



# Matters Most Extraordinary

SUPERHEROES  
THROUGHOUT HISTORY



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## Foreword

*Alex Nisnevich*

The truth is often stranger than fiction. Some events in history defy explanation, even today. Some historical figures have been so legendary that it almost makes you question if they were superhuman.

This is the question asked by *Matters Most Extraordinary*, an anthology of stories that examines historical events and characters from a fresh perspective. The thread tying these stories together is simple: *what if various people throughout history have possessed superpowers?*

There are only three rules that all stories contained here follow:

- 1) Don't change the outcomes of historical events;
- 2) Don't definitively explain the source of the superpowers; and
- 3) Don't focus on events that are central to an established religion.

Everything else is up to the authors. Some of these stories break free from the bounds we envisioned for this anthology, for instance by focusing on famous literary rather than historical characters, but are included because we feel that they adhere to the overall vision of *Matters Most Extraordinary*. We were pleasantly surprised by the many creative directions in which these authors took our concept.

The idea for *Matters Most Extraordinary* came from a conversation between John and myself, and we didn't expect at the time that it could have any success. We are very proud, a year and a half later, to be able to present *Matters Most Extraordinary*.

A round of applause to Stephen, Bradley, Rebecca, Andy, Marina, David, Mark, Margaret, and max, and happy reading!

# Introduction

*John Fritzen*

Present day. Location unknown.

The cell that they've kept me in for the past two months is beyond shabby. The walls seem like they could fall down any minute, but in this case looks are deceiving. What little light shines through is sickly and barely enough for me to see my surroundings, though given what I can see, it might be better if the cell was pitch black.

Gazing across my latest home, I can see spiders, cockroaches and other filthy creatures. The floors are wet, and the ceiling is full of leaks right above my cot, making it near impossible to sleep. I don't think my captors could have found a better prison if they tried.

With absolutely nothing to do, I've had a fair amount of time on my hands, which, outside of criticizing my surroundings, has been put to use in trying to figure out how I ended up in the cell. Best I can figure it's because of my ability. See, I am not a normal human, but rather something special. I can see the future and the past.

Normally I can only apply this ability to the location I am at, but when using my power on this cell turned up with no answers I began to search outward. At first I was obsessed with using my ability to see how I would escape this prison. The only problem with that, as I found out, was that I would have to wait a while longer before the events that would allow me to go free would be set in motion.

Given that I had time to spare, I had one option left, and that was to look back. What I found was not what I expected: things went back further than I had ever believed possible! Now I am preparing to look back one last time to finally fit all the missing pieces together.

I close my eyes and slowly let my consciousness drift. As I do so I let go of all control, as I have found that letting myself drift works better than concentrating. Slowly, slowly, I let myself go and begin to see the stories hidden in the past ...

## **In the Beginning: Two Introductory Fables**

***Stephen Weinstock***

Raising the cup of tea to his lips, the young dreamer took a sip of the hot liquid. Oblivious to the drops that remained on his moustache, he hoped the beverage could revive his exhausted brain. He had been awake three straight nights struggling over his latest thought experiment, and the effort was getting the best of him. Perhaps he should wander off to a café, order some breakfast, and return for a nap. The thought of sleep sent his mind into a delicious ramble: mathematical symbols made of icicles from the Swiss winter, sausages floating in the atmosphere, tropical jungles full of exotic beasts. In hopes that the fantasies would allow him some relief, he let his mind drift into another world, where a vision unfolded.

### **I. The Desmatosuchus Who Created a Buzz about the Dinosaurs**

V'don lived long before the giant dinosaurs like Tyrannosaurus and Apatosaurus. A heavily armored reptile, he had four strong legs, a smallish body, and sharp pairs of horns protruding from the side of his thick neck. V'don loved his body and strode through the forests proudly. He sneered at the crocodilians, who dragged themselves on their bellies, their stubby legs poking out to the side. V'don was a new breed of reptile, able to lift his body off the earth.

One day V'don was craning his neck toward the top of a fruit tree. Way up there is a bunch of sweet things waiting for me, he thought. Tired of rooting in the ground for food, he wished he didn't have to wait until the good stuff fell to the ground. V'don stretched his horned neck a tiny bit further. Imagine just reaching up for a bite –

A single fruit plopped down on the ground, smashing into small bits. V'don lurched forward toward the spoils. Three of the newer, hairy creatures shot out of a hole. Within seconds they had ransacked the lot.

V'don was furious at the pint-sized rogues. The smaller they make them, the faster they run! He needed a way to the top of that tree. If the flying creatures could get up there, so could he. They had scales, they laid eggs, just like him. Why couldn't he get up there?

V'don thought of all the other beasts. There were ones that swam the oceans. Among them were the first dinosaurs, and so his people admired them. Then there were the creatures that lived in the water and had come up on the land. Their families still bragged about their courage, even though animals living exclusively on land laughed at them behind their backs.

Finally, there were all the new reptiles, those that slithered, those that flew: we were a mixed lot, V'don thought. He had heard the back-handed insults about the dinosaurs, the most modern of the reptiles. "Dinos can't make up their mind ... Time to go home – are you walking my way ... or crawling?" We need a new breed of dinosaur, someone who will demand respect, who will represent us, who will be a larger-than-life figure.

A giant dinosaur!

V'don was so excited he did not notice the next batch of fruits hitting the ground. He was lost in thought: a giant dinosaur whose neck was so long that it reached the top of any tree. So tall it could stand up in the water. Its tail could swipe through a row of bushes or take down two or three smaller beasts at a time. It would command respect because of its sheer size.

V'don went home that night and told his cousins and aunts and uncles about his idea. They laughed themselves silly. Aunt K'saur humored him (as always) and suggested he share his idea with others. The family was glad to get their fervid cousin out of the house. V'don visited neighbor after neighbor. The smallest children, wishing to be big and tall, loved V'don's images of long tails and super necks. The parents told him it was the children's bedtime.

V'don was puzzled: why was no one as excited as he was?

Frustrated, V'don returned to the fruit tree. He tried clawing his way up the bark. The little mammals tittered at him from their hole. V'don swiped them with his tail. He collapsed at the foot of the tree, exhausted, downtrodden.

Nothing came of my idea. Nothing!

Then a curious and wonderful thing happened.

V'don went to a drinking hole a few days later. It was not his customary one: to avoid further humiliation, he was keeping a distance from his acquaintances. As he bent his head down to the cool waters, he overheard a conversation:

"But have you seen one?"

"Not personally. But my great-uncle heard one trampling through our backyard."

"And it was big?"

"You know the vines over our shelter?"

"Yeah. The ones hanging over the tree?"

"Completely torn down."

"Wow. I heard about one that was picking off the flying ones from the sky."

"I heard that. Apparently their teeth are enormous, too. One fang is the size of your whole mouth."

"Whoa! Let's hope they're plant-eaters."

V'don was incredulous. It was true! He jerked his head up to ask a question but the two had moved on. He circulated among the crowds, listening for more rumors. There were many. Everyone knew someone who said they had heard or seen the new giants. Among the gossip V'don recognized familiar images of long necks craning to the top of trees and tails wiping out several enemies at once. How could his vision have become true overnight?

"My friend heard from an Arizonasaurus across the valley."

"I've heard there's a lot over there."

"But I heard there are skeptics there, too. Called it stuff their kids made up. They were laughing about it."

"Who could laugh about something like this? We should be building defenses."

And so the truth dawned on V'don: no one had actually seen a giant dinosaur. They had only heard about them. The rumors had spread from his neighborhood; they were talking about his people, his family and neighbors. The long necks and tails were V'don's images. He had started the rumors.

So his idea was something after all. Or rather he had created something out of nothing. Despite the skeptics (his family), everyone was convinced that giant dinosaurs

were roaming the earth. With just a little effort V'don had created a new myth about his kind: they were developing into a terrible, colossal species.

V'don felt prouder than ever.

The wave of awe and panic among the animals did not last long. After a few strong community shelters were erected – and no monsters actually appeared – things quieted down. V'don tried to inject some fresh rumors of giant-sightings into the population. After a while these were met by a new attitude circulating through the forests:

“Giants? So what?”

“What do you mean so what? How can you be so casual?”

“Even if there were enormous animals – and have you seen any? –we’re ready for them if they attack. Who wants to lay eyes on such freaks? They sound disgusting.”

“Really? They sound powerful and majestic to me.”

“Awkward and clumsy with all that weight. Give me a tiny Coelophysis any day. Those guys can move!”

“They’d have to if a monster was chasing them.”

“They’d win claws down. We can outsmart those brutes. Smaller is smarter.”

V'don saw his vision disintegrate. If he wanted to preserve a positive image of the giants, he would have to fight this new “less is more” viewpoint. He stopped telling tales of terrifying beasts. His new angle was their benevolent side: helping the smaller animals gather fruit, pulling down branches for shelters, that sort of thing. He still tried to keep them noble and commanding. V'don sent out a story of a ‘king lizard’ who, after capturing his prey, would relax his victims with conversation, enabling them to put their awe and fear aside.

The story became widespread – because of its preposterousness. No one believed it. Friends and strangers alike stopped listening to V'don’s tales. The myth of the giant dinosaur was in great danger of extinction.

Ostracized from dinosaur society, V'don spent his days wandering the plains alone, and his nights sleeping it off in the back of Aunt K’saur’s shelter. He spent hours staring up at the top of trees. He’d lie next to the lake and scratch shapes into the sand with his claws: leaf patterns, sunsets, or just claw prints.



One time V'don etched what could be the footprint of a giant dinosaur into the sand. The next day when he returned, he found a group of animals studying the footprint intensely. It gave V'don his next inspiration. He tried creating prints in other places. Each time the faux steps attracted attention. He made longer strings of them, moving from one spot to the next. He noted how the lack of a complete set of prints, rather than discourage belief, actually aroused a sense of mystery, a need to explore further, and a renewed belief in the reality of the giants.

V'don was in the game again. Huddled over a crude map of the forest he had made at Aunt K'saur's, V'don devised an elaborate plan: when to make his prints so as not to be discovered, where to establish patterns of movement that would be alleged to the giants, and locations that would suggest activities and habits of the huge breed. Once belief in the footprints took hold, V'don had plans to leave other clues: broken branches, spots of blood (his own), isolated roars in the dead of night (created with the help of an amplifying cave).

V'don delighted in his new puzzle. He gave just enough information to provoke interest, left just enough out to inspire mystification. His puzzle had some repetitive pieces that suggested a reality and logic, but plenty of unpredictability to avoid the appearance of artifice. It all added up to a very convincing but baffling picture of the life of the giants. More firmly than ever, V'don had forged the myth, but as a complete outsider to society.

V'don was the proudest he had ever been.

V'don's clues got more and more elaborate. At some point the process of inventing the puzzle was more important to him than preserving the myth. Why did he want everyone to believe in these things in the first place? It was more fun to challenge himself to create convincing illusions of the beasts. For example, one day V'don worked on the image of the giants shaking the top of the trees. He considered enlisting the help of the flying reptiles but this was risky (they were notorious gossips).

Finally, he found one tree that contained an elaborate network of vines. V'don could manipulate individual strands from the ground and shake branches, tear leaves, or bend large limbs. As he was experimenting with the vines, V'don heard a series of thuds nearby. Concerned that his scheme might be discovered, he scanned the area quickly. A dozen fruits lay on the earth, dislodged from the tree by the vine.

V'don was thunderstruck. This was where it had all begun! I just wanted us four-leggers to have more ability in the world. He realized that in working out his puzzle he had surpassed his kind as a dinosaur. He may not be thirty feet tall or long, but at least he could get fruit whenever he wanted. He laughed gently to himself and walked over to the fruit. A small mammal dashed out before him. V'don let out a furious roar and the runt fled. V'don scooped up a morsel and downed the sweet fruit.

V'don continued the ploys for a while, but lost his passion for them. He observed that his family and friends, who had practically forgotten him, were now assured of the existence of the giants. The populace believed in them, and what's more, emulated them. V'don no longer needed to keep up his illusions: the giant craze had bit them.

Toward the end of his life V'don witnessed the hatching of the first oversized eggs. These hefty infants certainly weren't going to be giants, but the journey toward growth had begun. V'don would never see the first real giants; he lived millions of years before the true kings ruled the earth. Perhaps he was lucky in this: he would have been devoured in no time.

