.

It was sparsely furnished, just a small mattress placed in the centre of the room. No lights. The light bulbs had been removed, leaving the unconnected wires hanging from the ceiling. A bit like empty eye sockets. Inside the wardrobe was half a dozen identical white dresses in decreasing size from medium to very small. The larger ones were dusty and pushed up the back, perhaps suggesting that she hadn't worn them recently. Had she shrunk? But not just in weight but... *height*? I'm supposed to be cleaning up evidence of a pagan religious sect but so far, the only evidence that this woman had ever existed was a peculiar absence. It reminded me of a black hole in a way. You only know it's presence because of *its absence*.

Back in the kitchen I took a moment to collect myself. That's when I noticed it.

The fridge.

It was abnormally large. Nearly touched the ceiling. How had I missed it? It almost looked like stone, marble maybe. A thick frost like substance covered its exterior. It felt soft to touch, as if it was organic, which is ridiculous. The door was frozen shut. Piece of shit, she had obviously never defrosted it. If my heart was a drum right now, it was all snares being struck with razor blades. I pulled hard. It still wasn't budging. I gripped the handle like a drowning man grips a lifeboat. I *pulled hard* and it finally swung open; the same overpowering odour struck me like a hammer. It was pitch black inside, impossibly so. I shone my torch inside. I blinked.

It winked.

Charlie Shannon

Tarheel Phats

Slumped on a bench overlooking the red fields that bordered the lower district, Ant was adjusting his channel to Tarheel Phats' pirate radio show, *Rockbottom*, airing every Friday five to seven. This part of Central Garden was his favourite. Far enough from the covered beats near Low Town to avoid stumbling through smut and used condoms, but not too close to the central fields where families frolicked under the watchful eye of their private security. *Sickening*. Here it was peaceful. One could enjoy the red and yellow martian sky, composed by equal parts pollution and ochre dust, which hung low over the fields beneath Ant's vantage point. Just beyond was the industrial curtain of Low Town. Alleys leading to apparent doom visible between the stained grey blocks that lined the gardens. *Bottom left side of the temporal lobe*. That's where the pirate stations usually were but all Ant could find was mind fuzz. He sighed and dug out a counterfeit marlboro from his jacket pocket. They tasted nothing like the real thing. They tasted horrible in fact, but a bit of suspended disbelief really made it worth the 4005% mark down from Phillip Morris' avaricious prices.

The baggy in his jacket pocket burned hot, the contents of which were tantalisingly close to passing his lips and unlocking the mind. Ant focused on the top right of his sight inserts. The clock ticked over to 5:01. Tarheel Phats already started and was likely on a roll. *Fuck it*. Ant dry swallowed the blue and immediately found the channel at the bottom left side of the temporal lobe.

Aye motherfuckers you know it's Tarheel here on roooooockbottom. So deep we hit the bottom! No shit! I got the delay pedal back this week, you could call it my safety blanket - blanket - blanket - blank- ...

The gold plated radio voice of Mr. Tarheel Phats had Ant drooling on the bench. He felt his eyes rolling back as the blue settled into the tips of his fingers.

You know I'm getting deep tonight. It's Friday afterall, so for the users and abusers out there, you picked the right time to get high - high - high - high ...

Phats played the Cheap Deep track - Deep Shit - Deep (Deep!) Mix. Locked into the cosmic dream, the bass heavy sounds, Tarheel's counsel, and the blue, it picked Ant up off the bench and he made a pilgrimage across the fields into the depths of Low Town. From open space to the precise opposite. A journey he always made between five and seven on Friday evening. He crossed the street and felt the dank, damp shadows embrace him. Cheap Deep was oscillating through his body, vocals washing through his mind and permeating his form. *Your sweet lies will take me to paradise*. The structures engulfed all light as the world turned greyscale. He felt life exploding around him now, the tension of ten million Low Towners

scrambling for resources and kicks rebounded through the narrow alleys, arriving at near tangibility within Ant's mind. The cacophony of thoughts rattled at the periphery of his conscience, like rain on tin. But Ant was locked in *deep*. Phats soundtracked his evening as though anticipating his every move. Cheap Deep faded out and Tarheel droned in.

Everyone likes getting deep baby, that's Tarheel's piece of wisdom for tonight. Here's one for my biggest fan, the Ant-man. Marianas Trench - Cavern Dub. And Ant baby, make sure you tilt into the bass for this one.

Evening made. Tarheel had incredible control over his *connections*, as though he could send a different message to everyone listening. Regardless, when Tarheel dealt advice Ant always heeded. He made for *Star*, whose transmitter dealt primarily with bass. Ant crossed the lower district, through the residential lanes lined with street kids taking reprieve from the stifling heat of their shoe box flats, and found the redlit alleys of Ropewalk. Cycling through the channels you could hear a thousand dirty ads, spruiking each of your wildest dreams at a reasonable price.

Pleasure Dome at the Rusty Hook, the latest evolution of sensual indulgence brought to you by Sleaze Brothers Productions. Two for one Friday's to get your weekend off to a sultry start.

They could be hard to ignore sometimes. Recent arrivals from Earth stumbled around at all hours, too high to care, greedy eyes wide searching for a mythical door that led to untellable pleasure. The closer Ant got to *Star* the heavier the bass pulsed. It pushed out of the temporal lobe and vibrated up through his skin, as though his body was filled with pressurised sound trying to escape. Walking through *Star's* door opened the valve, bass seeped through his pores and surrounded him, a trance-like state fully realised. *I was wondering when you'd get in.* Cookie's drawl penetrated his mind and fucked up the flow. Ant recalibrated.

'Words please Cookie, I'm riding with Tarheel on this one'.

Cookie laughed. 'The usual?'

'Please and thank you'.

Cookie conjured a shot of Moutai and an ice cold Kirin while Ant lent back on the bar taking in the room. *Star* was a serious shithole that dealt in cheap thrills, appealing to Earth-born blow-ins with their relaxed drug policy and bass heavy transmitter. There were couches near the corner that the wreckheads melted into, racking up exorbitant tabs with a strained nod of the head every time Cookie came around to pick up the empties. Ant turned to the bar and downed the Moutai, easing into a stool across from Cookie. The blue was wearing off now, just as the bass was reaching mania levels. He reached for the baggie in his pocket. *Try without this time.* Cookie eyed Ant. He tried to respond in turn but couldn't lock onto her channel.

‘How long did it take you?’ He asked.

Cookie shrugged. ‘It just *happened* to me. I didn’t really use that much, I guess we were all *connected* growing up here.’

Ant focused on the bottom left of his temporal lobe.

Ay—.. Pha—z -eep— and yo—

All he was getting was mind fuzz.