Dystopia

Fantasy Faction Monthly Writing Contest Anthology, March 2016

Various Authors

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# Dystopia

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dystopia by shadow9020  
  
  
Apocalypse is a rad theme but as you all remember, we had it just recently in January 2013.  
  
This month I want your story set in a dystopian world/society.  
  
Quote from: wikipedia A dystopia [...] is a community or society that is undesirable or frightening. It is translated as "not-good place"[...] [The antonym] "Utopia" is the blueprint for an ideal society with no crime or poverty. n societies appear in many artistic works, particularly in stories set in the future. Some of the most famous examples are 1984 and Brave New World. s are often characterized by dehumanization, totalitarian governments, environmental disaster, or other characteristics associated with a cataclysmic decline in society. n societies appear in many subgenres of fiction and are often used to draw attention to real-world issues regarding society, environment, politics, economics, religion, psychology, ethics, science, and/or technology, which if unaddressed could potentially lead to such a dystopia-like condition.  
Alternatively you can write a story set in an utopian world/society. I believe it is much harder to do so, but if you want that extra challenge, here it is.

*All content originally appeared on the Fantasy Faction Forums in the Monthly Writing Contest. You can see more information (and even participate in the forums!) on this particular contest by visiting the site.*  
<http://fantasy-faction.com/forum/(apr-2016)-the-last-contest/(apr-2016)-the-last-contest-submission-thread/>

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# Stillness, or the apathy of others

## By Henry Dale

**Stillness: The collective apathy towards the world and one another. Soon the end will come, with the last silent man dying and no one cares.**

Bleak sunlight lashes at me as I open my eyes, worn. Crumpled and tear-stained I stumble out of the sofa and make my way towards the fridge.

My hand reaching into that cold hell. They only find half a pack of salmon mousse, dried out and so very cold but my fingers clutch around it in a cramped movement. Despite what happened, my body refuses to die.

I retch at seeing the grey goo but I force down some bites regardless before bending double and crawling towards the bathroom to empty my stomach. The taste of yesterday’s Lon Mei crosses my lips again along with some curses and whimpers.

I make my way to the shower and turn it on, the water too hot but I stopped caring.

The mental pain long outlives the physical one these days.

One by one the drops pound the shower floor in quick succession. For a moment I just sit there to listen, covered in my own filth. I appreciate the wonder of this rare sound for the wealthy have no neighbours to be noisy, I am long forgotten by the world and I don’t care about them. I long to be surrounded by this torrent, block everything out and forget about the world. Forget about her.

I lost her, heart failure said the doctors and nothing I could've done to prevent it. Nothing to prevent the silence to fill my heart, an apathy of living things, a shock till the day I finally wither away myself. My soul dead and body turned to ash in the furnaces of both man and the devil.

My stream of tears joins the shower’s tears. I want to die but I can’t die, stuck in a cramp of indecisiveness. I turn off that shower, wretched device that hides the pain but doesn’t solve it. Drying myself, brushing my hair and teeth. I could almost fool people to appear human once more, but nothing changes that animal pain of my eyes, those lines of anguish in my face that disfigure it as good as any scar could ever do.

I try to recollect more of yesterday. A bottle of wine lies on the table, still full, I don’t drink, but it’s my suicide bottle. When I’ll kill myself – finally, you’d think- I’ll drink that bottle to the bottom. To celebrate the end. Happy end of the world people! I laugh at this thought but the only thing that emerges from my throat is a hoarse sound of terror.

I grab my phone and check the usual websites and chat logs from my childhood, all of them long down. The world turns and you turn along. Or you get crushed like me. The phone deserves to be tossed against the wall, deserves its violent death as I throw it in disdain.

My aim is off and the phone lands in a couch, will live to see another day. I imagine it to be a struggle of titans, David versus Goliath and obviously the phone is winning.

A bell rings twice, tears through my stream of consciousness. *The postman always rings twice.* Usually it’s just trash, commercials and bills, products of an empty system grinding us back to the stardust we once were. And the system is rotten, tarnished by the Stillness, our society’s communal depression. My depression. The world goes on, but in what way? I don’t talk to anyone but myself and hear others do the same.

The mail ends up in the bin along with the rest of my dignity as I drop down in the couch.

The bottle of wine calls out to me, its posh label promising green hills and blue skies. I feel numb as I grab the bottle, uncork it and empty it in my thirsty throat. The alcohol makes my hungry eyes tear. Hungry for justice that no longer exists.

I try to make my way to the balcony in my desire to feel the wind one last time but I slip in a smear of my own vomit. The railing is too close, the fall too deep and I close my eyes to the impending smack on the concrete below.

What I expected comes after an endless time, after the torture of seeing my life again. Loving and losing her again.

It’s a bitter end, like the bottom of my wine bottle that smashes down first. I lie on the concrete staring at the ground as my blood and life drains from me into the sewer. People hurry past me, they don’t see and they don’t care.

Stillness has claimed one more victim who jumped in his despair. Stillness that makes people not care.

*L’enfer c’est les autres.* In both their presence and their absence.

I utter one last word before my end.

Fuck.

# The Hound of Arnas

## By Nora



My ports disengage, returning me to consciousness.

I stay on my back for a while, gaze turned inward, browsing through the nets. While my body warms I review the datafeeds I requested before going to sleep. Soon there is nothing for me to do but roll out of my dingy alcove, one in many in this shabby plug-a-night for cyborgs and droids. No one pays me any mind as I amble through what passes as a lobby and step into the already busy street.

"Please, parts!" A hand grabs my coat. "Any parts you can spare, I beg you, for my child, all his ports are outdated, he can't link, ple–"

The beggar clamps her mouth shut the moment she realises what she is talking to, her dull eyes already hunting for more pliable targets. Smart woman. She will sooner convince an AI to donate parts off its droid body than the likes of me, and she knows it.

Shells don't have parts to give. We're bio-engineered integral cyborgs. Expensive models like mine are even grown with full DNA print. Parts tailored for me in a body as perfect as one can dream. If I chopped my right hand and gave it away, no one else could use it.

However, getting this close to godhood comes with a sixty years binding contract, which is why I'm walking the trash ridden streets of an off-grids slum doing a bloodhound's job. Looking for a human here like a needle in a smelly haystack.

The first two days I spent along the dark sea and the beach–the rocky expense that once held sand, that we still call beach–where workers on long rafts poled their way through the mass of seaweeds they turn into fuel.

I could have been done in half a day, talking to supervisors, or the AIs that regulate our dead ocean's shallows. But unlike its simulations, the sea has a smell and a taste, almost a presence. It fascinated me, so I took my time.

Today I walk away from the shore. I've decided to talk to locals or else I'll be here until I catch the carbon plague.

My legs take me past triage factories, down streets smelling of rancid grease, where mechanics bend over patrons' cybernetic limbs, bartering their services, weaving through cables like jungle creepers, children running past yelling the names of parts they sell; ports, encrypted 9G cards, 5D sticks, or accessory mods.

Soon the street dissolves in a wider field. I scramble partway up a metal gangway that wraps around a building to the roofs. From there I can see, sprawled at my feet, the buzzing activity of the Mud-Market.

Cyborg modders with four arms selling flatbreads faster than they can turn them. People sitting on crates half sunk in the eponymous mud, tearing at steamed bug-buns, furiously betting on some game only them can see. Others haggling over second-hand garments and scraps of food. Even a few ADroids weave through the crowds, projecting bright holos and loud slogans.

I sigh and sit heavily, my legs dangling over the tin roof of a partmonger. This wreathing mass of bodies discourages me, somehow.

Resting my back to the wall, I turn inwards to log into official networks. I find a few agents in the area, and summon the closest, Agt. Edenton, an ID officer.

Before long, three kids come running out of the market, out of breath with laugher. I look down. One of them, a little blond fellow, doesn't register to my eyes. Unchipped. Or, more likely, never chipped: someone's illegal brood. Another has a cybernetic arm made of scraps. Both wave at the third, a black haired runt not possibly past seven, who leaves them to enter the street. The gangway quivers under me, heralding the kid's approach.

He sits not far, flashes his credentials–this is indeed Edenton– and opens a private channel for us to discuss away from prying eyes or ears, for all the world just two strangers enjoying the view before them.

*'What's a pricey Shell like you doin' here?'*

I stifle a laugh. The voice that popped in my head is a deep man's bass, completely out of place coming from the scrawny boy. Edenton gives me a withering look, and I sober up as I realise what an ID officer's job would be, shelled as a kid. Hunt unchipped children like the one I'd seen, gain their trust, follow them home, have it tagged, maybe chip them himself. The kind of job you got because someone thought you deserved it...

I poke his arm, surprised to find him made out of regular flesh.

*'Is this a BioShell? Aren't those pretty rare and pricey as well? Incubation is hard to do.'*

Edenton's frail shoulders shrug. *'They make kids like me easily, they don't try for perfection. The body decays after a year, so we swap regularly. It's just a pain to be in a tube for two months while a new body grows around you.'*

I'd shiver, if my body could.

To answer Edenton's own question, I display my working seals and credentials, and watch his eyes widen. A military Shell in the direct employ of Arnas CEO, wielding seals that give her unlimited power is a scary sight, I'm sure.

*'This is Halena Tesselandottir,'* I say, flashing pictures of a young woman. *'Used to live in the grids, legal as you please and pretty bigwigged. Took her chip off, came to those slums.'* I wave my hand, letting Edenton imagine the sort of drama that could push someone to such extremes.