He was also lucky not to live to see his modern ancestors, the alligators and salamanders. After their gargantuan phase, reptiles returned not only to smaller sizes, but to crawling on their bellies as well. It was as if the whole experience had reduced them; they couldn't stand on their own four feet. It was as if the giants had never existed, as if they had existed only in our imaginations.

A rude hand shook the young dreamer's shoulder, yanking him away from the marvelous vision. It was Mileva, nagging him that he was an hour late for work. Damn her, damn the patent office, damn the world! They all thought he was an idiot, like some lumbering animal; students, teachers, and bosses had all ridiculed him, but he knew he was the clever one, not them. All he wanted to do was think: what was the crime in that?

Mileva tossed him a coat and threw him out the door. The frigid Zurich air awakened him with its refreshing crispness. He would take a long walk to work and let the fantasies reenter his mind. Where had that vision come from? Pure imagination? A memory of a past life? An unconscious urge, as that renegade doctor in Vienna would have it? Perhaps another waking dream could help him work out his thought experiment. As he

ambled through the streets and parks, he willed his brain to explore Space and Time again, and arrived much later in the history of the dinosaurs.

## II. The Opossum Who Discovered a Notable Equation

Bala did not dare move. His entire family had been devoured by one of the monster lizards. The vicious beasts had become desperate with the change in the weather. There was less food, and the harsher conditions drove them to unthinkable acts.

Bala clung to his tree branch for dear life.

Bala did not need much to sustain him. When he could move the frightened opossum was slow and inactive; the food inside his belly was even slower to digest. He could go for days on a single seedpod. But he was getting hungry.

Bala had few options. He was well hidden in the dense foliage of the tree, but any movement on his part might shake the branch or rustle the leaves and give away his whereabouts. He hung upside-down, his toes dug into the wooden branch, his body curled into a ball. He appeared like a swollen protuberance on the tree, and to achieve this look Bala tucked his head into his body as far as possible. His vision was severely impaired. He could see straight above himself with a small degree of range, and that was about it.

The worst thing was the sound. From a distance Bala could hear the dull thunder of the horrid footsteps. He had learned to gauge how close a lizard was, and to recognize the different types. The softer rhythm of the four-footers meant he was in no danger: it was the plant-eater with the huge neck and tail. But the faster, insistent stomp of the two-footer meant terror: it was the King, the brawny swagger of the monster with the flesh-ripping teeth.

He heard the low thunderous sounds constantly; though distant, he knew the lizards could approach an area faster than expected. Terror and hunger was not a healthy match. Bala began to search around for any sign of food, hoping he would not have to climb down and forage. After hours of waiting, he became convinced he must move or starve.

A new sound startled Bala. From above. A sharp pop, very sharp, followed by wet splurgings throughout the branches. Bala carefully shifted his head to focus on the origin of

the sound. Was it a new predator? A tree climber like himself? Another shot punched through the air. Bala's head sprang up. More sloshing noise. The blood of a fellow possum spattered on the leaves?

A wet drop splashed Bala's face. Horror! Panic streamed through him. The juicy substance trickled down his cheek toward his mouth. Bala wanted to shake his head violently, rid himself of the remains. But he did not dare. He checked the air. Two-footed steps, resounding closer. Do not budge.

The trickle found its way to the corner of Bala's mouth. Fear had locked his mouth into a slightly open position, and before he realized it, Bala tasted the unwelcome drip.

It was sweet! Delicious! Some kind of fruity morsel. Food!

Bala realized that his eyes were closed, shut tight from alarm at the same time his mouth had opened. He raised his eyelids, raised his chin ever so slightly, and gazed at the upper portion of his tree. Sure enough, on many higher branches, puffy, yellowish fruits hung as if mocking Bala's frozen position on the tree. All through the leaves below, he spotted hanging globules of the red pulp that had burst forth from the fruit. Nourishment dripped from every branch. He was saved!

Bala began studying the position of the remaining splatterings. Only a few had a chance of dripping near enough for him to catch. He focused on these with a curiosity and wonder he had rarely experienced. Briefly, in the days alongside his parents, as he discovered the world around him, Bala had delighted in the motion of waters, the trajectory of the flying beasts, the shapes of rocks. Now there was little time for such luxuries, and all times were crowded with warning sounds and signs. Awe had left him.

Bala continued studying the fruit. He noticed that there were small and large ones. He had not noticed the small ones before; they were more like buds or seeds. The large fruits were ripe, heavy with pulp, stretching their skins ready to burst.

They were massive.

Bala observed the fruit for many hours. The single drip renewed his strength for a while, and he enjoyed his new pastime. His observance of the pendulous globes helped keep his mind off the lizards. Each hour he discovered a new dangling bulk, hidden in the leaves like him. Each new fruit seemed bigger than the last. Given their weightiness Bala expected them to explode at any moment. But why didn't they?

Then Bala saw one pop and he understood why. Just before it erupted a brilliant shaft of sunlight flashed through the branches and fell on the bulging skin of the fruit. Bala knew what it felt like to have one of these shafts strike him as he hung from the tree. It was a sudden warming of the senses, a rush of heat into his body. Mixed with fear of discovery, the surprise and the rush of the light and heat could drive his frightened state to extremes.

The light must have warmed the fruit with an instantaneous drive, causing it to expand or agitate or – Bala did not know for sure, but he knew that the light pushed the mass over the edge and made it explode.

Over the next few days Bala saw the sunlight cause a fruit to burst almost every time there was an eruption. He delighted in these events: in Bala's mind, the light ray was so fast you did not where it came from; its speed was faster than anything on land. The light was so intense that two rays felt like four. Whenever Bala's terror got the best of him, if he saw three giant beasts moving toward him, he imagined three times that many; if there were five of the monsters, then he saw five times that many. That was what the dazzling speed and brilliance of the sunlight felt like to Bala now. No wonder a plump pod popped when the light hit it. The combination of the swelling mass multiplied by the speed of the light times itself produced a violent outburst.

Unfortunately, none of these outbursts were close enough to Bala to supply him with any nourishment. Since his first awareness of the popping fruit, Bala had received perhaps three isolated drippings. After a time, his hunger stole back into the foreground of his senses, displacing his fascination with the fruit.

With his head tucked into his torso Bala was unable to see directly above him. He did not know if there was any fruit waiting to feed him from above. During a lengthy lull in the monstrous sounds, Bala decided to crane his neck upwards and take a look.

There it was.

The largest fruit he had seen yet hung five branches directly above him. From his earlier observations Bala knew that when this fruit burst, the residual drips could feed him for days. If he kept his eye on it he could maximize his intake of pulp when it showered down. And it looked like this one was ready to pop at any moment. Bala decided to chance having his head more exposed and wait it out.

A thrill raced through Bala's body. He had never anticipated anything so much! All of the booming fruit he had witnessed up till now flooded his memory and converged to form a singular image of intensity and arousal. The opossum's belly pounded with its starving need. His eyes darted around the leaves looking for an opening for the sunlight. Bala was so wound up and exhilarated he thought he might lose his grip on the branch. He dug in his claws further, stared at his fruit, and willed it to burst with all his energy.

Suddenly Bala came back to reality: footsteps! Loud ones, coming nearer. And another sound, a pleasant one, but in this context the most terrifying: the insistent swishing of bushes, the cracking of branches – the monster was close enough that Bala could hear it pushing through the undergrowth. It was upon him!

Bala's crazed mind leapt back to his childhood, back to the day he saw his mother and father cornered during a vicious battle between the lizard King and an armor-plated creature. A random swipe caught his father, who screamed. The noise disturbed the enraged lizard. With one decisive crunch of the tail, the giant decimated Bala's parents. Bala could not bear to see what the beast would do to the bodies. He would never see them again. He was not prepared to carry on with the life they had led. Terrified and furious, he ran away from the awful scene, barely maintaining control. He tripped over roots, knocked back every branch. As overhead branches swayed in response, darts of sunlight poked through the leaves, hitting Bala and mocking his escape.

The sunlight! As the creature got closer Bala sensed that his tree would get rattled, and its branches and leaves would shake. Shafts of light would appear everywhere. The fruit above would get hit by two, by four, by multifold rays of light!

Bala could barely stand the intensity rushing through him. Did he dare keep his head up? If the branches opened for the sun before the creature arrived, Bala could catch the shattering fruit just in time to tuck his head back into his fur. He had to try it! He had to be brave, muster any courage he found mixed in with the jumble of emotions. The anticipation, the terror, the hunger, the visions of exploding fruit, the double thunder of the popping and the footsteps, the building tension in his muscles, the heroic challenge of holding his head high – everything rushed together into an enormous energy, an energy ready to blow out of every fiber of Bala's being.

And every fiber of the swollen fruit! The branches shook and shafts of light shot onto the yellow skin. As the pulp exploded forth in all directions, Bala's tensions released in a gargantuan energy. As the sweet rain showered down on his mouth, an amazing insight blazed into Bala's brain. The huge energy – the release of tension, the noises, the thrills, and their culmination – was exactly the same as the mass of the fruit bursting in combination with the intense, flashing light. The energy equaled the mass multiplied by the light speed times itself!

Bala froze in a moment of pure rapture. Pulp doused his lips and fur. For an incredible instant Bala had it all: delicious taste on his tongue, pride at his heroic action, and a glowing perception of the meaning behind how the world worked.

The branches shook more violently than before. The King of the lizards stopped at Bala's branch. In the next instant Bala felt the breath of his worst nightmare. On its next exhale, the great beast spotted Bala. As the monster let out a roar, taste, pride, release, energy, explosion and the deafening sound all came together for Bala in a brilliant, euphoric equation.

Savage claws ripped the opossum from the branch.

As the last light disappeared from view, Bala took a final, satisfying gulp of the delectable fruit.

Despite the tragic outcome of the opossum, the young dreamer felt exhilarated at the end of his vision, for through it he discovered the solution to his thought experiment. He raced home, ignored Mileva's complaints, and worked out the other pieces of the mathematical puzzle. In 1905, he published the resulting paper that gave birth to the Theory of Relativity. Years later, in the peace and comfort of his home in Princeton, Einstein wondered if those visions had been purely a product of his sleepless mind, or if other forces had been at work. If the prehistoric creature had actually existed, had it sent its thoughts to Einstein somehow? By inspiring the young dreamer, was the opossum responsible for the twentieth century's most important scientific breakthrough? History might tell us, Einstein mused, but we are too caught up in textbooks and timelines to listen.

## Bio

Stephen Weinstock's novel *1001*, based on *The Arabian Nights*, is an eleven book series about a group of people who discover they have shared 1001 past lives; the series has 1001 chapters, each containing a past life tale. Stories from the project are appearing in online publications such as *Liquid Imagination* and the exciting new *Matters Most Extraordinary*. Stephen has worked as dance composer/musician at Juilliard and the 'Fame' School, coordinated NYU's Musical Theater Writing Program, and composed the award-winning experimental Mt. Quad and the musical *Rock and Roy*, with Barry Jay Kaplan, about the double life of Rock Hudson.



## Red Cliffs

*Bradley Michaelson*

Watching the strategists use their big brains to strategize their way through battle gives me a headache in the best of circumstances. Today, however, was beyond painful. The big brains, Zhou Yu and Lu Su, were meeting with our new ally, Zhuge Liang, and the words they were throwing around... Let me put it this way, there was one particular sentence they used where I understood maybe half of the words in it. It was like they were speaking that mongrel language the pale-faces use when they come around selling their cheap wares off their smelly boats.

I watched the three of them sitting in a luxurious tent on silk cushions around a brazier and drinking wine out of gem-inlayed goblets. They did not look like much of anything, thin bones dwarfed by voluminous robes. But I knew that their appearance was deceiving. I had talked back to Yu once during a planning session. He said nothing beyond asking me to stay behind. I hoped that he was going to try to teach me a lesson; I welcomed a chance to see the skinny pretty-boy dance with that little sword of his. He told me to put down my blade and meet him outside, just the two of us. I smiled, looked down at him, cracked my knuckles and agreed. We walked to a little alley and I faced the chief strategist of my lord, Sun Quan, in battle.

I'd never received such a drubbing in my life. I should have known that someone as highly placed as him would have skills beyond that of his overeducated brain. I lifted my hand and beckoned him to come at me. Then I put up my fists. He sighed, tossed his long hair behind him and put up his own. Then flames popped up around his knuckles and sparked into the air, illuminating his face. I gasped and took a step back; it was all the opportunity he needed.

He flew at me, faster than an arrow and was within my guard. His fists, knees and feet came at me from every direction. I normally would barely have felt his blows. But the sheer number of them, combined with crackling heat, overwhelmed me. In only a few moments, I was on my knees. Just before my face hit the dirt, he reached and grabbed my hair with his fiery grip. At the brink of unconsciousness, I could smell my hair singeing.

He spoke quietly. "Have we come to an understanding, Lord Lu?" I mumbled something in the affirmative, eyes starting to water from the pain. "Good. Do not defy me in public again," he said as he let my head fall face first into a puddle of foul water. I coughed and retched as I rose to my feet. Through tear-streaming eyes, I could see Zhou Yu walking away, calm and collected.

When I saw him the next day, I bowed my head and addressed him as Lord Zhou. He asked me if I, "... was feeling any better, my friend Meng." He recommended I see a physician regarding the burns on my face and turned away. As I left, I saw my friend, and one of the greatest warriors I have known, Gan Xing, smile broadly and finger a faded, hand-shaped burn scar on his throat.

Remembering my defeat at Yu's hand, I stifled my contempt and stood at attention with the other waiting generals as the three scholars planned. Zhou Yu, clad in flowing red robes, gestured wildly as he argued with his second-in-command, the diminutive Lu Su. Su, in a white robe and headdress, dismissed the implication and turned to the third, Zhuge Liang. They both quieted while the newcomer dressed in green twirled his long moustache. Finally, after long moments of contemplation, the Sleeping Dragon smiled and nodded to Yu. An agreement apparently reached, Zhou Yu turned to the waiting generals, I among them.

He regarded us a moment before pointing a long finger at the grizzled veteran, Huang Gai. The old warrior – a veteran of many campaigns – sauntered over and leaned in close as Zhou Yu drew him to the tent. All of us still waiting perked up our ears and attempted to eavesdrop. I managed to hear the words, "Our lord ... defect ...," before Zhuge Liang motioned with his fan. Instantly, a gust of wind rose up, blowing out the brazier in the tent and stirring dust and debris all around. A wall of air, detectable by swirls of dirt, blew in front of the tent, preventing our snooping. Zhou Yu, annoyance readable in his face, re-lit the fire with a flick of his hands as he continued to speak to Huang Gai.

"I wonder what they are talking about in there," Xing said. I looked at my friend out of the corner of my eye, his short hair and pirate tattoos clearly distinct in the flickering camp light.

"Some genius plan on getting us out of this," I said.

“You think they can do it? Tomorrow will be bloody to say the least. They say that Cao Cao has a force of almost a million men.”

“So they say.” I snorted in contempt.

“And we have barely fifty thousand, and that is with our new ...,” he regarded the green-robed man fanning himself slowly in the tent. “ ... allies. Those are quite some odds.”

“Are you nervous, Xing, great Pirate King? You should be happy.”

“Happy?”

“A great naval battle tomorrow and thousands of victims.” I smiled, still keeping my eyes trained on the tent. The tacticians were drafting a letter, having Huang Gai make his signature at the bottom.

“I like a slaughter when I am the one slaughtering, my friend. Tomorrow, though ... I do not wish to die, swarmed by ants.” Gan Xing stared at the dirt, scowling.

“Enough, Xing,” I said, cuffing my friend lightly on the cheek. He stumbled and looked at me angrily before falling back into line, red seeping into his cheeks. “What will be, will be. I have doubts that the enemy numbers that many. The forces of Wei are strong, but they are coming to us. We are a nation of seamen – they are plainsmen who are being forced into makeshift boats. We have a strong ally in Liu Bei and his men: Zhuge Liang is the equal of our Zhou Yu in many respects. No, tomorrow does not look promising. But all is not lost,” I said through gritted teeth. Slowly, I saw the tension and anger ease from Xing’s body.

Xing said, “Thank you, Meng. It is hard for men of action – men like us – to stand idle. You understand.” I nodded and he continued, “You are right. Tomorrow will be a great day, victorious or not.”

I smiled and took a moment to reach out and grasp Xing’s shoulder before I stood back at attention. Almost immediately, Liang gestured and the wall of air came down with a rush and a popping of our ears. I gasped involuntarily, as did many of my fellows, as the four of them walked out of the tent. Huang Gai took his place back in line, stroking his long white beard. Then Liang and Yu walked off leaving Lu Su to give us our orders individually. He would touch each of the men lightly, on the arm or hand. Each would stand a little straighter and seem but a touch stronger after he spoke.

When he came to myself and Xing, Lu Su said, "You two are at home in the water, leading men and battling. Especially you, Xing. You are both in charge of the vanguard and will be reinforced by Huang Gai's smaller navy. You will lead the attack when the enemy approaches tomorrow. You will be supported by Liu Bei's troops on shore, archers and cavalry mostly. Hug the coastline and make sure that you do not become separated from the rest of the fleet." He grasped my forearm and instantly, I felt a surge of energy.

"Yes, of course," I said. When Lu Su moved to Xing, it was obvious that he also felt the power of Lu Su's touch; his breath quickened and his pupils dilated.

"You will watch for Liu Cong's recently impressed fleet. They will be the only troops that have any experience in a naval battle. They will be the most dangerous by far. When you identify their insignia, make for it straight away." We nodded our heads, as we had already come to that conclusion. The decision of our formerly allied northern neighbor, Liu Cong, to surrender rather than fight Cao Cao's invading army had brought this battle to us. We felt we had a score to settle with the coward.

"Now," he said, growing quiet. "Something will occur from our own lines during the battle. You are NOT to engage or interfere in any way. Do you understand?"

"Nor really, no. What is to happen?" I asked. He shook his head.

"I am sorry, but there are already too many who know. Just be cautious and allow anything from our own lines free rein." We nodded, cautiously, and he dismissed us before moving on down the line. Our hearts bursting with excitement and our limbs swelling, we broke out of formation and made our way to our tents, through the bustling camp.

Now that our lord's forces had combined with the forces of Liu Bei, the amount of men that were running around, preparing for the battle tomorrow, astounded me. Never had all of our troops been amassed in one place. We had made our camp on the Yang-tze river, just south of the port town of Hanyang, on top of some cliffs overlooking the water. When Zhuge Liang arrived yesterday, bearing the token of his master and ten thousand men, we could scarcely house them all. Now, in such a short time, everyone was huddled around camp fires, preparing for tomorrow.

We reached our tents, pitched next to each other near the center of the camp, and lingered for a moment. We stood and watched the activity of the camp without speaking for several moments before I finally broke the silence. "Tomorrow's going to be here soon."

"So you say, Meng, so you say."

"There is no use worrying. Let's drink, eh?" I asked, reaching into my tent and pulling out a large jug of wine.

"Now that is more like it," he said, removing his sword from his belt. We sat down on the ground and passed the jug back and forth as the night drew on.

The next morning, I woke as soon as the sun rose. I left my tent and waited in the gray light for Gan Xing to rouse and join me. It took him a short time and he grumbled at me when the light hit his eyes. "That was a brilliant idea, Meng. Drinking the night before we die. Wonderful, I get to drown with my head full of anvils and my tongue made of sand."

"Look at it this way," I said, dressing in my too-large armor and strapping my halberd to my back, "You might die from an arrow to the gut or a sword to the throat. Then you wouldn't have to worry about the indignity of a hangover." He barked a laugh and resumed getting ready as the camp woke around us: fifty thousand men rushing around and getting ready for the upcoming battle.

We made our way to the water, through a camp like a beehive set on fire. Through the whirl of activity and commotion, we walked through the stables as two thousand horses were being mounted and readied. I saw a glimpse of Liu Bei and his top generals in the center of the field, awash in green livery and metal before they were lost in the sea of action. "He looks old," I said to Meng. He grunted. They were to guard the shores of the river from enemy fire, hopefully not to be overrun.

After we passed the stable, we walked down the cliff path and saw the fleet of ships that waited. Our lord, Sun Quan, had diverted his entire navy to this one site and an entire section of the Yang-tze river was covered in the gently rocking boats and ships. The majority of the craft were small, humble vessels and would not be of much use in the fight, save as transport. Only one hundred of the ships were battle-ready; one half of those would be under the command of Xing and myself, and a dozen would be led by Huang Gai. We marched to our flagship, the *Sun's Flame*, and briefly conferred with our officers. I half watched as Huang Gai's vessels were loaded with hundreds of barrels. Puzzled, I started forward, thinking to ask, but was held back by Xing. I put it from my mind.

Xing and I spoke to each other and discussed the plan and our orders. We knew we were leading a diversionary tactic – but for what, we had no idea. We simply hoped for the best and trusted in the men under our command and our strategists to pull us through. “Or,” as Xing said, “to the Gods to receive us.” After consulting with Huang Gai, we ordered our men to board the vessels. And then we waited.

It took forever before Cao Cao’s forces were visible. At first, as the day wore on, nothing could be seen upriver. The sun bore down with us with an intense fury and the dead, calm air did nothing to alleviate the heat. We were all soon drenched with sweat and boredom. The early morning drifted into the afternoon and soon stretched into the evening before the first troop sighting was seen. Cao Cao’s cavalry and infantry had arrived and, at first glance, it seemed to rival the force of Liu Bei’s. A few minor skirmishes broke out, but it was apparent that Cao Cao was not planning on engaging, but held back instead. The army of Liu Bei soon quit attempting to bring the fight and instead settled down to wait for the arrival of the armada.

It didn’t take long at that point. The horizon was soon filled with small black dots that grew into distinct boat-like shapes. I heard Xing curse under his breath from next to me as the site grew into focus. “There’s hundreds of them. Thousands.” We stared together from the bow of the ship before I gave the signal to the captain to set out.

Immediately, our ship drew its anchor and set sail to engage the enemy forces and the fifty other ships in our convoy immediately followed. We took our time, making sure to keep our allies’ forces within sight and able to assist us if needed. As we approached, we readied ourselves. Suddenly, Xing gasped, shaded his eyes and squinted. “The enemy, their boats are all moving at the same speed at the same time. How is that possible?”

Now suddenly nervous – for we had heard of Cao Cao’s power and the ability of the warriors under him – we wondered aloud at what possible skill they had utilized to make their vessels sail in such tight formation. I ordered the captain to bring us to a halt.

We had to wait ever longer for the uniformly-moving boats to reach us and I itched with impatience. We could see small amounts of men moving on the north bank, reinforcing Cao Cao’s non-naval forces, but they seemed content to wait for the moment. As twilight came upon us, we finally saw a large detachment, about two hundred ships, break away from the main armada and sail toward us. Thousands of oars pulled at the water.

“Finally,” Xing said, yelling to the troops. He yelled his war cry and ordered the captain to engage the enemy. Our ships jumped forward, and our land-based allies, alerted by our flagmen, kept pace. It seemed only moment awaited before we would meet the enemy.

Xing screamed shortly before we reached the enemy and jumped to the side of the ship. He extended his sword, pointed it toward the leading ship marked with Liu Cong’s blue banner and a humming kind of vibration emanated from the blade. He moaned along with it and, after a moment, light emitted from Xing’s blade. He screamed and a great blast of energy burst forth from the tip and across the water to smash into the prow of the oncoming ship. Wood collapsed and the vessel began to sink. I took Xing’s arm and helped him step down. He shook me off and mumbled that he was fine ... and then we were among the enemy.

A naval battle is no less confusing than a battle on land – if anything it is more so. To go with the screams and shouts of thousands of men, there is also the heaving of the ship which can throw off even the best placed blow. There is the constant spray of water and the creaking of wood as ships slam into each other. There is the spray of vomit from sea sickness that mingles with the blood and water.

Immediately we were boarded by the enemy. The rest of our assault group were spared the indignity of hand-to-hand combat and simply strafed the enemy with a barrage of arrows and small siege weapons. We, however, as the lead ship, were instantly swarmed. My hand-picked men met the charge with a scream and cold steel. I unstrapped my halberd and leapt into the fray, followed closely by Xing, and began laying about with everything I could muster.