*'Back then she was a modder.'* Lists of parts and softwares join the pictures. *'Augmentations, but no cybernetic replacements. I'm pretty sure she downgraded, since many mods are trackable. She was spotted in this slum, so I was sent to find her. I'd like some help.'*

An order dressed as a request that Edenton accepts with good graces. In no time he comes up with a cunning plan that won't damage his cover, and I mentally pat myself on the back for involving him.

We weave our way through narrow streets, continuing our secret dialogue.

I learn that Edenton has been undercover in this slum for four years, and soon guess that he got there by asking too many questions. He's fourty-two, single, grumpy.

We spend some time polishing our plot in a back alley. We'll need our public feeds to display some action to look credible.

Finally ready, I step into a wider street, Edenton's weightless body cradled in my arms, and stumble towards an older woman, busy smoking in front of a brothel. Edenton's notion being that such Madams know everything, and everyone.

"Seima," I call, picking her name from her public feed, "this kid just crashed into me. He banged his head hard..."

Seima rushes up to us with a face like Edenton is her own grandchild. She looks at me with narrowed eyes. Can't blame her for mistrusting a Shell in a muddy coat, but my public feed has a record of the entire "incident" we orchestrated, and Edenton moans, the voice passing his lips a mewling so pitiful that I stare as well. His feed flashes with one of the pictures of Halena I gave him.

"He's been showing that image the whole time, could it be his mother? If you know her, maybe I could leave him to you..."

It's the magical words. Trying to shirk my responsibilities, am I? She'll find the boy's mom in no time, she swears, and furiously propagates Halena's picture through her personal network.

Finding where Halena (or Hena, as she now goes by) works is a matter of minutes. The hardest part of the job is to pry Madam Seima off Edenton.

Out of sight I put him back on his legs, and we hurry to intercept Halena before someone warns her that we've been asking after her.

It's almost too easy.

She's exactly where we were told.

Unchipped, so nearly impossible to track, she was betrayed by the simplest of human drives, everyone's inherent need to network and socialise.

Edenton's bass vibrates in my skull. *'What are you gonna do?'*

He follows me over crumbled walls and up stairwells that lead us to a rooftop. Lying down, we can spy on Halena and her companions, sorting garbage, probably paid by the amount of recyclable they can sift.

I scan her face, still young, but scarred by the mods she took off her temples and neck, as I'd guessed.

I extend my arm, fingers splayed, lock, breathe out, and fire.

My shoulder joint shifts, swallows the recoil. People scream, run to cover. Edenton jumps, grabs me with his little hands. In the street her blood flows, joining the streams of dark fluids down the gutter. Half her head is gone.

"Why," Edenton cries. "What did she do to deserve that?!"

"I never asked," I reply, "and neither should you."

# Everything in Frame

## By tebakutis

As the two clean-suited enforcers marched me through from the exit pod into the magnificent bright, I considered my inevitable death. I'd never seen the sun before — none of us had, other than in videos the director showed on weekends — and I had never seen anything so bright or beautiful. I couldn't even look at it, not directly, and I longed to feel its heat on my skin. Assuming Gurney was right.

Stalks of grass greener than any green I'd ever seen swayed in the gentle wind, rising to my thighs. They brushed against the legs of my clean-suit as they brushed the round, rusted domes of the exit pod. That pod and the long elevator shaft inside it was the only link between Sanctuary Twelve and the surface world.

I took a long look at the world the Overseer had assured me would kill me, the world his oldest and most trusted servant, Gurney Maynard, had assured me would not. I had to act shocked, because this world did not match the dead plains the Overseer showed us so often below. I felt one enforcer push his staff into the small of my back.

"Move," the enforcer said.

"Or what?" The head part of my clean-suit wouldn't turn to look back at him, but I didn't need to look back to express my disdain. "You'll execute me twice?

A holo screen flashed in front of me. It was a recording of my son, now thirteen and wiry, as he worked beside the others dredging energy fragments out of the deep shafts. The enforcer made it disappear.

The threat was obvious, and I walked without another push from the enforcer's staff. I'd already taken steps to ensure the Overseer could never punish Matty for what I was about to do, but I couldn't let him know that. I had to act like another outspoken problem marching to my inevitable comeuppance.

The outside world was poison without a suit — the sun, the grass, the air — and questioning that was the only way one escaped the drudgery of the crystal mines. We were safe in the mines, the Overseer assured us. We lived by his grace, his generosity. Everyone outside Sanctuary Twelve was doomed.

Soon the enforcers marched me to a clearing, a down swept field of brown stalks crushed beneath dozens of robotic feet, likely less than a day ago. After they poisoned the grass. That streak of death sat in stark contrast to the simple beauty around us. It was a naked, pus-filled scar on a glistening grass plain, but that was the advantage of a narrow camera lens. You could focus on so little and block out so much.

The Overseer had constructed a fake exit pod at the top of the descending plain of dead grass, and I recognized that pod and the dead field from the videos I had seen of the others who dared question the Overseer. People who insisted the world above was alive and safe, like me. Murdered people.

The enforcers would force me inside that dome and strip me of my clean-suit, with dire warnings of what would happen if I went outside. When they were ready for me to make my entrance, they would pump the pod full of something noxious – tear gas? Toxic fumes? – until my heaving gut and shriveled lungs forced me to stumble out of the front door, into the camera frame.

Then I would die. Then my fellow miners would watch as I shrieked, and burst into flame, and melted. They would watch my seared bones pop, my body brutalized by the poisonous world above.

"The outside world is death," the Overseer would repeat, as those below averted their faces from my melting body. "The claims of Worker 542 are as false as all those before them. Only I protect you."

They marched me inside the dome, just like Gurney had said they would, and they stripped off my clean-suit, just like Gurney had said they would. All I wore now was my light gray mining jumpsuit, and the air inside the rusting pod was stagnant. I longed to feel the sun on my skin, a cool breeze on my face.

The sun wouldn't melt my skin, and the grass wouldn't melt my jumpsuit, and breathing this wonderful air would not shrink and ruin my lungs. Those horrors would instead be caused by the weapons of the Overseer, hidden out of frame. Microwaves. Heat rays. Infrared. I did not know what those words meant, what Gurney had envisioned when he said them, but I knew they offered invisible death.

I waited until the Overseer's voice echoed through the rusty pod. His voice was pumped up to the surface so the enforcers could hear it, so they could pump in the gas at the proper time. The Overseer was speaking, now, which meant the feed was "live", as Gurney had called it. Time for me to die.

I burst out of the front of the rusting pod.

That was the difference between me and the other victims, you see — Gurney's betrayal of the Overseer, the clarity provided by a cancer no Overseer medicine could cure, and the death of the Overseer's leverage. Gurney's daughter. Those events conspired to make my death different.

The enforcers had done this a dozen times before. Place the victim in the rusting pod, set up the weapons and the camera, check the camera angle, and then, and only then, pump in the gas. All happened only after the Overseer set the stage, said a few haunting words for this poor deluded fool.

No miner raised as I'd been would voluntarily burst from their safe haven, but I had, before anyone planning to murder me was ready. The outside world felt wonderful. For the first time I felt the gentle heat of the sun on my skin, a cool breeze rushing over my cheeks. Nothing melted. Nothing burned.

That was the other thing victims of the Overseer couldn't do — run — because when your lungs were full of tear gas you made a very slow, very easy target. I was no easy target. I zigzagged down that field of dead grass toward the small, round ball sitting at its end. Toward what I knew was the camera.

I saw the now panicked overseers struggling to set their weapons up, to bring them to bear — they were mounted, I saw now, on complicated tripods which were still being arranged — and for a moment, I pondered grabbing a weapon. Yet I was not here to kill anyone, and any overseer was easily replaced. I reached the round black dome as the first overseer grounded his tripod and readied his weapon.

"Look at me!" I shouted into the camera. "I'm alive! The world above isn't killing me! They are!"

I struggled to rip the camera from its mount, but it remained stuck tight. I heard a loud hum and then I felt heat that seared my skin and bubbled my eyeballs. The air was so hot I couldn't even scream, yet I didn't die — not immediately — and my rage gave me the strength to turn the lens, not up and out of the ground, as I planned, but sideways. Toward the green fields and the enforcers with their weapons.

Even as invisible death set my skin afire I heard the Overseer shouting over the speakers, not to his enforcers, but to those below. His desperate explanations fell on deaf ears. Gurney had whispered to those below as well, and all they needed to start their riot was proof. My death was that proof.

The boiling heat ended at last, perhaps because the enforcer knew better than to waste power, or perhaps because he heard the masses rioting below and knew that running was better than facing those he'd help imprison. None of it made any difference to me. I drank in the feel of that cool breeze.

I wished I could see the sun and touch the grass, stroke my son's face one last time, but I was too busy dying. Had I succeeded? Gurney's crackly voice echoed over the Overseer's intercom

"We did it!" Gurney shouted, as my people cheered. "You gave us the truth! You gave us the whole world! We're free now, all of us!" The cacophony faded as Gurney faded, as he called for silence.

"Thank you," he said, voice trembling over the speakers. "We're coming up. We'll see you soon."

They wouldn't. No one would reach me in time to save me, but I didn't mind. Matty would grow up breathing this clean air, living beneath this warm sun, sleeping in this soft grass. After decades of slavery, it seemed absurd that our freedom required nothing more than a camera, twisted sideways, but that was the beauty of it.