My halberd sheared through armor, metal and bone with ease and their blades, if they did pierce my armor, bounced off my skin. One hapless soldier, overcome perhaps, jumped on my back and attempted to slice my neck with his blade. Laughing, I concentrated for a moment and, seconds later, I had grown to half again my original size. My once-loose armor, which jangled and chafed with movement, suddenly fit like a second skin. I am not normally a giant – it tires me out; I had met many former opponents who, when introduced in a tavern over a glass of spirits, were confused and bewildered by my meek frame. Only in the thick of battle would I use my power, to grow or shrink according

to whim. The soldier, suddenly displaced, tumbled from my back before I turned and skewered him. I turned back to the rest of the enemy and barely saw the giant metal club as it came at me.

I brought my weapon up just in time to block the blow, but the sheer force of it threw me backward. I scrambled to my feet and then I saw him, Xu Chu, the Tiger Fool, captain of Cao Cao's bodyguards. He was a bear of a man, over seven feet tall and twice as thick as an ordinary man. His enormous belly and friendly, round face belied his enormous speed and brutal force. I recognized him immediately, though we had never met. He had slaughtered thousands in service to his lord.

Xu Chu sprung at me, swinging his great club as if it were a table knife. I made no attempt to block it, but shrunk myself and dodged to one side, letting the club swing over my suddenly child-size body. I spent a moment's time growing and then, twice the height of a normal man, swung my halberd. Xu Chu turned in time to see it coming and, snarling, knocked my blade aside with his hand. He yelled and threw the club at me with all his strength. I could not dodge in time, but willed my skin to be as hard as stone and increased my size once again.

All the air left my lungs as the club struck me in the belly and tossed me off my feet. I was propelled back, knocking over several fighting men, until I slammed into the guard rail, cracking it. I shook my head and stood, in time to see Xu Chu charging at me. I was shocked when I saw tusks grow from his mouth, his fair skin grow mottled and hairy, his feet burst free from the confines of his boots and hooves pound the deck, cracking it in places.

Knowing I had no chance of surviving the impact or taking Xu Chu barehanded, I decreased my size one last time, my ears popping and my heart beating double-time with the strain. I willed myself to be as dense as possible and now, only a fraction the size of a man, I flung myself at his pig-feet.

I felt two of his hooves slam down on me, cracking my ribs despite my iron-like skin and I grunted with the pain. Xu Chu cursed, off balance and, running full-tilt, smashed through the damaged guardrail and into empty space. I yelled in triumph, rushed over to the side and looked over, hoping to see nothing but bubbles. Unfortunately, the giant pig-man was swimming gamely to shore.



"I didn't know pigs could swim," I muttered, turning back to the fray. To my surprise, however, it was over. The enemy, all garbed in blue, were lying on the deck, mingled with the red of my own allies. Near the bow, I could see Xing mopping up the rest of the boarding crew as they rushed to escape his wrath. Satisfied that my attention was not needed, I next looked to the naval battle beyond.

A few of the enemy ships still drifted among our fleet and were putting up a fight. In addition, perhaps a score of our own vessels were listing or sinking, but the vast majority of the enemy were either vanquished or retreating, followed by Huang Gai's reserve force. I cheered.

Soon though, my cheer turned to a frown. Why was Gai not attacking the enemy? It was almost as if ... I squinted and looked closer. I saw that one of Gai's ships was actually *leading* the pack. As Xing came back up to me, chest heaving in exertion and a trickle of blood running down his forehead, I took his shoulder and spun him, pointing. "What is Gai doing?"

Xing looked himself and then cursed. "The bastard is leading the enemy away. What the hell happened?" Just then, one of our lead corsairs drew up to our boat and the captain leapt from his ship to our own. He fired us a rapid bow.

"My lords," he said, his voice quavering. "We were engaging the enemy flagship, led by the betrayer Liu Cong when all of a sudden, Huang Gai attacked us."

"Huang Gai attacked you?" I asked, trying to overcome my disbelief. Before he could answer, I signaled for us to give chase. The message was swiftly relayed throughout the fleet through our flagmen in the crow's nest. Our jumbled fleet slowly tried to untangle our position to begin the seemingly hopeless pursuit. Meanwhile, the main enemy body had barely moved position. In the still, dead air, our oarsmen groaned to move the dense water.

"Yes, sir. We were in the midst of fighting when we were overcome by the most horrid noise. Many of our men's eardrums burst then and there. Both our troops and the enemy's troops fell to their knees. When we attempted to reconvene, Gai's troops were among us, beating us down and protecting Liu Cong's retreat. Before we had the chance to recover, they were away."

After the captain gave us his story, I thanked him and sent him on his way. It was now a race against time that I didn't expect to win. The enemy had too great a distance

advantage. We pressed on and I took the chance to survey the position of our main fleet and ground troops.

Nothing had changed. Liu Bei's forces had barely moved from their prior position and were still keeping time with us, if only just. Meanwhile, our grand fleet had advanced slightly and seemed to be keeping an eye on the action. In the distance, I could just see a small group of horsemen on the wall of rock overlooking the water itself. I could just barely see a triumvirate of color before I turned back. Cao Cao's main land troops had still not engaged our ally, apparently waiting to see the outcome of the naval battle.

Several tense minutes went by as we drew ever closer to the enemy. Xing stood on the bow and again his sword hummed as he unleashed his power toward the retreating ships. A flash of light, a roar of displaced air and an arrow of fire emerged from the tip of his blade ... to dissipate harmlessly across the water. He sagged in exhaustion.

Soon, the first of Gai's ships reached the enemy and I spoke to the captain of our vessel. The message was quickly relayed throughout our command and we slowed. Xing turned to me and asked, "What are we doing? We can catch them!" He pointed at the retreating ships and spit as he spoke.

"Of course we can. And then their numbers will overwhelm us ..." I trailed off as I looked at the horde of blue-flagged ships, so closely packed together in an impossibly tight formation. Even our own ships, the best of the navy, could not keep such a perfect line. I squinted again, and saw something thick and heavy extending between the ships. "It isn't possible ..."

"What?"

"The ships ... they're, chained together. But that's." I stopped speaking and thought. It takes me awhile sometimes to get a thought, so as this one occurred to me, I devoted all resources.

"What, Meng?"

"Hold on ... I think I'm getting – yes! I am definitely getting a thought."

"What?"

"The ships. No wonder they are so closely packed. They're chained together," I yelled at last.

"But why? That's stupid."

“Who knows? We wondered how they amassed a navy so quickly. Maybe they don’t have much of a navy. Maybe they have a quarter of a million infantry on boats. And maybe they are, I don’t know, sea sick or something. Chaining the boats together would reduce that wouldn’t it?”

Xing thought for a moment. “I suppose so, but that doesn’t explain why Huang Gai would betray us and make for the enemy.” He watched the last of the fleeing troops join the vast navy. The few red-flagged ships joined and we watched men crossing over. I turned again to face the cliffs overlooking the river. Again, in the distance, I could barely make out three forms watching the conflict: one clothed in white, one in green and one in red.

I watched the oarsmen of our own ships sitting idle and thought about the heavy, unmoving air. I thought about why six lightly manned boats would rush the enemy, betraying a master they had served for a lifetime. I thought about how vulnerable chained boats would be together.

I turned to the crew, “Pull our boats back. Signal all the ships.”

“My lord,” the flagmen said.

“Wait for the signal from Gai,” I said. Xing turned.

“What the hell are you talking about?” Before I could respond, we heard, distantly, the ear-piercing shriek of Huang Gai. Immediately, one of our ships began to pull away from the enemy horde. I signaled to our flagmen, but he was one step ahead and was already motioning to our troops. As we began to retreat the chained-fleet began chasing us, still bound together, our five renegade, clearly abandoned boats bobbing in the still water behind them, enveloped by them.

Me, I watched the cliffs.

Soon, one of the forms, the one in green, lifted his arms. I could barely see him at that distance, but I could fill in the blanks with my imagination. Slowly, a tiny breeze would blow around him and build into a strong wind. Not long after, the one in white would grasp him by the arms and bow his head, concentrating. His own strength bolstered by the power of another, Zhuge Liang’s wind gust would burst into a gale and rush toward the oncoming navy. It howled through our own ships, setting us to rocking and chopping the water into a frothy nightmare. Our ships rolled with the new wind storm but the chained enemy barely

rocked. Xing and our sailors yelled, their voices lost in the mightiest gale we had seen in a long time, all from nowhere, but I stayed calm. I had a suspicion of what was to come.

While Zhuge Liang held his arms aloft, keeping the storm gusting about, focused on the five ships now deep in the enemy armada, virtually in the center and enveloped by the enemy horde, Zhou Yu bowed his head and concentrated. In a second, a small spark grew in his outstretched hand. It built into a fire that engulfed his hand and then, as sweat began to form on his brow, into an inferno the size of a man and then a horse. As it reached the size of a house, Lu Su let go of Zhuge Liang and grasped the red-clothed man's forearm. Energy surged through Zhou Yu and the flame, which started as a spark, suddenly built into a river of flame. A torrent of fire was unleashed into the storm and was borne along the winds to the center of the enemy fleet. A few enemy ships were engulfed and our soldiers cheered. But I waited.

The explosion that resulted when our abandoned ships, deep in the heart of the enemy lines and filled with barrel upon barrel of oil, pitch and gunpowder, met the river of fire, rocked the chained vessels and engulfed the center of the armada in flames. Buffeted and fed by the roaring winds, the flames spread quickly to the trapped and immobilized fleet. We all watched, fascinated as thousands of boats, all teeming with enemy soldiers, burned on the water. Only a few on the outskirts managed to detach the heavy chains and flee, as did the remnants of Liu Cong's attack force. The rest we watched burn.

As we watched burning men dive overboard and the smell of roasting flesh wafted to us on the still-roaring currents, our attention was dragged by a scream of metal against metal and cries of thousands of men as Lie Bei's force suddenly wheeled in their place and charged at the shocked and motionless land troops of Wei. Despite their smaller size, the ferocity of the attack shocked the superior army, distracted as they were by the raging pyre and screams of their men, and they were immobilized. Just then, the main force of our armada set out for the other side of the river, clearly to give aid. We had not noticed, but over the past few hours, the armada had drifted closer and closer to the opposite shore, preparing for this moment. It did not take long before they reached land and disembarked, screaming, to join with Lie Bei. We gave orders to join up, but it was clear that the fighting would be long over when we reached them.

As we approached, I saw a small group of horseman disengage from the rear of the fighting and set out for escape downriver. I ordered my ship to turn about an attempt to give chase. I had no stomach for what I knew was about to occur. I like a fair fight.

Before we were far gone, we could hear screaming the in distance. The butchering had begun.

We sped toward the fleeing horsemen. As we neared shore, we managed to overtake them. I jumped on the bow and watched; I could spy in the center of the pack a large blue banner above an ornately dressed warrior. I ordered the oarsmen to redouble their efforts and the sail to be fully let out. We jumped ahead and I rallied the men around me. In moments, we had made shore and we leapt off.

I concentrated and felt a surge of energy as I instantly doubled in size. My feet hit the muddy beach and made an indentation the size of a large dog. Behind me, I heard the air vibrating and felt the heat of energy as it went past me and into the rush of oncoming horses. I rushed toward the confused enemy, my long strides leaving my men behind. I was met by the giant club of a giant pig.

We fought on the river as my men caught up to me. Xing shouted encouragement from the rear and the cavalry pressed as they desperately sought to escape. I dimly saw Cao Cao mere feet away from me, but every time I attempted to reach him, the giant club flew at me. I barely dodged attack after attack and launched my own, with no success.

After long moments, I heard a cheer and smiled, confident that we had finally taken down the leader of the enemy. *The war is over*, I thought. I grinned and pressed my advantage, doubling my size once again as my weapon locked with the Pig. I looked down on him and grinned, bringing my full weight to bear. Just as I was about to bear him down, he twisted his weight (surprisingly nimble for one of his bulk), and I lost balance. Starting to tip over, the ground rushing toward me, I closed my eyes and cursed.

When I woke up, a dull pain in my head and my limbs feeling heavier than iron, I was first surprised and elated that I still lived. I could smell the overwhelming scent of iron and salt and ash. Confused, I whipped my head around. I then saw it, the river, running blackish-red from the blood and soot that had been unleashed.

Just beyond me, I saw Xing rallying the remainder of our men. I stood and waved to catch his attention. He nodded, smile breaking out on his face as he talked to the men. I

took a moment to glance around, seeing no signs of banners or pig-men and, importantly, no raiment of Cao Cao himself. It took me a moment to process it and when I did, I sat down on the blood-soaked ground with a grunt. We had failed.

I ignored Xing's embrace when we walked back to our ship. We sailed back to our forces, to where our combined army stood congratulating each other. My heart was heavy when we sailed upon that diseased-looking water.

The cliffs ran red with blood; the sky was choked with soot and ashes. And this was but a footnote.

## **Bio**

Bradley Michaelson hails from Baltimore, MD. This is his first publication. He's read about a lot of superheroes and he's happy to contribute a story of his own.

# **Burning in Rome**

***Rebecca L. Brown***

The madness came from trying to hold it all inside; he must never let them know. Even now, he could feel the tips of his fingers singeing the fabric of his robe. He closed his hands into fists, curling his body around them.

As a child, even as a young man, he had been able to control it; both the madness and the heat. He had delighted in touching the wicks of candles and watching the flame jump onto them, clapping his hands as his glowing fingertips faded back to more fleshy tones. Later, when his powers had begun to grow, he had been able to place his hand on a pile of wood and watch it spring to life. Many times, he had rested his hand in the centre of his fires but never singed so much as a single hair; no fire of his making could ever harm his body. His clothes had burnt though, the folds of his toga often blackening as he leant over the fires he had created. The slaves had not dared to ask for an explanation.

He remembered the first time he had lost control, the flames flowing out of his body without his bidding. The girl had been a household slave, less a lover than a vessel of relief. Even so, she had not deserved the fate which had befallen her. He had gathered her ashes himself, tipped them into the household waste before anybody could see them.

That was when the flames had started to move into his mind, their tongues melting away his sanity, whispering lies and garbled nonsense into his ears. The flames consumed him from the inside, marking his feverish skin with pocks and spots. Only the sight of blood or the sweet sounds of music retained the ability to cool the blaze which raged within him. Yes, music flowed through his veins, his passion for it almost equal to this ungodly heat. In other moments when the pressure had become too great, he had found release through his song.

These days, the heat controlled him, racking his body and his mind with its intensity until he could no longer hold them back. He should never have made such flippant use of his flames, encouraging them to greater and greater heat as he rose to power until now they almost consumed even him. Worse, now when he held them inside he felt as if his own

mind was on fire. It had been months since he had been able to sneak away, to place his hands on the sweet, brittle surfaces of firewood before a slave had beaten him to it.

He bit down on his tongue, a slight tang filling his mouth. His hands flew open and he arched backwards, grinding his head and thighs against his bed. Every inch of his body throbbed unbearably, his own pulse racing through his mind, a staccato of agony.

His hands closed on the sides of the bed and he screamed silently...

As the flames jumped from building to wood-framed building, his bodyguard rushed him from the city. His fingers brushed the beams of buildings as he passed, unable to contain the flames which leapt from them in the full grip of his madness. As they passed from the fear-crowded streets, the echo of his pulse eased from his mind, replaced by the agony of this vision.

They must never know he had been there, never know he had caused this nightmare! In that brief moment of sanity, he constructed his plan. Later that night, he would return as if from Antium, rushing as if to quell the blaze which threatened to destroy the heart of his empire. Even now, he could turn this disaster into his ultimate glory! From the Palatine hill, he watched his Rome burn and dreamed of what might rise from the ashes.

## **Bio**

Rebecca L. Brown is a British writer. She specialises in horror, SF, humour, surreal and experimental fiction, although her writing often wanders off into other genres and gets horribly lost. For updates and examples of Rebecca's work, visit her Twitter page @rlbrownwriter or her blog Bewildering Circumstances ( <http://bewilderingcircumstances.blogspot.com/> )



# Empirical Purple

*Andy West*

*Nations and empires flourish and decay,  
by turns command, and in their turns obey.*

*– Publius Ovidius Naso (Ovid) 43BC – 17AD*

*Men are but children, too,  
though they have grey hairs;  
they are only of a larger size.*

*– Lucius Anneus Seneca 4BC – 65AD*

Though his knees were rooted on cold marble, his spirit soared. His breathing had not subsided back to normal; his chest pumped heavily through a dry throat and his heart hammered. The Virgin Mary smiled upon him, and the sober sanction of history flowed from Justinian's unwavering gaze.

Heraclius heard a rustling of robes as the Patriarch knelt beside him. He raised his sight, past mottled columns tiered upon columns hiding shadowed secrets behind, past lancing beams that sought vainly to reveal and, tilting back his head, past the bright hues of hovering saints and up into the highest reaches of the Church of Holy Wisdom. Its great dome, like the golden iris of God's vision upon his flock, ringed with dazzling light, stared back.

Heraclius lowered his head and waited. His breathing finally quietened, yet his veins tingled with the feel of the Holy Spirit. He turned to his companion. The echoes of a distant chant rolled over them like the gentle surf of a celestial sea.

Ruddy lips trembled in the grey waterfall of the Patriarch's beard. His face was pale and drawn, but eyes of glassy blue revealed crystallisation into a stern decision.

"Augustus, Imperator," announced the Patriarch in tight tones, "the Lord's will shines from you." He paused. "The full resources of the church are yours. This will be... Holy War."

Those last two words, thought Heraclius, never before used together, made a strange marriage of sound. Yet undoubtedly a potent one too. He smiled the smile of the just.

‡

Ofermynd peered through a meta-lens at the multifarious, proliferating life that seethed within its boundaries. For his better understanding, each of the sub-species had been tinted.

A huge swathe of primitive purple things occupied the central area, almost completely surrounding a reflective splash of water. Other entities, gathered in churning agglomerations of grey, ate aggressively at the left boundary of purple's collective mass. Yet even as they did so the latter's hue leaked into the grey forms, subtly altering their characteristics.

Sub-species purple was in fact heavily pressured all around. Virulent emerald dropped from above, stretching the purple there to a wafer-thin meniscus that looked likely to burst. Increasingly darker greens pushed in waves from behind this first, marking a series of related organisms that originated outside the field of the lens. To the right a dense pool of gold, although itself suffering beneath descending invasions of green, nevertheless spilled forcefully towards the water, overwhelming a frantic defence by the purple creatures. As if all this wasn't enough, umber ripples washed up from below and nibbled, before retreating elusively to somewhere off the bottom of his view.

Although he had seen miniature struggles of this kind many times before, he was absolutely fascinated by purple's survival in such adversity. Especially since it had lasted so long already while other colours, other sub-species that is, grew and died around it. He switched out of real-time and played back the historical record once more, seeking explanations for this peculiar longevity.

He felt strangely omnipotent as he did so, suddenly aware of his own vastness and sophistication and sense of time compared to the hapless, striving generations of simple life beneath his observation. How odd! Such a sensation had never assailed him before. He pushed the spurious mood firmly aside.

‡

Five years of hard war had brought Heraclius to this dry eastern plain. Inspired war, successful war, Holy War.

He gazed out towards Nineveh. The massed spears of his enemies gleamed pale-gold in the thin sunlight of a fine winter's day. Above the deceptive sea of their perilous points,

flew the many standards and colours belonging to those great families and royal regiments gathered here by their overlord, the king of kings. Yet though this grand army was proud, Heraclius was certain it was born of a last possible muster. When its pagan defiance shivered under cogent Christian swords, all Persia would be prostrate and helpless before him.

Amid the waving banners he recognised a yellow-gold lion on white. A wry grimace flickered across his lips. If they would desperately resurrect their lost glories of old, the ancient colossus of a thousand years gone, then *he* would comfortingly recall Alexander, flame of the West and the nemesis of Persian empire. It came to him that in all the long age since those mythic days, East and West had hardly ceased their struggle.

His horse gave a loud snort and vigorously shook its head, eager for the coming charge. He leant forward a little in the saddle and patted its muscular neck.

“Patience Dorkon,” he muttered. “By the will of God, it comes soon.”

‡

Deep in the historical record, Ofermynd found that the watery area’s right half was once dominated by a bewildering patchwork of differing blues. He focussed in, peering curiously at these earlier inhabitants of purple’s future territory.

He perceived that they prospered on specks of solidity within the shallow liquid, also clustering around the more jagged profiles that defined the water’s edge. Their wide variety of form, their polymorphism, which the meta-lens had represented via many shades of blue, was mainly due to scattered populations developing in partial isolation.

As accelerated time propelled captivating, kaleidoscopic patterns around, some of the brighter blues flooded a great distance out to their right, expanding eastwards as it were. Meanwhile a vivid, uniform burgundy grew to the left of their home. This fresh colour first occupied a long finger of ground that stretched southwards into the water, then expanded violently in all directions, to the detriment of most of the adjacent creatures.

Yet belligerent burgundy didn’t consume the blues, Ofermynd observed with great surprise, as it had other shrinking victims. Rather it surrounded their core area and merged with them, forming a new entity. This was the birth of purple proper, and now he began to understand the origins of the organism’s persistent nature. Burgundy provided a strong backbone and overall uniformity of action, while numerous expressions of blue survived

sufficiently in the fused population to donate an impressive breadth of form, and so excellent adaptability.

Having paused the record for a while to observe this crucial stage of purple creation, he let time roll forward again. Flickering, radiant hues reflected the lives and deaths of millions, fleeting fuel for evolutionary tides.

Residual blues left stranded far to the east of the water by the force of their own flood, faded out as surviving shards of a once dominant saffron sub-species that had been shattered by blue's invasion, eventually coalesced again. They transmuted to a great block of glowing gold, while powerful purple augmented to occupy a wide border all the way around the water. Territorial tension between western purple and eastern gold was then endemic for many generations, right up to the present moment, where the inertial genus represented by weighty metal had rolled forward to gain a significant advantage.

‡

Heraclius swivelled as best he could in heavy armour and glanced back over his own troops, still flowing like an irresistible tide of steel into their final positions. Imperial and legionary monograms were held high on long poles, their purple swallow-tails fluttering in a chill breeze. Above all sailed the white cross and letters of Christ, pure against their background of blazing red.

He deliberately and devoutly crossed himself. Seeing this, his generals and staff then followed suit. They had unusually strong reason to do so. Their path to the heart of enemy empire was gilded with victories gained against the odds, and strewn with unlikely Persian destruction. This army carried the fury of The Lord, fighting always under His protection.

An acrid smell reached his nostrils, overriding the constant odour of pig-grease that was used to care for their precious steel, the teeth and claws and hide of this avenging beast of sixty thousand parts. They were setting fires and heating tar, for the arrows that would pour onto the heads of their foe in a righteous rain of flame. After his fifty-two years and many wars, it was a smell rich in memories. Black coils angled up, stigma against the sky, but higher still were cleansed by crystal heavens.

Dorkon's ears flicked forward. Faint cries grew to hoarse shouts on the wind, accompanied by thumping hooves and the jingle of harness.

"Mard U Mard. Mard U Mard!"

It was the traditional Persian call, “Man to Man.” Their champions, adorned with gold sashes, were riding out to challenge the Roman best in single combat.

He swept back his cloak of imperial purple and loosened his sword in its sheath. The generals blanched.

“Augustus, please...” stuttered Priscus.

Heraclius replied with only a stern glance. Their pleas would not hold him back this time. Unlike them he had no need for fear or hope. He knew with an absolute certainty given to no other, that The Lord would preserve him.

He pulled his spear free and braced the heavy weapon before issuing a sharp command. Dorkon sprang forward, as though a living arrow loosed from some great bow.

Heraclius exulted as the keen wind of speed roused his blood. His cloak pulled and fluttered behind him like wings. He angled towards the leading champion. The man’s dark steed frothed at the mouth. Black locks and gold streamers flew from a lofty helm. A wild stare targeted him from immediately beneath.

Steel sparked and spears shattered, as purple met gold in a bone-shaking crash.