All it took to free us was one traitor. One sacrifice. And one perfect camera angle, everything in frame.

# Border Crossing

## By Jmack

PFC Charles Walker's final mission was a total fuck-up. Going house-to-house in Raleigh, North Carolina, his squad got separated from the rest of the platoon. Sergeant Morales took a bullet, which left Charles next in rank. They ran, got lost, hid from drones, ran some more. He hardly knew how they got back over the lines.

His only thought when they stuck a shiny medal on him was how he'd left Morales’s body behind. The sergeant always said "family takes care of family", and in the weird world of war, that was your squad.

Then someone nuked Chicago, and the Second American Civil War was over.

Charles waited to hear about the sides exchanging their dead, but months went by. The squad said somebody had to get the Sarge, but they were all missing some body part or other. It was just that they knew Charles was going no matter what.

The important thing when going rogue was to swap out your brain chip. You hired a head-hack to pull out the old one and put in a counterfeit, praying he didn't nick an artery or puncture your spinal cord in the process. And if you were hunting someone else's chip--like some dead sergeant's--you needed a tracker box. The squad pooled their savings and still they had to go to the local loan shark to fund the mission.

It only took Charles a few hours to pack his gear, buy a ghost phone, and hitch down to the border. It took three days of waiting in lines, bribing everyone in sight, and praying the head-hack was as good as he claimed, until the guards passed Charles through the gates - just a local guy heading home.

He hailed an Uber taxi. The driver, tall enough that his head scraped the little car’s roof, was a nice enough guy. But he was smart, too. Didn't believe the chip for a minute and called Charles "Yank" right off the bat.

Charles got out at the nearest hotel, then ducked into a Wal-Mart for a gun. He planned to find the sergeant the next day.

It all turned to shit that night.

A voice over the hotel phones ordered all guests to assemble in the lobby. Charles didn't like it. He grabbed his gear and evac'd down the fire escape. The street was a mess. Cops were forcing people to line up at barricades to be scanned. Charles hung back, listening in on conversations until he pieced together that the Southern government was doing a universal chip reset of its citizens.

"We need to know who's really one of us, don't we?" said a Southern belle who didn't mind at all talking to the handsome black man. "Were you in the Grand Army?"

“Yes, Miss,” Charles lied. He made an excuse and drifted away. People were shouting across the square. Police pulled an old man out of line and threw him into a van.

Charles needed to move up his timetable, but first he needed a way out of the city. He thought about stealing a car, but that wouldn’t get him past roadblocks. His phone showed an Uber nearby.

"Yo, Yank!" said the driver as he pulled up.

Charles snorted. Same tiny car; same too tall guy. “I need--”

"Sorry, friend, but your fake-as-shit chip won’t scan tonight, which means the cops aren’t letting you through."

Charles slid into the passenger seat.

"Whoa, hold on --" the driver protested.

"LeRoy, right?"

"It’s Roy. But look - "

"Listen, Roy, I need a favor."

The men stared at each other for a long moment before Roy shrugged and said, "Shit." He pulled out a flat metal box which he plugged into a socket under the dash. "I’ll run your chip on this." Roy explained. "It's a John Doe box. All the best Uber drivers have one. You know, when Mr. Senator This or Miss Socialite That wants to party and no one wants any records left." He pressed a button, and the dashboard displayed a randomized name. “You know, I usually charge a lot for this kind of favor.”

“I can pay,” said Charles.

“Not tonight,” said Roy. “I don’t like the feel of things tonight.”

They lined up at a roadblock and waited. When it was their turn, a baby-faced cop pointed a flashlight inside to check the number of passengers, read the fake id off the Uber system, and waved them through. Charles sighed, and took his hand off the gun inside his coat.

The little car accelerated. “Where to? The best place for you is back at the border.”

Morales had been killed about ten miles southeast. Charles gave the name of the place. Roy sighed. “You’re just one problem after another, aren’t you? That poor town was shredded.”

The short drive took hours, what with cratered roads and bombed out buildings. Roy kept up a monologue about his customers, covering his nerves. "Passengers are like family, right? You don’t get to choose; you just have to do your best by them."

When they got to the spot, Charles fired up the chip tracker.

“You need to tell me what’s going on, Yank,” said Roy.

“My squad,” Charles began, then cleared his throat. “My squad got into a hell of a firefight over by that gas station. Lost our sergeant.” The tracker beeped. “Morales.”

Roy frowned. “Put your tech away, Yank. I’ll take you where all the bodies are.”

He drove them to a cornfield. “In there,” he said.

Charles pushed through the dry, skeletal stalks, Roy following behind, until they broke through to a clearing the size of a football field, covered over with fresh concrete.

"What's this?" said Charles.

"Mass grave," said Roy, softly.

Charles’s head pounded. His breath came ragged. He rounded on the Southerner. "You couldn't treat them with respect? You tear the whole country apart, the least you can do is have some respect for the dead!"

Roy's face grew red. "Who're you yelling at? We just wanted to be freed to do things our own way. What's wrong with that?"

They were in each others' faces, fists balled. “They treating our people any better up North?” demanded Roy. Charles didn’t know. He’d never thought about it.

A rooster crowed. They looked away from each other and out to the clearing. “Maybe your sergeant is near the edge,” said Roy.

Morales wasn't. Her chip pinged thirty yards in. Failure clamped Charles’ heart. He might have sat there forever if Roy hadn’t said they should get moving.

Charles reached into his pocket and pulled out his medal. It shone in the daybreak as he placed it on the concrete above the sergeant’s grave. It was all he could do for her.

They drove north. Two miles shy of the border they heard a drone and pulled under some trees. Roy scrolled through the news on his phone. "They've closed all the crossings." He sat and thought. "Look, Lake Gaston gets narrow near the Route 1 bridge. It’s an easy swim. You can swim?"

A red light flashed on the car dashboard. "That's a call-back,” said Roy. “All cars back to their registered address."

“Let me out here,” said Charles. “Roy, they can track you by satellite, by cell tower.”

Roy stared out the windshield. "Yeah, well, no one said I can’t take a quick detour on the way back."

The highways weren't safe, but Roy knew the unmapped dirt roads. Ten minutes later, the lake appeared over a rise. They stopped, got out, and gazed at what was left of the United States beyond it.

"Home of the brave," said Roy. A low buzzing came from the sky to the south, followed by the drone. "You better go.”

Charles handed him his gun. "You might need this."

"Against you guys?" asked Roy.

"Or your own," said Charles. "Fuck if I know." They shook hands. "Take care of yourself."

Charles headed to the lake. Glancing back, he saw Roy fold himself into the little car. He walked fast into the cold water.

The drone passed over, banked around in the distance, and started back. He swam. The buzzing passed to his right. A huge blast hammered his ears and shook the water. He glanced back to see pieces of metal flying and smoke pouring from the car. Roy was running away from it.

"Don't make me come back for you," Charles thought, swimming harder.

The drone circled, coming back his way. Christ, Charles prayed and swam on. The buzz grew louder; it was almost on him.

Gunshots rang out from the shore and the drone veered off. Charles stopped and treaded water. Roy stood at the water's edge, firing into the air and waving his arms.

"Dammit, Roy," shouted Charles. "Don't make me come get you!" The drone zoomed across the lake, and Roy fell, then struggled to rise.

The north bank was so close. Charles turned, and swam back south.

# Axe of Salvation, Blood of Honor

## By m3mnoch



The line, formed from gray, shambling humanity, stretched down the cobbled street. The Midday Offertory Prayer typically finished within an hour, but was running long. Worse, it felt like the sun had already baked the inhabitants of Refuge after the first fifteen minutes waiting their turn outside the church. Sweat salted the donation marks on their throats, making the ritual even more delicious for the Vampires of Faith.

Unlike the others gathered, Edmund and Rose were not donating today.

"Edmund, I feel dizzy." Rose, knuckles to her forehead, staggered. "This heat is unbearable."

"Let's get you some water, dear." Edmund guided her out of line, through the gate, and over to the well in the cathedral courtyard.

Rose sat in the shade and fanned herself while he brought over a small cup of water. The couple waited until the crowd had completely turned over before exiting the opposite side, following the lethargic people fresh from their blood donation.

This was the fourth day in a row they'd avoided the Offertory. The two felt hearty, healthy, and warm as their strength built.

Strength enough to ascend the outer wall. They would make the climb and see Ruin for themselves.

The teachings of the Vampires of Faith claim two centuries ago a devastating battle was waged beyond the wall. Through great sacrifice, the vampires saved humanity from Ruin and oversaw the building of Refuge -- the last stronghold of mankind.

Refuge was enormous, containing the farm district and livestock pens where most everyone labored, small homes, the Church of Faith, everything. Surrounded by a ten meter wall holding Ruin at bay.

Edmund and Rose shambled down the street leading to their shanty, careful to appear as weak and drained as the others. Tonight, they would be free of this prison.

They would prove the rumors true.



Rose stood at the corner, peering around the hovel, as she searched for anyone that might interrupt them. They'd found two abandoned homes tucked back in the outer neighborhood, backing up against the wall, and providing cover from nighttime passersby.

*CLANG!*

That had been his third throw. He should have worked the iron into more than a single hook.

"How much longer?" Rose whispered from her corner.

"As long as it takes to get over." Edmund threw his hook again.

They both watched as it arced over the wall but, after a tug, flipped up and fell back to crash onto the roof of the left shack.

Rose shook her head at him and, turning back to watch the street, hissed, "There's a Grey coming."

Greys were zealots. Handpicked for their idolatry and tasked with maintaining order in Refuge among places the Vampires didn't travel. According to rumor, they even donated twice daily.

"Oy! What do you think you're doing?" The *SCHLIK* of a sword clearing its scabbard echoed through the silent streets. The only Refuge residents allowed access to weapons were Greys.

Edmund hesitated.

"Run!" Rose screamed.

Jolted to action, he grabbed Rose's hand and sprinted out of the alley before they were trapped.

"Hey! Stop!"

Muscles pumping with blood-fueled strength, the couple streaked down the street. The wind slashed through their hair as they angled around the block to leave the Grey streets away. The speed and power Edmund now possessed was exhilarating. Inhuman.

The smile on Rose's face told him she felt it too. They sprinted on.

Rounding another corner, they found themselves again at the well in the main cathedral's courtyard. He'd been so caught up with his vitality, his legs had automatically run the well-worn path to the Offertory Gate.

They stopped to rest. To think. An alarm bell rang in the distance. Any moment, half a dozen Grey patrols would stomp through the gate.

"What are we going to do?" Rose, eyes wide and scanning, spun to face Edmund.

He froze. He didn't know what to do.

Edmund had planned everything out. Thought he was ready. Yet there he stood, paralyzed, and staring at Rose. His escape plans, his bravery, and his confidence drained out his feet and seeped into the clay-packed dirt.

Rose growled at him. "You *always* do this." She grabbed Edmund by the arm and dragged him to the well. "I've got a stupid idea. Get in."

Taking the bucket rope from Rose, he locked eyes with her. "I'm sorry."

"Hush. Just get in."

The two climbed into the well and struggled down the rope as Greys stormed the courtyard above.

Five meters below the stone lip, a small tunnel opened into the well. Examining the outward slant of the opening, Edmund assumed it was some sort of runoff conduit in case the well overflowed. It became their escape plan.

"In here." He pointed to the hole. "We can wait for the Greys to give up. We'll even be home by dawn."

Pushing off the opposite wall, Edmund flopped into the tunnel. With the slope steeper and the limestone slicker than anticipated, he slid, uncontrolled, for a terrifying handful of seconds before finally firing out into emptiness.

He fell, arms flailing.

Three meters of open space and he splashed into a dark lake filling a large, low-lit cavern. Edmund kicked with his legs, pulled hard, and burst the surface.

The basin was enormous, entirely filled by the lake except for a ledge that ran along the far side, 120 meters away. A trickling drip somewhere in the darkness had been distracting him when he noticed the coppery taste of the thick, brackish water. Edmund realized it wasn't water.

It was years of blood.



Edmund had climbed the ladder's metal rungs until he could see into the hole in the cavern ceiling. Rose trailed close behind him.

After splashing into the lake of blood, they'd swum, buoyant in the dark, dense liquid, and finally pulled themselves up on the distant ledge. They had found the iron ladder, running up into the black above and had started climbing.

At the top of the ladder, drenched and dripping with blood, Edmund toiled up through the opening.

He entered a dusty room, dark aside from a sputtering torch in a sconce. Edmund bent and grabbed Rose's blood-slick hand, helping her up into the room. They stood, soaked and anchored with dread.

"Where are we?" Rose asked.

"I *think* we're below the cathedral." Edmund worked the torch from its holder. "I've seen wall sconces like this during prayers."

Flashing the weak light about the little room, they spied a door. "Let's get out of here."

Opening it, Edmund peeked around the corner. The passageway was formed from large-cut stone blocks with two other small, oak doors. It swept to a main set of brass doors at the other end of the corridor.

"This way." Gripping her hand, their steps echoed down the hall.

Edmund gently pushed through the double doors, entering into a large sacristy. Desks, containers, and artifacts filled out the space while maps and tapestries, worn and depicting Ruin, hung on the walls.

A pale, corpulent figure in a desk chair flung around at their arrival, rising from his seat.

"Who are you? What are you doing here?"

It was a Vampire of Faith.

The monster lurched at a paralyzed, wide-eyed Edmund. Instinctively, he lashed out with his torch, catching the vampire across the jaw. The two tumbled into a pile on the thick carpet.

Edmund rolled the fat beast to the side and crawled out from under its still form.

"What happened?" Rose covered her mouth with a hand. "That's a vampire!"

"I don't know." Leaning over, he pushed back the lips to reveal two long, sharp incisors. "It has fangs. It must be a vampire."

"How. . . Is it actually dead?" Rose turned about the room, as if searching for some other reason.

Edmund leaned in closer to examine the teeth. They looked *strange*. He grasped and snapped off a piece of sharpened ivory exposing a standard tooth beneath. The fang was fake.

"Look at this! He's got fake teeth. He's just a man." Edmund stood, displaying the ivory bit to Rose.

"Wait until you see this." She ripped down a broad parchment tacked to the wall. "Look at this map. Edmund, we're not the only city left."

She was right. There were multiple cities marked on the map, some within a few kilometers. All named and numbered Sanctuary 63, Haven 64, Solace 66. They, apparently, were Refuge 65.

Rose glanced at the dead "vampire". "What are we going to do?"

Edmund walked over to the large plaque for safeguarding the *Steel Axe of Salvation* used in the yearly ceremony. He lifted it off the hooks and tested the weight.

Rage finally bubbled up. No more hesitation. No more paralysis. He knew exactly what they were going to do.

Turning, Edmund faced Rose, axe on his shoulder, and snarled, "We're freeing our people."

He stalked to the inner door, the blood from the lake swim now a sticky brown, and kicked it open.

# Romeo is Bleeding

## By Mr.J

The Gang has turned on itself. We are lost now. We are done before it has started. Romeo is bleeding and we don’t know what to do.

I can taste the blood of my Gang on my lips, it is sticky and metallic, bitter. In the melee I crawled on my knees from the body of Romeo, his once glowing skin tarnished by a cold callous blade. The knife of a jealous, green eyed boy called Rose. Romeo had been the best of us, Romeo is why we were all here; Romeo kept us breathing.

But what can he be now?

A dying, stained red boy of sandy hair and a quivering hard jaw seething with rage and sweat and panic. We all felt it as one, the catch of pained breath, the bursting heat rising in his chest as the knife slid inside his golden skin; sliding between bone and blood slowly, trapped with the horror of fading life from our Romeo, fair Romeo.

I have made my way to what we call the streets, the wooden gangways hooked onto ropes to join the high rises

standing tall, surrounded by a churning sea. Blue Tower is closest; they would not kill me at first sight there. The boards creek beneath my bare footsteps, the metal scaffolding surrounding me whistling with the wind. It was taunting me, the world singing its own playful tune as Romeo lay bleeding in our House.

I grip the metal bars that are icy in my hands; I am scared if I let go it’ll claim the skin of my palms for itself with bitter teeth, tearing my flesh to satiate its hunger. I shut my eyes tight and let the streams of tears and sweat trickle down my cheeks, let the wind freeze the liquid onto my pale flesh. I think of what I am leaving, the House and Romeo, bleeding at its centre as the Gang tear each other apart in grief.

The House, the entire top floor of a concrete juggernaut nestled proudly at its height among the other man-made trees ascending to the smoky skies. The rooms and walls shattered by our dusty, crooked hands with hammers and saws; the bricks discarded from the roof of the building. It kept us all safe, free from the smog. The Other Gangs haunting the towers at every hour.

We covered the House with our findings, decorated each window with a mosaic of torn curtains and cloth - sheets flapping and bulging in the wind where the glass had dissolved to the acid storms. We built Romeo his own quarters, the largest space to himself. It was stuffy and smelt of sweat and greasy skin. But Romeo made you breathe, let you feel wonder as he drew you inside through the hanging red curtains across the entrance and into the bowels of his domain.

Romeo walked on thick carpets and furs, his bare feet unable to touch cold ground like ours in the old worn floors of the House. He would take your hand lightly with a spare manicured finger, painted brightly with red or gold, smile warmly. Romeo had led me through once, removed the little amount of clothing he possessed, a tight pair of dark blue shorts and yellow sandals, shining coral eyes telling you to do the same.

Romeo would stride among the House like this, the ideal of beauty; soft gold skin and perfect muscles – would pout his red lips and raise his chin slightly to the air, smiling and nodding at his Gang kneeling and bowing at his feet. A few would kiss him there desperately, he begged them to rise with a silent hand, fingers lifting them up by the chin with a powerful ease. The boys and girls would grin and stutter and mumble nervously as they hopped on their blackened toes, desperate to radiate in his presence, enjoying the glow of his fame and wonder.

Romeo would select those to join him in his living with a colourful smile, your skin prickling with anticipation. I was led into the very corner where he slept, thick bulging mattresses piled three levels high draped in slick velvet and linen sheets. There would be others already chosen by Romeo in his bed, making love tentatively and nervously until he returned. I joined them all and we wrapped ourselves in him, three boys and a girl bowed to serving his pleasure. It was the first time in our short lives we had been entirely happy.

I hoped the memories of the House would spur me, bring the warm feelings to the surface and surge into the tips of my body to drive forward. The poles complained at my weight as I shuffled forward along the plank, faint splinters of wood sticking to the thin soles of my feet, smeared with dirt and blood. Though there was nothing but a spiralling dark below I could hear the seas roaring in my head, willing me to fall into their cascading arms.