‡

Ofermynd pondered the beautiful, metamorphosing patterns. To his surprise, he was deeply stirred by them. These trivial creatures and their petty battles for survival should really mean nothing to him, except for a little dry knowledge he might perhaps filter out. Possibly some unique details about the competitive process within their particular environment. Yet in the distant places below his high consciousness, something significant was moving. What? Ancient instincts perhaps? A fundamental recognition? That even at the hugely elevated plane of his own Community, a much more sophisticated form of this rainbow game still defined all their actions?

He realised he had to know more, search deeper, resolve and release the flaring of his inner psyche. And he found himself curiously and strongly sympathetic to the purple creatures. How ridiculous! Yet he truly hoped they would not be crushed by the pressing weight of gold or damaged by grey aggression, or simply overwhelmed by enormous, emerald tsunamis.

He replayed the same section of the record, but now he concentrated upon the display’s upper portion, the north of this tiny world revealed by the meta-lens. The first

destructive wave of green came as burgundy and blue were still marrying. Fortunately, ochre and other creatures to the north-east buffered its force, to their great cost. Some were extinguished.

The second wave came much later, when purple was at its territorial maximum, but this one was far more potent. A torrent of vicious organisms battered against purple's top border. The line of purple shimmered and bulged, but somehow it held. His favoured sub-species had successfully defended its core breeding grounds around the water, but unfortunate secondary effects were then set in motion.

Green's massive momentum was undiminished. Constrained to roll west over a straining mass of purple, the virescent wave swiftly crashed into piled greys. Great globs of these, the creatures within both highly provoked and fleeing danger, were then sent spinning irresistibly into purple's western territory, devouring all before them. After two more generations, the entire left-half of the long-standing and ordered domain of purple was lost to churning storms in smoky hues, albeit their trailing fringes were now strongly tinged with mauve.

Apparently undaunted, purple proper in the east began an arduous re-conquest. As current time was once again reached, it had taken back a large portion of the lost area from chaotic grey. But the situation was still fluid and by now a third destructive wave, the glittering emerald, had swept down from above. Once again purple's boundary was distended dangerously downwards, still more so in fact. Once again unfortunate greys absorbed a massive shock and fired out dangerous, invasive fragments.

And from the furthest east came yet more danger. The gold organisms, though harmed themselves by the next green menace from the north, had chosen this moment of all moments to set their tremendous weight against purple, and push towards the water. Ofermynd now understood the vivid scene from all angles, and he perceived that purple's very survival hung in the balance.

An illogical but intense concern for purple's welfare rippled through the different dimensions and far-flung places of Ofermynd's consciousness. Unquenchable curiosity soon followed. What process made the disastrous green waves? How did *any* of these insubstantial creatures bind together for such aggressive and co-ordinated communal

purpose? How far did the word *purpose* even stretch for such apparently mindless strife? How did they perceive each other? What would become of purple?

The meta-lens detected his queries and tightened its focus, pulling him nearer to the turbulent world of vivid competitors. Finer shades and greater detail sprang out at him. The instrument also offered lengthy analyses and predictions for the future; two generations ahead, ten generations ahead, thirty generations ahead.

In a fey mood, he waved the formal data away. For once he wanted to see for himself, not be told. To *really* see. The strength of feeling that welled up in him about this was a great surprise. Perhaps teased by the base instincts these hypnotic patterns seemed to evoke, he lusted strangely for raw experience and excitement, *outside* the constraints of Community. He desired in some sense to attach his emotions to the fate of purple's millions, despite their incredibly primitive form and *without* knowing what that fate was likely to be.

Recklessly, he pushed himself further into the lens. His vision narrowed to a fine needle of light. His perception of time and space was sloughed off. New senses, relayed by the meta-lens from the fecund, fermenting environment of the burgeoning creatures, assaulted him and sent shockwaves out to the furthest corners of his being.

‡

The troops were inspired into a frenzied bloodlust by his deeds. Hurling at the tops of their voices, hails pounded against his ears like the waves of a storm-driven sea.

Heraclius allowed himself a smile, though the action spilled a new rivulet of warmth over his chin and lanced pain into his jaw. He spat out a piece of tooth. A slashed and splintered mouth was a small price to pay, for out on the killing field he had slain three mighty champions, dispatching their pagan souls to hell right before the massed eyes of both armies.

Dorkon carried a wound too, though he trotted back proudly, hooves high. His armour of dried sinew had taken the worst of the blow, yet even so his left foreleg was now dyed red.

The generals were almost as moved as the common soldiers, Heraclius noted, but their belief in him was less profound and so easily overwhelmed by simple astonishment. As they struggled badly to conceal this reaction, concern came to their rescue.

"Augustus, you're wounded. I'll call for a surgeon."

Heraclius raised his arm to forbid.

"It's nothing, it can wait," he slurred through ragged lips. "The Lord just likes to remind me I'm mortal." He paused and briefly tilted back his head to view the heavens. "Move the men."

He caught Markus and Priscus and Patricius all glancing sidelong at each other. Signalling what? Uncertainty? Scepticism? Fear? He knew that of late, the nature of his very personal relationship with God unsettled them.

Markus wheeled his horse and galloped away down the lines, lightly tapping commanders with his baton as he passed. The beast of an army bared its teeth.

Archers flung black sheets of arrows over the sky, each time dimming the sun and filling the air with a devil's hiss. Sixty thousand throats bellowed for blood as innumerable swords beat hard against shields, creating an immense clamour that outmatched the short-lived peals of nature's thunder and rolled menacingly across the plain. The letters of Christ, like Argo's sail in the ruddy glow of a sunset horizon, surged forth on a swirling sea of purple pennants and silver steel and shining faith.

"Priscus, go forward with Markus. Patricius, stay here beside me."

Patricius visibly slumped with disappointment. Heraclius didn't doubt the young man's courage, but much more than dash and daring was needed to lead men in the field. Though he showed promise, Patricius' rank was due to exalted family connections in Constantinople rather than to proven soldiering skills. He needed a few more years in the saddle.

"If things go badly," stated Heraclius in a low voice, as though in confidence, "I'll need a bold officer to inspire the troops again. One not already exhausted from hard fighting."

Patricius' spine straightened.

"Do you truly believe these Persian slaves can resist us?"

"I believe in The Lord's purpose. Though often veiled, at least it seems clear here. Yet He still expects us *to strive* to fulfil His will. Yeah to our utmost, and more."

As the first clash and shriek of conflict rent the dense winter atmosphere, Heraclius surveyed the field through narrowed eyes.

"And bear in mind that we are deep in our enemy's territory, without hope of relief and facing a larger army. Nor in this case are most of them slaves. There are noble families



here, and townsfolk from Nineveh, which has neither the walls nor capacity to improve its odds by opting for siege. They defend royal Dastegard and Ctesiphon too, the heart of empire, for no other army is left in all of Persia.

“Desperation lends a certain kind of strength. But if we hold to our duty, divine purpose will prevail.”

“Is it The Lord’s purpose to have all pagans slain?” asked Patricius breathlessly, as though he couldn’t believe his own audacity.

While groping for expression, Heraclius lost himself in a maze of recent memory and wonderment, stumbling across more complex questions than that from young Patricius.

When sitting in utter despair by the Bosphorus years ago, watching fat-bellied ships claw their way crabwise against the wind, he had doubted the power of The Lord. Why had Persian unbelievers been allowed to take and desecrate greater Syria and the Holy Lands? Why had his generals crumbled? Only when he had realised it was a challenge and a test of faith for the true flock, perhaps for him personally, did selfish shadow lift from his eyes and reveal noble, white-hot remedies. The path to The Lord was up-wind, and it was time for a change of tack.

His first and greatest reward had come right there, exalting him.

He immediately swore to become a warrior of God, a fierce flame of The Lord’s fire. He swore to burn away doubt and un-Christian practice, to incinerate the occupying hordes and blasphemous idols, to blast the very foundations of eastern evil; not just in the Holy Lands but far beyond, until the pagan pulse of Persia was cauterised, and ceased.

Since then, incredibly, over a five year campaign he had faced up to and destroyed no less than five Persian armies. This sixth was the last. The Lord had made him invulnerable, and despite his comments to Patricius there could be little doubt now that the Persian monster would topple.

Resisting the temptation to follow more material concerns, those of empire and his own too, he’d always kept The Lord’s purpose uppermost. He did not occupy conquered territory or waste time on booty and reward. Instead he laid waste to Atropatane, the centre of heinous Zoroastrianism, and levelled the birthplace of Zarathustra himself. At the pagans’ revered Fire Temple of Atur Gushnasp, he extinguished the ‘eternal’ flame and had every brick and stone of its structure pounded into dust. As for its bottomless pool, with the

famed purity that evoked false worship, he poured in thousands of armoured battlefield corpses plus fifty weighted and leaking barrels of tar.

He gutted a string of defenceless towns and some luckless cities too, only to abandon them again and drive for the central organs, the capital Ctesiphon and nearby Dastegard. Yet not before he'd put all the religious hierarchy of such places to the sword. Thus were the slaughtered monks and churchmen of Jerusalem avenged, with generous interest.

Learning from the flashing scimitars of his enemies, he'd kept moving, staying flexible and striking fast. He hadn't attempted to grind down and recover Damascus or Jerusalem, thereby harming his own populations within and becoming a strategic target himself. He'd simply bypassed them and thrust straight into the guts of Persia's homeland.

Patricius, fresh from Constantinople these three months past, had missed most of the campaign, indeed had been a gangly boy when it started.

Now at last an end was in sight. An end to this long trial and punishment that the priests were calling *causa crucis*, the cause of the cross. But what did The Lord expect of him next? An utter extinguishment? Or holy mercy? Would the Persians learn their lesson and seek a right path? Would their minority Christians, the Nestorians, be raised up?

His choices were limited. He didn't have a fraction of the manpower required to occupy the vast domains of this pagan empire, which stretched far eastwards into India and beyond his imagination.

And what came after? Peace and rest, or a still sterner test?

He remembered himself and focussed back on Patricius, attempting a smile that turned into an agonising and no doubt bloody grimace. Searching blue eyes and a flickering frown told of the officer's long wait for an answer.

"The Lord tolerates those who have not yet learned His name and His ways. Some such he even sends as allies to aid us. Simple folk and shallow, though swift and fearless in battle.

"But this ancient eastern foe, these wilful disbelievers, have piled sin upon sin. After resisting The Lord for centuries, they have ravaged His true flock. From Antioch to beyond Alexandria, they dared to look upon our Roman sea. And they raped all the churches in-between, stealing even the Holy Cross of Jerusalem to parade in their decadent capital.

“The Lord cannot allow such evil defiance to go unpunished. His will is that Royal Persia be utterly crushed, and its idols cast down and defiled. Though in part our own faltering of faith caused things to go so far, we are now the inspired instrument of that will.”

Patricius’ confusion transformed into reverence and open-mouthed awe, yet doubt then gathered around quivering lips.

“Augustus. Augustus... You rule us in war and peace, in body and spirit. You are The Lord’s hand on Earth. But... but...”

“But yet I am still just a man. How therefore can I be so sure?”

Inspiring memory came to Heraclius and lit a leaping fire of faith in his breast. Forgetting the pain in his jaw he laughed, deeply and easily. Excitement relaxed his cautions and loosened his tongue.

“After the Avars pierced us so deeply from the north and Persia grasped our Holy Lands to the east, I thought all was lost and considered abdication. But at my lowest ebb, divine purpose flowed into me like molten steel, and was set there by the voice of The Lord himself. Not in dream or symbol, but as loud and clear and real as your voice is to me now.

“Alone upon the lowly Earth, The Lord honoured *me*, His vassal, with true speech. In return, I do not intend to fail Him!”

Patricius goggled.

The front line of the Persians buckled and broke. The irresistible, clanking might of the Lord’s army, hacked pagan flesh and trampled gilded helms and a golden lion into the dirt.

‡

A churning whirlpool of colours sucked Ofermynd into a beckoning, crushing vortex. Thoughts and rationality, accumulated experience and entire faculties, were all ripped roughly away from him as the meta-lens squeezed his ego through a tiny dimensional orifice.