The seas carpet our world; a frothing grey ocean of scum flecked waters licking the surface of the jungle of buildings. The towers would come crumbling one day, claimed by the Ocean for the final time and sink below with the rest into the underworld. Even the House would go someday, Romeo had warned, before sliding a smooth finger across worried lips tenderly. We felt better when he touched us, acknowledged our existence; spoke to you like a real person. He was real too, but better. We all knew it.

It was the right thing to do, to leave. I could not stay and be torn and bitten by desperate teeth; sliced by rusting blades and sharpened wires digging into eyeballs. We should have seen it coming, Rose wanted it too much. Others had before but had it beaten out of them. They wanted Romeo. Badly. Rose could have been Romeo himself in a lesser House, in a world where Romeo did not exist. Rose had demanded more without knowing what Rose wanted. Rose needed to be Romeo as much as Rose wanted to be near him, to be exclusive in his living quarters and pleasure only him.

It had been too much; Romeo’s Gang could not hold Rose. And now Romeo was bleeding, sliced with a moulded hook of wire and rust. The House bled with him.

I sink to my knees as a crash of metal echoes around me, the ropes swinging the boards at my feet with the wind like a cruel and horrible dance. A loud scream and shattering thunder clap reveals a girl called V, collapsing against the gangway. She falls into the grasp of the poles and the tangled hold of the ropes, screaming and spluttering blood from her mouth.

“Romeo is Bleeding!” she says in a tearful cry, teeth slick with blood, the skin on her arms shredded by blades and bite marks. V glares at me with red stained eyes, pupils clouding dark and watery.

“Romeo is Bleeding” she yells, as the ropes straining against the poles give way to her weight, sagging and letting her go. She falls, slowly. Her cry echoing in the wind as it pulls her body down through the air.

The gangway slips under my feet like the arm of a clock face, drifting out into the open and hovering above the waters, offering me to the hungry waves and starving skies. I cry and leap to my feet, hauling myself along the boards as they bend and shatter beneath me. The air chases me as I run. It is swallowing the world behind me, nipping at the blood on my heels. It licks the naked skin on my back as I feel the solid wood disappear. I am running on nothing but air, my throat gasping and heart sliding up my throat for a bloody escape.

I crash through a metal door of the Blue Tower, hooking my arm around the handle and swinging inside its hollow walls. My nose cracks against concrete ground as I hear the angry wind swallow the world behind me, metal and wood dissolving into the seas and darkness. The House is gone. I have left Romeo bleeding; I cannot go back. I weep at my pain and my loss into the cold floor. Blood pouring down my lips and chin.

Heavy boots click behind me, a gun pressing itself into the side of my face. I glance up to the owner; a young girl with buzzed red hair and a metal spike through the nose, naked but for a leather jacket slung around her body, combat shorts bulging with weapons.

The barrel of the gun slips into my bleeding mouth. Tasting the cold metal of the weapon as it clicks against delicate teeth. I roll to face her and hold up my hands.

“You will kneel” she tells me, and I do.

I radiate in her presence.

I feel safe again.

# Saviour from the Past! (Kinda)

## By Rukaio\_Alter

In hindsight, Aria *really* shouldn’t have pushed that button.

The young woman had been weeding one of the fields on her tiny farmland when, suddenly, she felt her rake run across something metallic half-buried in the soil. It took her a bit of digging around to discover that what she had initially thought was a small piece of litter, was in fact a human-sized pod buried beneath the earth.

Aria considered simply leaving the pod there and calling someone to pick it up. However, she also happened to spy a large red button on the side. And Aria, as sensible as she liked to believe she was, was a sucker for a large red button. So she pressed it.

“STAND BACK, UNKNOWN LIFEFORM, OR FACE INCINERATION!” The pod suddenly blared. Steam hissed from the pod-door as it began to open. “REVIVING SUBJECT FROM STASIS!”

Aria could only watch in terror as a humanoid lifeform in a bulky spacesuit slowly stepped out.

“Do not be afraid.” It said in a calm, male voice. “I have come to help.”

That was when Aria hit it with the rake.

“Ow!” The thing wailed as it fell to the ground, facescreen cracked. “The hell was that for, lady? I said I came in peace!”

“You expect me to believe that?” Aria said, clutching her weapon. “Your pod threatened to incinerate me!”

“What?” The man (?) turned towards the pod from which he had emerged. “Why would you say that, FT028? This is supposed to be a peaceful mission! You’re not even armed!”

“I THOUGHT IT MIGHT ADD DRAMATIC FLAIR.” The pod blared again. “ALSO I PANICKED.”

“Oh. Well, in that case, I apologise for my AI.” The man said. “I suppose your reaction was understandable considering the dystopia you live in.” Before Aria could ask him what he meant by that, he gave a sharp, military salute. “Let’s start introductions again. My name is Major Michael Harper of Project Restoration. And you are?”

“Aria.” Aria gave him a suspicious look. “You alien?” She paused. “Not that there’s anything wrong with that.”

“Eheh. I’m afraid not.” Harper said. “Although I can understand why you might think that way. No, in fact, I am a human, like you, but from the *diiiiistant paaaast!!*” He said while twiddling his fingers in what he seemed to think was a dramatic way.

“…Is that so?” Aria said.

Harper paused. He put down his hands. “You seem unimpressed.”

“What? Oh, no I’m very impressed.” Aria lied. “So what are you doing here from the *diiiistant paaaast?*”

“Well, I’m-“ Harper paused mid-sentence. “Are you making fun of me?”

“A little.”

“Hmph. Well, I guess I can’t hold that against you.” Harper sighed. “You’ve probably had a very hard life, what with the rape gangs, plague and oppression.” Before Aria could emphatically deny this, Harper threw up his hands dramatically. “But fear not! All will change now that I’m here! I have come from the past, to save the future!”

Aria blinked. “Save it from what?”

“Simple.” Harper said. “FT028, please prepare the story of Project Restoration.”

“AFFIRMATIVE.” The pod beeped. “BUMBADUMBUMBUMBUMBUMBADUMBUMBUM-“

“Um…” Aria slowly backed away from the pod. “What’s it doing?”

“Merely laying down an appropriately dramatic background score for my explanation.” Harper said. “There wasn’t room in the databanks for a recorded song, so FT028 provides its own.”

“If it doesn’t stop now, I’m going to hit it with the rake.”

“…FT028, maybe tone the music down a little.”

“AW. BUT I NEVER GET TO LAY DOWN MY FUNKY-FRESH BEATS.”

Aria blinked. “Funky-fresh? You really are from the distant past...”

“Anyway…” Harper continued. “Project Restoration was started in the 2200’s. Humanity was at its peak technologically and socially. However, we felt a duty to later generations who would feel civilization's inevitable collapse into dystopia. As such, several of the best men and women of the age were placed in stasis pods and hidden away to survive into the future. Upon awakening, they would then rebuilt humanity from the ashes with their superior technological and sociological skills! And thus…” Harper threw his hands up dramatically as FT028 began to ‘play’ dramatic music. “I am here to save you all!”

Aria took all this in silently. Then she spoke.

“Um... I don't think the future really needs saving. We’re basically fine.”

“Fine?” Harper chuckled. “How naïve. Maybe from your point of view, you’re fine, but I can tell otherwise just from this farmland. According to our records, 500 years ago, this land was a city. Obviously the entire place was flattened in some sort of nuclear blast/alien war/demon invasion and nature has only just started to recover.”

“Oh no, actually, all of this is just cultivated.” Aria corrected. “Part of our attempts to foster Earth’s ecosystem after we moved all our cities onto orbiting satellite spaceships.”

Harper blinked. “Really? Um… Are you sure there wasn’t a nuclear war?”

“Yeah.”

“Not even a little one?”

“Nope.”

“Maybe a nuclear skirmish?”

“I think I’d have heard about it.”

“Well, what about your leaders?” Harper asked. “I bet, by now, you’re entering the 100th year of the reign of your genocidal cyborg dictator, HitlerStalinTron 3000 or something, right?”

“Nope.” Aria said. “Still largely democratic voting. Sure there are still problems here and there, but when aren’t there with any democratic process?”

“Er…” Harper seemed rather taken back by this news. “W-Well, what about the air? I bet centuries of pollution has left it near inhospitable! I bet if I took off my helmet I’d be choking in a matter of minutes.”

“Well, you’ll find out fairly soon.” Aria said. “Your helmet’s leaking.”

Harper paused. “What?”

“Your helmet.” Aria motioned to a crack in his facescreen, from which the low whistle of escaping air could be heard. “Leaking.”

“Oh God!” Harper immediately flew into a panic, pressing his hand against the crack in a futile attempt to stem the air. “Atmosphere plating cracked… clean air escaping… toxic radiation… flooding… in…” He slowly collapsed to the ground, making loud, wheezing sounds.

Aria watched him thrash about for a few moments. “You seem fine.”

Harper stopped mid-flail. Then, cautiously, he sucked in a quick breath. “Huh. Guess I am. So the air’s breathable too, then?”

“Well, yeah. What were you expecting it to be like?”

“Let’s not go into that.” Harper said, getting back to his feet. “You’re sure there are no toxins in the air? Nuclear fallout? Toxic waste? Even a little?”

“Nope.” Aria shook her head. “All clean and breathable.”

“Really? How come I can smell bitter almonds?” Harper said, a little too smugly for someone seemingly hoping to choke to death. “That’s a telltale sign of cyanide.”

“Or a telltale sign that I baked an almond shortcake 20 minutes ago.” Aria said, fishing a slice out of her satchel. “Want some?”