Plunged into darkness, he almost dissolved in *smell*, a kind of aggressive chemical attack that seemed to reach deep into emotion and batter at conscious intention. He struggled to hold off its many assaults as the meta-lens delivered a painful jab, which injected a thousand primitive dialects into the delicate veins of his self-awareness. He grasped at tumbling words to help define the onslaught of odours. He picked out the

metallic undertone of *snow*, then the tang of *sea-salt* and the bitter perfume of *wood-smoke*. A soup of foul decay followed, but was swept away by heady ozone and the alluring sexual scents of myriad forms that rooted or crawled, swam or leapt or flew. With great difficulty, he kept these insidious formulas from overwhelming his adapted consciousness, his new selfhood in this muddy and three-dimensional puddle of rapidly evolving creatures.

Vision burst upon him once more, bright and intricate. Armed with new language, he resolved strange geography that rolled beneath his presence.

An intense blue jewel with a million flashing facets was locked in a bronzed setting of sun-rich provinces. This was the Mare Internum, a sea *medius terraneum*, in the middle of land, the *Mare Mediterraneum*.

Beyond its northern coasts and piercing the icy planes of rushing, high-altitude winds, reared sharp peaks of stone. Chill currents from their dazzling flanks descended over the vibrant flowering of opportunist meadows beneath. Further north still, dense deciduous trees suckled by maritime moisture and temperate climes, rolled massively over the eroded hills and valleys of ancient geology.

Eastwards, fibrous grass rippled over a seemingly endless domain daubed in buff and sage and pale yellow. Its level horizons and sheer distance from moderating oceans, rendered this huge plain defenceless against withering winds and cruel winter.

South of the Mare Mediterraneum rose more mountain teeth. Snow-bleached and stumpy, they kept another kind of ocean at bay; an astronomic weight of ochre dunes that might have smothered anything else. Indeed serried crests of sand pushed close to the south-eastern coast, but here the flashing tongue of a mighty river nourished and stabilised the land all around, licking at the Mediterranean gem through a great delta of green and gold and turquoise.

And all across this patchwork geography teemed the many busy sub-species he'd come to observe, who to his surprise appeared to name themselves collectively, as *mankind*.

The probing snakes of men's armies wound through connecting valleys, their metal scales glinting in the sun. Dromons and Triremes, like many-limbed water insects, patrolled the surface of the Mediterranean in scudding swarms. With their fierce eyes and barbed

snouts they seemed insatiable for destruction, eager to spit rocks or Greek Fire and puncture enemy hulls, thereby roasting or drowning the puny rowers inside.

Supporting their warrior castes, legions of peasants scratched at the dirt, hacked down trees and gathered the hard-won harvests. Their hovels of mud and straw and wood erupted like cankers throughout the man-made landscapes, yet fed the growth of occasional proud cities where art and defence flowered together in more permanent, intricate structures.

Recalling the colour-map of sub-species, Ofermynd started to impose more context on his new vision and rediscover the boundaries of competing entities.

To the north and west, grey-cloaked Saxons and Bavarians and Thuringians smithied long-swords under the dripping eaves of cold forests. Their cousins, the Franks and Lombards and Visigoths, were settling into newly-won realms that rested on a framework of Roman roads and were still studded with tottering edifices of sculpted stone, outsized reminders of the purple empire's lost western power.

These Germanic tribes and others too formed the grey and grey-mauve agglomerations of the meta-lens. Though introduced to benign religion and writing and higher levels of organisation, they revered traditional ways and still rushed at external peoples or even each other in heroic hordes, being quick to quarrel and fiercely nationalistic.

On the Land of Grass, men had apparently formed a symbiotic relationship with other creatures, chiefly horses and sheep that could draw their nourishment directly from the vast supply of this pervasive plant. Yet because long-term climatic cycles in this type of region would alternately produce abundance or dearth, Ofermynd realised, it must periodically generate populations in excess of sustainability. Both mobile and hungry for fertile territory, these would be ejected in great waves. Unfortunately for surrounding nations, the horses and horse-culture of these migrants conferred significant military advantage. The Grass Peoples ate and slept and even gave birth on the move. Fighting on horseback came naturally to them, and their sweeping campaigns were almost impossible to arrest.

The slow pumping of this climato-cultural engine, Ofermynd observed, was a primary factor in the production of those destructive green waves he'd observed through the meta-

lens. After early pressure from the Scythians and Sarmatians and Sakas, the real floods came. First were the fierce Yue-Chi, then the implacable Huns, whose violent collision with German peoples had catapulted many of the latter into purple's western lands. After them White Huns, cousins of the originals, merged with fleeing Juan-Juan to make the Avars. This new entity formed the surge of glittering emerald that even now flooded through purple's shattered northern border. Yet behind came still more. Turkic Khans back in the Land of Grass were already on the move, crushing or driving before them lesser nations or the remnants of previous waves.

Ofermynd lowered his gaze. In Syria and Palestine, massive Persian numbers had overwhelmed purple's defences. For the first time in a thousand planetary years, regal Persia, the heavy gold of the meta-lens, owned a sizeable window onto the Mediterranean. He saw that new and captured ships were crowded into the harbour at Tyre. Clearly, the famed king of kings intended to translate his power into maritime aggression.

And what of purple itself? The colour he discovered was *Rome*. The burgundy of Latin resolution blended with blue shades of Greek diversity. The tenacious creatures that had so inspired him.

They seemed mortally wounded. Both green and gold ravaged them. And with that perception granted by the lens and the historic texts he gulped down in great, bitter-sweet draughts, he saw with dismay that their motivation was mortally wounded too.

For the first time since the official declaration of their sustaining faith, which was the creed of Christianity, their most important shrines were held by enemy unbelievers. Pagans occupied the Holy Lands, and purple creatures everywhere cursed and trembled and looked at the skies in horror, while awful disbelief knocked at the fragile doors of their tiny minds.

‡

The ringing in his ears swiftly subsided, as the fervent joy of the vast throng around him transmuted into respect. The last petals span gently down to earth. All was still. Even the sunlight seemed static, brilliantly fixed to white-washed walls and making sharp solidity out of shadow.

Then, with a groan of relief, the great doors of the church of Jerusalem swung open. The bearers braced their load and the jewelled, gleaming form of the Holy Cross lurched

forward. Clutching the imperial purple around him, Heraclius delicately and formally stepped after it, into the beckoning dark of the Lord's cave.

Three draining years since Nineveh, he reflected, to reach this official and ultimate restoration. Years full not of war, but certainly of battles. A long struggle to return order to ruined and chaotic provinces.

Yet now his goal and triumph had come, forming the pinnacle of his life so far and his highly visible commitment to The Lord. This moment surpassed even that when in white armour and astride a white charger, he'd ridden boldly into Constantinople to challenge the tyrant Phocas, gratefully receiving the people's adoration and ultimate gift, The Purple.

The Holy Lands were free. The Cross restored. Even the Avar advance had been stayed. The Lord's will had been done. Surely the true flock had passed this stern test. Surely *he* had passed the test.

Just a flicker of worry remained. For the sake of practicality and stability, he had raised a Persian general to the enfeebled throne of his crushed enemy. A grateful ally in the exhausted lands that Rome could not realistically rule in any case. He hoped the Lord would forgive his compromise.

Then powerful incense entered him, and with it the heady feel of the Holy Spirit. The Cross processed forward, pulling him along in its glorious wake. Bearded priests bowed before him. Innumerable candles radiated dancing globes of illumination, like liberated souls populating the dark that lived before God's Word. Soft gold gleamed. Saints adorned in muted hues looked serenely down upon him.

He did not expect the Voice of The Lord a second time. Yet now all doubt left him. He was a mighty servant of God and he had done his difficult duty. All here paid him homage, after The Lord.

The innocent voices of children soared effortlessly above earthy, thrumming chants into the highest tonal plane, carrying him up towards ecstasy.

‡

Ofermynd focussed his presence down and down, tighter and tighter, sweeping over the coastal zones of purple's domain. Thousands of Romans were busy netting silver protein, fish, from the depths of the blue sea. Still more gathered green protein, olives, from the carefully managed land. Pealing bells summoned whole communities to white-domed

churches, the local centres for purple's ethical expression and reinforcement, encoded as deity worship.

He traversed northwards and narrowed his vision still more. An infantry column tramped grimly beneath him. Muted music hung on the rhythm of their feet, from the jingling of steel platelets on their jackets to the regular clank of arms or shields or the helms that swung at their belts. He entered the uneasy mind of their mounted captain, and determined they were marching to help staunch that massive wound inflicted on the body purple by invading Avars.

Passing through the signal of grey dust they raised, Ofermynd came to the stone maze of a great city. Peering into its history, he discovered it had grown throughout three centuries and was built over the site where a village called Byzantium once stood.

Teeming markets spread throughout its cobbled streets like colonies, rippling with voices and odours and colours. Stinking slums fed off its margins. Citizens scurried, driven by minute purpose, the rich in white and the poor in homespun browns, many eastern visitors in finer yellows and greens.

He moved on, drawn to something, or someone. Passing a rotunda like a hill, which dwarfed the constructions around it, he came to an uninspiring barracks. On a square of dirt within its walls, a small cavalry-troop wheeled and cantered and skewered dummies with their spears, arduously seeking the skills that endless hordes of Grass Peoples were born to.

An insistent murmur pulled him through clouds of seagulls to a plain of white-flecked waves, which beat in restless rhythms upon a stone shore. And beside that shore sat a man, all wrapped in a cloak of purple and staring fervently out over the water. By his badge of colour, Ofermynd recognised him. It was the leader of the purple masses, their emperor, the ultimate arbiter of their choices, the ultimate vessel for their woes, the ultimate spear-point of their actions. His name was Heraclius. This burdened creature seemed wholly distraught, for occasionally he beat his hands upon the unyielding ground or tore at his hair, occasionally yelling or apparently beseeching the sky for help.

Ofermynd focussed closer in, observing deep lines carved into a seemingly well-balanced and undoubtedly expressive face. Nevertheless, it revealed a mere bundle of



biological needs and instincts. Does the fate of millions, he wondered, truly rest in the tiny mind of such an unsophisticated animal?

He felt pity for Heraclius, as immense pressure on the body purple seemed to be reflected in pain that poured from the emperor's eyes. Then shockingly, he felt much more than pity, he felt identification. For suddenly this creature did not seem like an insignificant thing of mud and water and smell and base biology and the swift breeding of immensely lower orders. It seemed like a character, a thinking being, a whisper from the great utterance of purple's communal culture, an entity that might aspire to his own state.

As Ofermynd continued to watch, Heraclius implored to the wind.

"Oh Lord, why have you forsaken me?"

After this the emperor appeared to calm down, yet still he stared intently out towards the wooden transports that traversed a choppy sea.

Insatiably curious, driven by his illogical need to completely understand all things purple, Ofermynd crept gradually into the miniscule mental space of the emperor. He lurked there undetected, unashamedly sifting through the creature's thoughts and assessing its capabilities. His swift discoveries surprised him.

Despite the crudest mental models of its world's operation, a limited historical perspective, very low processing-power and inadequate connections to its community, purple's prime being was groping its way towards remarkable insights. And the emperor's curious display from moments before seemed to have released a powerful cocktail of chemicals into the pathways of its primitive brain, prompting wild connections.

In just one of these, Heraclius perceived the myriad gold Persians as a single entity, a lumbering beast, from which flowed a plan to drive straight for its heart. Surely *brilliant* for such a limited mind, this strategy ignored contemporary military wisdom. Yet it would employ the beast's own fear and inflexibility against itself and avoid grinding re-conquests of lost territory. Cascades of detail followed, including the audacious idea of drawing the cruel Turkic Khans, the next green wave behind the Avars, into a flood over Persia's northern territories.

As Heraclius shook with infectious excitement and inspired new purpose, Ofermynd was overwhelmed by the instinctive cunning and bravery of the emperor. Though Persia

would refocus its armies, these would probably be destroyed piecemeal before the true threat was perceived. He foresaw a very high chance of success.

“This plan is well-thought,” he mused to himself. “Rome will regain the Holy Places, and her belief.”

Heraclius leapt up and whirled around, then gazed up at the sky and sank slowly to the earth on trembling knees.

“Lord, I hear you. I am your humble servant,” he declared in strained tones.

Belatedly, Ofermynd realised a terrible error. He’d inadvertently enunciated his thought, and the meta-lens had automatically translated. He slipped guiltily out of the emperor’s mind, frantically thinking how to correct this gross mistake, an undeniable breach of Community rules that might have very serious consequences for Earth’s development.