“…I’ll pass.” At this point, Harper was beginning to look genuinely frustrated that he wasn’t dying. “So is there anything wrong with the world right now? Any reason for me to be revived? Any reason at all for me to have spent several generations asleep in that cramped, uncomfortable pod?”

“I get the feeling you’re a little bitter.” Aria said.

“A little.”

“I DO DETECT THAT BITTERNESS LEVELS ARE SLIGHLY RAISED AT THIS POINT IN TIME.”

“Not helping, FT028.”

“Well… I suppose there may be something wrong…” Aria racked her brains for anything to sate this increasingly frustrated ‘distopia expert’. “Um… Sometimes, the cybernet connection is a bit spotty. And, er, the garbage chute sometimes overflows. It only gets collected once a fortnight, so-“

“Wait.” Harper froze. “You don’t have day-to-day garbage disposal?”

“No…” Aria said slowly and cautiously.

“My God, woman!” Harper said violently shaking her. “What dystopian hellscape are you living in where garbage is not promptly disposed of?! This is worse than I expected!”

“Um…”

“But fear not!” Harper said, posing dramatically. “For I have come from the distant past to aid you in restoring humanity to its former glory! You shall have your garbage disposed of in a timely and convenient fashion! This is what Project Restoration was built for!” He patted the flank of his pod. “Come FT028. Let us make plans to fix this new world!”

“MAY I SUGGEST WE START BY INCINERATING IT?”

“We’ll file that as Plan B!”

“YAAAAAAAAY!”

“Okay then.” Aria said, slowly backing away. “You two… do that. In the meantime, I’m going to quickly make a call…”

“Hello, this is the Earth Security Agency.” The receptionist said. “How can I help you?” She listened over the phone to Aria for a few moments, jotting down details on a notepad. “Alright ma’am, I understand. Just stay calm and we’ll send someone round to deal with it.”

Placing the phone down, the woman leaned back, avoiding the pod parked behind her. “Hey Jones! We’ve got another one of those Project Restoration freaks! Send a team to deal with it!”

“Not again…” Jones sighed. “That’s the fifth one this month.”

# The Exile

## By SugoiMe

“I didn’t do anything!” I yell as they drag me to the square.

Throngs of people line the narrow aisle to the pulpit, every one throwing jeers and coarse words in my direction. Some manage to get their hands on me, beat me, the only permissible time they would be allowed to hit another person. If this wasn’t a sentencing, they would be in my situation.

“Please,” I beg my captors. “Please, don’t do this to me!”

They pull me up to the centre ring where the pulpit stands, nought but a caged box. A high rise towers overhead where the mayor and his officials sit, every one of their faces glowering down at me.

Voices raise, shouts soar. I shake, trembling, wishing this wasn’t happening to me. Me, now the only child left of my household.

“Morgan Verrison,” the mayor’s voice rings above the crowd.

The crowd dies down to listen to my inevitable sentence.

“You have been brought here to be condemned for your crimes.”

“I didn’t do anything!” I say, sounding the words out loud and clear. Tears stream down my face, a clear indicator of my distress.

The mayor ignores me. He’s heard protest before.

“You are found guilty for the use of black magic. I hereby sentence you to life in the Outlands.”

“It was an accident!”

He slams his wooden mallet on the table. My captors lead me away for the Preparation.

“No!” I scream. “I’m innocent!”

The people grow into a tumultuous roar, and by the time I disappear from them, I have cuts and bruises from their sticks and rough fists. My captors don’t seem to care about what they do to me. This is my fate for using black magic.

But it was an accident! Can’t they see that?

They take me to the Preparation room. No one knows anything about the Preparation. Even the Sending is private. But no one cares except for those in charge and the ones that go through it. I won’t be seeing those throngs of people anymore, I know. I’m already dead to them.

Next thing I know, I’m stripped naked and my captors leave. The humanoids replace them, modified people, half machine half human, and they carry rods and cables and batons. I don’t know what to make of them at first, but then the reality dawns on me. The humanoids can’t feel like people, though our drugs dull human emotion. They’re permanently unfeeling objects, rid of passions and desires. They make for a pristine utopia here in Dystrandis, but that also means they’re capable of doing things without feeling the results from their actions.

First one strikes, then another. I scream, but the sounds don’t penetrate the room. No one can hear me. Soon, I’m on the floor in pain, blood staining the cold cement. Then I’m hoisted to my feet. I stumble alongside them as they lead me to a vault.

The Sending, I figure.

They put me inside the hollow tube, naked, bruised and beaten. The glass door shuts. Then up I go, the humanoids disappearing.

Up, up, up. My head gets dizzy from the pain of my body and the whirlwind of a ride to the surface.

The Outlands. It’s a place talked about in history books at school. They say we burrowed down into the earth when the sun grew too hot. Those were the richest men in the world, the ones with the money to fund projects of preservation. Yet only the purest could remain in Dystrandis. Then came the rules to govern a shining utopia. Rules like the forbidding of magic. If you don’t follow those rules, you’re sent to the Outlands.

The upwards motion stops, the door opens. The heat is stifling and I can barely breathe. A metal rod pokes me in the back, just a tap, but it feels like a sharp needle. I stumble forward, landing weak on a dusty ground. The door behind me shuts and the portal disappears, a metal door preventing me from diving back into the haven of Dystrandis.

I quiver, curling up into a ball. What do I do?

Just then, a call echoes into the shaft. “Offering!”

I look up to see a group of people coming toward me. They’re clad in dull tones, dirty rags compared to the solid, undeterred colours of the people I’m used to seeing. Bottles dance at their sides, fastened to their belts. Some carry metal rods, others nothing at all. They gaze down at me with unconcerned eyes. Most prominent are the scars on their faces. Not a face is unmarred.

A man steps forward, their leader. “A live one, and a beauty,” he says, squatting to my level.

A woman joins him, her skin as dark as her clothing. She’s a stark contrast to the white world I grew up in. “She’s weak.”

“A worker then,” says the man.

“She’ll burn,” says the woman.

“Too bad for her.”

“But we’ve lost so many this year.”

“Guess that means more water for us.”

He snaps his fingers and two of his band come forward with a blanket. Through weary eyes, I can’t make out whether they’re male or female because of the cloths wrapped around their heads and billowing, ratted robes.

“Take her,” the man says, starting off.

I’m hoisted up and taken out of the shaft. Blinding, burning light stings my eyes and my skin burns after a measly fifteen minutes. I try to speak, to beg for water and shade, but the words won’t form, barely a croak breaking my already cracked, parched lips. Soon, my head grows light. I feel unconsciousness threaten to pull me under, drag me into its welcoming arms away from the heat, the pain, and the sorrow. But a part of me refuses. No, I reason. I cannot give in. Not yet.

So I stay alive enough to notice shade. Then down, down, down we go into the earth. The stifling air gradually cools, a welcome relief for my sweltering body. Eventually, we reach a large cave swarming with people. Hard-working people. They toiled, sifting and scraping at dirty pools, each one’s eyes glazed over as if in a trance.

“The workers.”

I look beside me and see the woman from before. She retrieves a bottle from her side and pours some water down my throat. It’s not much, but enough to speak.

“Where are we?”

“The salt mines.”

“What’s wrong with them?” I ask, looking around at the workers. “They look possessed.”

“It’s magic. Let me guess, that’s why you were thrown out? Accused of black magic?”

I nod.

“Magic thrives here. Some of it can be used for good, but…” She motioned to the workers, bent and crooked from a life of servitude.

“I don’t want to become that.”

“You don’t, do you? Well, too bad. The boss says’ you’ll be suited as a worker.”

I’m too tired to answer. Instead, I slump my head down, feeling as tranced and bent as the workers we pass by.

“So…what kind of magic did you wield?”

“What?”

“Your magic. Was it fire? Water? Lightning? Magic is born out of emotion.”

“It was fire.”

“So you were angry at someone,” the woman mused. “Not going to do you much good here. Like I said to the boss, we need water wielders, but it’s a hard one to conjure. Water doesn’t come from sadness. It’d be a whole lot easier to make if it did.”

“Where does it come from?”

She looks at me, a thin smile spread across her lips, but her eyes melancholic. “Joy and laughter.”

“But that’s not so hard.”

“How do you feel?”

I lower my head. “Terrible.”

“Exactly.”

“But what if I found something to be joyful about?”

“This is Utrondis, girl. You’ll find pretty soon there’s nothing to be happy about here.”

“I don’t believe you. I’ll find a way to be happy.”

She laughs at me, a mocking guffaw. “You will, will you? Good luck with that! Even if you recover properly, you’ll still be deformed like the rest of us. And if you’re fitted to be a worker, you won’t be able to feel anything, just like those Dystrandians.”

I go to say something, then clamp my mouth shut.

No, I reason. I’m not about to let this woman be right. Even though I was in despair when I was exiled, I won’t let that defeat me. If fire was built from my rage in Dystrandis, then water will burst from my joy in Utrondis.

Utrondis. A fitting name for the city of the Outlands. I will make it a utopia.

# Our kind of Watchman

## By Peat

I am waiting for the bell to toll.

There’s five of us, all with coffee in one hand and a stylus in the other. Stretching out reports and cracking jokes until our shift is done. MacElra is the loudest, the one who aims nearest the knuckle. I worry he’ll get into trouble at his next thought-sensing but today I’m grateful. He masks my silence. I don’t want them worrying about me. Worry can become questions.

The bell rings. I am released.

“I must go quick,” says young Ronagh. “Saorne expects me.”

“Not the only thing she expects, I’ll wager. Hoard your silver, lad.”

We laugh at MacElra’s jest, even Ronagh as he flushes. They’re recent news and he’s not comfortable with it yet, but he knows we tease because we’re pleased. Your Watch-brothers are closer than your real brothers.

“I’m for the inn. Any takers?” MacElra announces.

I shake my head swiftly. “Not me.”

“Too many of you have beautiful women,” he grumbles as I leave.

Outside the Watch-house’s sanctuary, my stomach grows cold and tight like a dead man’s grip. Citizens look at me and move aside. My uniform marks me as a Hierarch’s servant; a figure of law, order, and dread. The Hierarchs know their crimes and I punish them. It keeps Tallabhair whole. I walk home, except I take a turn I normally don’t, knock on someone else’s door.

“Come in, Toadstool. You ready?”

I nod. I’m ready to commit my first crime.

There’s three of us. Niaja, heretic mage; polite, withdrawn. Comarach, our patron’s favourite killer; scum.

And me. The necessary traitor.

I take out my key and open the treasury door. The moment I enter, awareness of everything permeates me. I know who is here, what is here, where it is. One of the many blessings the Hierarchs give their Watchmen and right now, the best of them. Niaja’s face is clenched in concentration as she maintains the spell that masks us from my fellow Watchmen. And Comarach follows, ready to kill either of us if we get clever ideas. When I stop, waiting for a man to walk by, he places his blade at my back. I hated him enough before that.

We continue through the labyrinth, ignoring the kings’ ransoms piled to either side. Our patron bade us take the Knife of Riaghaid, and that only. Even if Comarach was not here, I could not afford to anger her.

I have never seen the Knife of Riaghaid before but one thought summons the image. An ordinary thing, dull and notched. The desires of mages are strange. I lead us to it like a bird seeking summer. There are few of my fellows this far in. I take it and the power of it makes my teeth rattle.

It’s all too easy. No one thought to protect it from a Watchman. Our loyalty is legend.

I smile as we walk out. Disloyalty never felt so good.

Tallabhair is riotous at night, the citizens drinking their sorrow. I smell danger in the mead fumes. All Watchmen know the stories and I’m not protected by my uniform now. It’s the first time I’ve been out without my uniform since I was a boy. The thought troubles me more than any threat. A stranger walks in my body, past the crimes I swore to punish. Poppy smokers, unlicensed poets, adulterers. They don’t seem so terrible tonight.

I had no choice, though. I have my own Saorne; Muadha, whose eyes make the Moon Maiden weep and own my soul. Muadha, whose eyes fail more every day, the magical energies of Tallabhair eroding her brain. The doctors told me it was not uncommon, a side-effect of the sheer scale of the Hierarchs’ workings to keep back the hungry sea. They had a cure; the Hierarchs could hardly do their work without one. An expensive one though, they warned me. I paid that no mind. I was a Watchman.

Then the Hierarchs denied me.

I didn’t dwell on it. I was trained to quick action and stoic courage. Instead, I started looking for others who might provide me what I needed for my beloved Muadha, heedless of price. The refusal continued to fester away though. Eating away at the man I was.

We turn a corner and I find myself eye to eye with MacElra. Fear consumes me. Is he waiting for me? Does he know? No, he’s with a woman. His eyes are wide in question.

I open my mouth and Comarach slits his throat.

“Fucking toadstool,” he hisses.

My fists ball up. He smirks at me. My hand is on my knife hilt when Niaja coughs. I look and she gestures at the woman. We all realise the truth that the heretic is saying in the same moment; the witness cannot live. She runs and Comarach chases but I am faster. My blade flies straight between her shoulders. I pull it out, the coffee rising up my throat. She’s dead. At least I don’t have to finish her. I don’t sheath it but turn to face Comarach again. His own weapon, wet with MacElra’s blood, is waiting.

“Perhaps it would be best to settle this matter elsewhere?” says Niaja. “Such as, say, somewhere that is not a murder scene.”

She’s right. I clean my knife and sheath it. He takes the lead, unafraid of me. Scum. I glance at Niaja and her lips twitch, then she’s like a statue. We go to the meeting place as quickly as is sensible. As we enter, I nudge Comarach.

“I’ll get you for this.”

“No you won’t.”

He’s right. I won’t even remember it.

The patron gives me two vials. The first is for Muadha.

The second is for me.

There is a problem with committing crime when your mind is read regularly. The only way to escape capture is to never remember doing the crime. The second vial will solve that problem. But there is more, as my patron had explained when we first made our bargain. The Hierarchs are not fools. If a man receives a great prize but cannot remember why, they will prod and probe until they have the truth. And what greater prize is there than the miraculous recovery of your wife from the surest disease in Tallabhair?

When I wake tomorrow, Muadha will be well, but not with me. She will be somewhere else and I will believe that the strange corpse lying next to me is hers. Every little drop of pain I’d thought to escape will be mine, right down to the dregs. When my patron told me, I nearly begged her to find another way. To make me vanish too so that we could be together. I know she has a use for men such as me, if a man like me was willing to be scum.

I was not brave enough.

Now the vials are in front of me and I want to ask her for this mercy. I’m still not brave enough. I tell myself it is necessary. No one will suspect a thing if Muadha dies, but if we both disappear after tonight, people will come looking. People like Comarach.

It is three weeks since the night that both MacElra and Muadha died. I sit away from the others as I write my report, my coffee laced to keep me numb. My Watch-brothers watch me quietly. They wish to heal me but don’t know how. They don’t know how to heal themselves. MacElra was our soul. We take our pain out on the scum who did it.

My mind wanders constantly. I keep starting to write a resignation rather than my report. My captain, MacCuoma, refuses to consider such a thing. He tells me it would dishonour their memories. Maybe he’s right; I struggle to know. I am grateful for his care, for my brothers’ sympathy. It’s MacCuoma who tells me when the bell rings, tells me to go home. He emphasises the word home. Citizens look at me with fear and pity. I’m not just a Watchman to them, I’m a human too.

I reach my empty dwelling and look for the mead bottle. It’s not where I left it but there’s a small one in it’s place, it’s contents a pale yellow. Like amber. Or piss. I don’t care, I drink it.

As I do, I notice the woman. She wears no marks of belonging and a deep hood that doesn’t quite conceal the inhuman perfection of her face. I finish the vial, my mind sluggishly accepting the impossible reality.

“Hello, Watchman. We still have business, you and me.”

She is right. I try to open my mouth, to ask after Muadha. When I can be with her. I can’t, but she smiles anyway.

“There is a man,” she continues, “Who has offended me. He believes himself safe.”

I understand her request. All of it. I nod, heedless of price.

# Little by little, we slipped into the dark

## By OnlyOneHighlander

“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was time for a Pepsi…”

Much better, thought Milton, returning *‘Pepsico presents A Tale of Two Cities’* to the shelf. His hand lingered on the spine of the book as he let his gaze wander across the other titles: *‘The Famished Road brought to you by Mars’*, *‘The Grapes of Wrath in association with Jacob’s Creek’*, *‘The Odyssey: Ryanair edition’*. It had worked. He knew it would.

Before the last election, the country’s libraries were on their last legs. No budget to maintain them, and who would agree to more taxes so someone else’s children can read books. No-one, that’s who. A knotty problem, but one that had been solved many times before. It just took a man with the right amount of imagination and, despite what his Year Seven report card might have said, he had it.

A knock at the library door. Stephanie, his chief aide, popped her head round the gap. “Two minutes, sir.”

“Thank you, Stephanie,” he said. Stephanie wasn’t her real name of course. Or at least it hadn’t always been. Employability data shows, she had explained to him, that her original name was likely to hold back her career, so she changed it. It had cost her, and had mother had been none too pleased, but, given her current position, it was clear to see it had been a wise investment. And of course, she had not repeated her parents’ mistake with her own children.

It was right, Milton said to himself, to hold the speech here, his old stomping ground. This school had given him so much, now it was his turn to give back. He took a final sip of his cappuccino, dropped the green and white cup into the recycling bin, straightened his tie and took hold of the door handle.

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“Children,” Milton paused to look across the crowd, “Children are our most important resource. They are the workers of tomorrow, the life blood of our economy, they are - ladies and gentlemen - our future.

“Ensuring this future, securing the best chance of success for our children is, surely, the most important function of a government. And I can assure you, my government sees the unlocking of our children’s potential, preparing them for the global marketplace - with all its risks and uncertainties - as our most sacred duty. However, the question must be asked, is government, is the state with all its inefficiencies, its bureaucracy, best placed to carrying out this function?

“Can we expect our hard working teachers,” Milton let his eyes flash to the front row, the faculty row, where the wise old farts had squatted at so many assemblies, “Can we expect them to know which skills young people will need when they enter our ever more competitive economy? Can we expect our civil servants, shut away in Whitehall’s ivory towers, to be able to predict where we will be, what the key industries will be ten, fifteen years into the future? I remember, growing up, we were taught ‘you must learn your times tables, because you won’t have a calculator in your pocket wherever you go’.”

Milton took his smartphone from his inside pocket and held it up for all to see. “And that was right, of course,” he continued, the audience’s chuckles proof his speechwriter’s concerns over this play to the gallery were unfounded. “Because instead we have supercomputers!

“And we have this magical machines all thanks to the dynamism, the creativity and drive of the free market.

“Now, we all know the market is not perfect, there are always winners and losers, but it has been proven - time and time again - to be the best tool for organising resources and improving the common lot of humanity. And I believe it is time to bring this, our best tool, to bare on our most important function.

“Liberalisation of investment into and delivery of education will bring this dynamism, this creativity to where it can do the greatest good. Under the reforms published today, companies and international corporations will now have the ability to set up their own schools, with children free to choose their own futures.

“Rather than learn coding and computer science from a teacher - who may have finished studying five, ten years ago - wouldn’t it be better to learn these skills from Google or Microsoft? Rather than learn about mathematics from old Mr Brickland - who told me about those calculators - wouldn’t it be better to learn it from Barclays or Pricewaterhouse Coopers? It is the difference between being taught about Shakespeare and being taught by Shakespeare.

“And if one of these talented young people,” Milton cast a hand across the youngsters sitting on the stage beside him. Stephanie had been right. Having the school’s current pupils in the hall would make for a great photo opp after the speech. “If one of them excels at their new studies, and is ready to enter the workplace and earn a wage, should we shackle them to an arbitrary age limit? If a person is fifteen, fourteen, twelve, and wants to take a job, and has the necessary skills, should this aspiration not be applauded? After all, we don’t stop people from working because they are too old anymore. Why should we deny people the right to work because they are too young? To do so is a patronising assault on liberty, on the freedom to choose, and I am here to tell you today, we will put up with it no longer!”

The thump of MIlton’s fist on the lectern echoed through the cavernous assembly hall. He looked up. His fingers in his free hand were shaking. A long, slow breath eased from his lungs…

And then the applause began.

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# Wire in my Soul

## By Corvus

I've razor in my mind,

I've fire in my veins,

I've wire in my soul.

Living on the edge,

Between neon's glare

And desolation's black.

Jacked in, jacked up,

Take the plunge,

Make the run,

Beyond the edge.

Searchlights sweep the rainy streets.

Above it all the call to prayer,

To worship at the corporate altar.

To consume

The expendable.

Sirens scream,

Muzzle flash reflected in the mirrored eye.

The metal and the flesh they sing.

Flatline.

The pulse it ends.

No time for remorse.

Another day,

Another job.

From coffin to coffin,

Fuelled on synths and turps.

Carry what you own,

Own what you can keep.

All around the throng of crowds,

The beat of the city,

Riding the disconnect between reality and reality.

All of the,

Alone.

# Four years, six months, and three days after surfacing

## By ArcaneArtsVelho

When the doctor ordered me to write this journal so that I would have a vent, I didn’t really know what she meant when she said to write about the good things too. But I suppose this counts as a good thing; as good as it gets anyway…

I had spent two days running from Cole, the self appointed king or god of the wastes. It was starting to get dark, and I was tired, so I made the rather insane decision of trying to find a hiding-place from a city, or what was left of one. I was well aware of the Crazies that roamed most cities after sunset but I also knew that had I stayed put somewhere in the barren wilds, Cole would have found me before the dawn. I could handle the Crazies, but the King had too many pawns and too many guns.

I was scouring the outskirts of the city, trying to find a way to get closer to the centre without going through too much radiation, when something caught my attention on one mostly collapsed brick wall. There, in the middle of the greys and browns of the world, a poster shone in what seemed like the brightest green, blue, and white. It seized me completely, beckoning me to take a closer look. It was a picture of a tropical forest and a hut, with a sandy beach and sparkling sea in the background. On the deck of the cosy looking hut, in the shade of palm trees, there stood two people: a woman and a boy, both dressed in the cleanest white, holding hands and looking towards the sea, away from the camera. There was a single line of text near the top of the poster. It said, “Dream of Paradise.”

I stood there for far too long, mesmerised. Looking at the poster I could almost feel the heat of the sun, the humidity of the forest and the sea, and even the light breeze that was playing with the golden brown hair of the woman. I could smell the exotic flowers growing nearby, the salty water beyond the beach, and maybe some delicious food cooking inside. I could hear the rustle of the palm fronds and the singing of the songbirds swooshing in their midst, and, from a distance, the steady undulation of foamy waves rushing to shore. I could picture myself with the others; my hand resting on the back of the woman’s white dress or stroking the boy’s shaggy hair. It was a perfect moment; a few minutes in Paradise, away from the dread and misery of the real world.

And then it was over.

A scream yanked me out of the dream, and I pulled out my gun instinctively. Then I saw it: a pale figure leaping at me from behind the heaps of bricks. It was a human, or at least it had been; now mutated by the radiation or drugs or something. Its pointed teeth and yellow eyes flashed in the dying light as it lunged forward. Had I not been in the trance I was, I would have probably heard it earlier and been able to avoid it. But now it was too late. I had to do something I didn’t want to. I took the shot.

It was loud. The .45 bullet made short work of the creature’s skull and whatever was inside it. A red splatter hit the wall near the poster, and only then I saw the literal writing on the wall. It spelled “Keep dreaming” in shaky letters of reddish brow; of blood, who knows.

I had to leave quickly. Cole’s men would have heard the shot, and the Crazies too. In a few seconds, dozens of bad things would have been coming my way. And still I stole a moment to looked at the poster again; it was such a perfect thing amidst the ruin. I thought about taking it with me but decided not to. It was a beautiful dream. But merely a dream nonetheless.

# The Feline Supremacy

## By Lanko

Humanity always wanted to talk to their pets and properly understand their feelings and thoughts. And this is how we doomed ourselves.

We created an invention to read the minds of animals and write signals and patterns that would help scientists translate to our own language. We used it on cats and dogs, the most popular pets in the world.

Nobody expected the side effects. The dogs gained the ability to talk to us. And the cats… well, instead of reading their minds, they were the ones that gained the ability to pry inside ours. And influence and later control our thoughts and actions.

The cats, being much more mischievous than any human politician, and all tyrants in the becoming, quickly assumed control of the world, remaking it to suit their needs. Which means all industries turned into wool factories, the navy of all countries basically became fishermen and the air force bird hunters.

Kitler, Supreme Leader of the feline race, reigned over the Earth unchallenged. Except for the Canine Resistance, an underground organization of terrorists that cowardly attacked the various sandboxes capitals of the world.

The only humans happy with this status, and therefore able to retain their free will, were ambientalists, all too happy to see humanity finally paying for their mistreatment of animals during all our existence. The cats secretly despised them, but if some humans wanted to betray their species, who were the cats to deny such help?

I observe one of the sandboxed cities from a rooftop, my mind protected with the use of a tin foil hat. The streets were now filled with sand everywhere, with mindless humans at every corner ready to keep it always constant and clean. A large shipment of humans were delivered to a nearby Pet Shop. There the humans would be bathed, shaved, have their nails cut if necessary, breed with another humans to maintain an acceptable number of workforce available for Kitler. Those would be allowed to feed on fish and rats, which now the cats considered far below their station, while the other humans had their nutrition taken care of by the ambientalists, which means everybody only ate vegetables and were all malnourished and skeletal.

This also suited the cats’ purposes, as our bones were perfect for them to scratch their claws on. The demand was far above the supply and only very rich felines were able to constantly afford them. It’s perhaps a consolation at least one part of us still had value.

Using a hook equipment inspired by Batman, I reach the Statue of Liberty, now a giant cat holding a globe resembling Earth in one of its paws. The government building was just ahead, a large tower made of ivory.

The binoculars with a microphone attached allowed me to see Kitler himself, shouting and gesticulating at his officials for another failed attack on the Canine Resistance. His left paw was shaking slightly.

After he finished scolding them, the large screens throughout the sandbox city showed the Supreme Leader giving another speech of victory and glory. From all over the city, thousands, probably millions of kittens meowed for a full minute in response.

It was the time for the attack. I’m not much for talking, so me and the dogs proceeded in complete silence for the ambush. They all wore sunglasses and headphones to protect their eyes against flashbang grenades and their ears against dog whistles. Our experiments gave the cats psychic powers and super senses to the dogs, plus immunity to the cat’s powers. That’s how they survived so long, being able to see, hear and smell any attack from very long distances and pretty much always avoid them. However, this also caused some problems. Flashbang grenades, for example, instantly blinded dogs due to the increase in their sight senses.

After killing Kitler, the Feline Empire would fall and retribution would happen. Probably it will result in a canine Empire and extinction of cats, but I’m fine with that. I’ve always preferred dogs anyway.

We saw Kitler leave his box-car and unloaded all our weapons on him. He fell, but it was just a decoy. We should have expected that. In a few seconds, the special forces of the kitten leader climbed buildings and jumped from roof to roof in our direction. We ran, but the ninja kittens were much faster.

And they had a special weapon with them: rotten eggs grenades. The smell caused the dogs to throw up. Being only a feeble human, I wasn’t affected like my canine partners and was able to slip away. Plasma shurikens and laser claws made short work of the crippled dogs.

I ran to the designated escape route and managed to return to our base, hidden in the sewers. Everybody looked down as I walked inside. We were sure this time we had it. Sixty-six years of Kitler’s dominance. Sixty-six assassination attempts. Sixty-six failures.

The radio was transmitting another speech of Kitler, boasting about his survival and assuring his compatriots he was truly invincible.

I always thought we humans would end up prey of our own ambition. That our end could come from a totalitarian world government. Or an alien invasion. The global warming. The rise of artificial intelligence.

Who could even conceive the idea we would lose to our own pets?