Yet as Heraclius meekly waited, it came to Ofermynd that maybe the slip wasn’t so bad and could easily be glossed over. Heraclius had already thought himself to be communing with his god; had immediately assumed that a disembodied voice must belong to this same deity. Confirmation would not substantively change anything, could scarcely even strengthen the emperor’s already total commitment. It seemed the smoothest solution, certainly better than letting questions dangle.

“Do this duty you have perceived,” Ofermynd gently commanded, in precisely the tones of the emperor’s expectations.

Heraclius rose uncertainly. His face beamed and his eyes flicked repeatedly towards the heavens. Then he turned and bolted back towards the city, with that reckless speed Ofermynd had observed in the excited errand boys who threaded through Constantinople’s dusty markets.

‡

In the following planetary years, Ofermynd spread his consciousness over the purple people like an invisible cloak, seeking to absorb all they were and all they signified. Dramatic instincts, which his constituent parts had forgotten millennia ago, stirred in him anew. Egotism, the alluring call to conflict, uncomplicated loyalty to colour and badge.

He felt purple deliberately re-inventing itself to escape harsh fates, and he gloried in this resurrection. His much reduced nature in this narrow corner of three dimensions that

was Earth, became further eroded as he knowingly wallowed in the base pleasures of identification with purple, of allegiance and of raw survival.

He kept a close eye on Heraclius too, both in fascination and with growing disquiet. The emperor's victories fired his passion for purple survival, but by the fourth and fifth they made him wonder whether he'd created an indestructible force, a mere man with the conviction and confidence of a god.

Yet as Heraclius ceremonially restored The Cross in Jerusalem, Ofermynd swelled with pride and couldn't bring himself to make a second intervention, a sternly corrective one. Nor did he avail himself of data and predictions from the meta-lens, being fearful these might tell him what he definitely didn't want to know or otherwise spoil his illicit enjoyment. But just as The Cross was settled at its final position on the altar, a frightening, freezing pain grasped Ofermynd, almost arresting his thought.

He fought the assault, clinging desperately to the Earth and its purple people. But one by one his holds were torn. He was dragged forcefully back through the lens, surely towards a terrible encounter.

The Elder crushed him. The Elder filled him. The Elder shamed him. As time spun wildly, the Elder's cultural exhalations almost buried Ofermynd in the dragging dust of countless millennia. Its focus cruelly sliced him on interstitial planes. He couldn't answer the icy accusations that probed mercilessly to his core.

He had no excuse for interfering with Earth. The attraction of total power must have corrupted him. Stern Community laws, applied with the full weight of an Elder who spanned entire galaxies, ground excruciatingly into him, threatened to expunge him.

Yet anger and harsh authority were soon withdrawn, leaving Ofermynd shocked but largely unharmed. Instead the Elder turned aside and with a single, astonishing gulp, digested the whole of Earth's history and indeed *everything* about the planet and its life-forms that could possibly be known.

Belching the essence of volcanoes and slime and pine-forests and people, the Elder expressed words with the force of a nova. "INTERFERENCE IS FORBIDDEN!"

Ofermynd quaked. The myriad minds that supported his existence temporarily crystallised back out, to gaze at the stars in fear. But then the Elder's mood swiftly thawed. The warmth of forgiveness comforted Ofermynd and new knowledge began to soak into

him. He felt like a dry sponge, craving the vital fluid of perception and expanding hugely on its generous supply.

His original curiosity was resolved at once. Purple's impressive persistence was founded on an empirical approximation of co-opetition.

"But in truth they are almost blind," intoned the Elder. "Stumbling along the path through feel and painful falls. At best, almost two Earthen millennia will pass before mankind *consciously* perceives the evolutionary laws, perhaps two millennia more before their offspring can properly wield them for self-guided evolution."

"I can see!" replied Ofermynd, in awe. "Purple's benign, monotheistic religion was a useful step, and they have learned the value of social and political flexibility."

"Yet purple's way is not the only way," cautioned the Elder. "Far to the east, the T'ang rule a land where another valid route to good governance is being forged."

Ofermynd peered through the lens again and saw that this was so. But then another sight shook him.

Earth years had already passed while he'd communed with the Elder. In this time a flood of white had burst out from the Arabian peninsular and rolled over several Roman provinces; the land of the great river, the cherished Holy Lands and also Syria. Yet despite the great size of this loss, the already humbled gold empire had fared much worse. It was totally obliterated. A boiling sea of white had scoured the Persians utterly away.

Ofermynd stared, frozen in amazement. All the purple territory Heraclius had fought so hard for, was now lost again. A great sorrow and sympathy for the aging emperor filled him.

"To further your enjoyment and sharpen your experience," uttered the Elder, "you unwisely brushed much of the lens data aside. But it has long predicted an explosion of Arab culture, triggered when both gold and purple overlords holding down the nomadic tribes were exhausted by their long duel."

Ofermynd detected hints of amusement, but then a more serious mood gathered, like the grey clouds he had seen over restless Earthen seas.

"We are not masters of time." The Elder's apparently simple expression pushed through Ofermynd like a pressure wave, creating a long gradation of meanings on its passage. One said: "we cannot change history." Another: "we are not immortal."

"If worlds such as Earth are contaminated and grow in our image, the progress of life's flame will stutter, perhaps for a very long time indeed. Uniqueness makes precious fuel."

"It wasn't intentional," defended Ofermynd.

"Your crime is excess curiosity and carelessness, not calculated intervention. For this you are forgiven.

"Perhaps, in five thousand generations, Earth's spawn might see through the veil of branes and step into the Community. If so, *you* will be the one to greet them. Maybe, much *much* later, *they* will reign, when we are rendered obsolete and so step wearily into oblivion."

While Ofermynd pondered this wisdom, the Elder began to dissolve back into the dimensional fields from which it had sprung. Yet it continued to communicate.

"Now heed your most surprising lesson. Your intervention has made *no difference*."

Ofermynd viewed the prior predictions of the lens against current reality, finding that they completely matched. It was humbling. He had spoken as an omnipotent god to one of the most powerful men on Earth, and yet at any level that counted, *nothing at all* had come of it.

"How can this be?"

"You may count yourself fortunate. Heraclius had already found his inspiration and crystallised his plans when he perceived you. But know too that the inertial engines of history are not easily turned aside! Even a man like the emperor, a great captain comparable to those on his world such as Alexander or Julius Caesar, an influential philosopher and determined reformer too, *even a character such as this*, is more a *symptom* of historic circumstance than a *creator* of history."

The essence of the Elder then disappeared, leaving one last message hanging heavily in Ofermynd's consciousness.

"You may commune with your would-be acolyte, *only when* it can no longer corrupt the course of his world."

And so Ofermynd gathered his thoughts and studied all the predictive data closely, re-forging his knowledge of Earth and its purple culture. It was ironic, he mused, that all the sub-species of men worshipped a supreme being or beings; that in a sense, Heraclius had

even spoken to his own God. Yet all that had *ever* occurred on Earth was the outcome of utterly natural processes.

He plunged back into the lens.

‡

Ofermynd found his way to the palace's principal bedroom. Heraclius lay feverishly awake and hollow-eyed, propped on pillows that could not support his burdens. The inexorable laws of evolution had crept into this place, for even the most powerful man of all Earth's western domains is subject to mortality. The emperor's breathing was shallow. He was afraid. He had just minutes left to live.

The imperial coverlet spilled cascades of purple silk over thick Persian rugs of gold and blue, which sealed off the cold from a dark stone floor. Bleached sheets caught the light from hundreds of candles, promoting their purity above all colour.

To the emperor's left knelt the Patriarch and a cadre of priests, murmuring prayers. On the right his family were gathered, also on their knees. Around the ornate room, in the shadow of marble columns and extravagant drapes, stood representatives of the state Heraclius had so ably served: the army and navy commanders, top civil servants, the chief landowners and judges and other men of weight.

Ofermynd entered the mind of the emperor and found that he wept within. Once again, the purple empire was ravaged. Even its physically untouched territory was torn by religious strife, mainly over the precise nature of Christ. Moreover the salve of monotheletism applied hopefully by Heraclius, the doctrine of a single will of Christ, had only inflamed the disputes.

Corrosive guilt worsened the effects of stress and sorrow. The emperor believed he'd failed his god. He believed he was being justly punished. Perhaps for not occupying defeated Persia and imposing direct Christian rule. Perhaps just for lacking the strength to hold onto his successes. Ingrained belief instructed him that these new invaders, the barbarians of the sands, couldn't truly be Men of God, given the divinity of the Lord Jesus was not acknowledged by them in any way. But the current confusion of his own subjects had seeded doubt. Deeper down, he feared the Lord had found more fierce and fervent followers to defend Jerusalem and eliminate pagan threat.

A great tide of compassion overwhelmed Ofermynd. In part he was to blame, and must make amends. As the voice of God, he had sanctioned this poor creature's actions.

He manifested to the emperor alone, in all the shining raiment and glory of that deity Heraclius imagined.

Heraclius started. His jaw dropped. Then an immense relief washed through his gaunt features.

"Lord, I have failed you. I have lost the Holy Places."

It was the relief of confession.

The emperor's words were so thinly breathed that those attending him couldn't decipher them, though they strained hard to hear the last utterances of their dying leader. Ofermynd interpreted directly from the failing brain.

Heraclius struggled to say more. "*The Cross is safe, I brought it here...*" But Ofermynd raised his hand and answered before the phrase was even voiced.

"The Cross was always safe." Feeding direct to the aural centre, he wrapped stern but benign tones around the audio pattern of the emperor's father, plucked from memory. "Even in Persia the Nestorians took good care of it. And Jerusalem is not lost to me, for the Muslims are your brothers. They will keep and revere the Holy Places."

*"But they don't believe..."*

"There are many routes up a mountain. Not all of them are visible from each one."

The emperor's lips wobbled and he fought for breath. He stared so intently at Ofermynd that the priests glanced uneasily towards the end of the bed, wondering what he saw.

"They invaded. *They fought us.*"

"Sadly, the Crescent and the Cross will strive and argue for the best part of two millennia."

"*Why?*" Heraclius thought. "My Lord, I humbly beg instruction," he managed. The Patriarch's eyes widened.

Ofermynd considered all that he knew of the many sub-species he'd observed on Earth, from the new perspective the Elder had enabled him to achieve. He realised that the emphatic colours of the meta-lens, geared to highlight detailed interaction, hid the fact that more united these sub-species than divided them.

But how could he describe the imperatives of the evolutionary laws? How could he explain that men would not perceive them until an era Heraclius couldn't conceive? How could he make clear that sacred patriotism had been practically hard-wired into the brains of mankind? By endless millennia of reinforcement, which stretched right back through ancestor worship to the need for inventing 'unseen agents', during those long seas of time when culture itself first formed in biologically different men who by slow degrees shifted further from their primate cousins. How could he make comprehensible the sheer count of generations it would take to overcome this? How could he demonstrate that men were not the free agents they felt themselves to be? That judged even by their own aspirations, they were only half-men.

"Men are but children," Ofermynd stated gently, before Heraclius had even drawn his next, tenuous breath.

It seemed a poor answer, but the emperor smiled. Already less taut from a transfer of responsibility, his grey face transformed, as though spiritual sunshine had broken through the overcast nature of his demise.

"Seneca," he stated clearly.

The Patriarch started, then dispatched a messenger to call for the complete works of the long-dead statesman, in case the emperor wished to support some last wish or command with the endorsement of their eminent forefather.

Ofermynd returned a lordly but kind expression of amusement.

"Some men are wise outside their time."

He capitalised on the moment.

"Do not torment yourself, my son. You have done your duty, and through you the core and spirit of Rome has been re-forged, to act as an illuminating strength that men of the west will still turn to in eras yet to be born. You yourself will rank in history next to Justinian."

*"How long?"*

Ofermynd recalled the predictions of the meta-lens.

"The last emperor will not yield The Purple until at least another thirty generations have passed, and only then to thunderous demons of fire that can shatter even the thick



walls of Constantinople. By that time the purpose of Rome will be done, but its concept will remain indelibly in the character of men.”

Now at peace, Heraclius smiled again, then spoke out.

“Live among men as if God beheld you; speak to God as if men were listening.”

The priests bowed their heads.

“Seneca,” replied Ofermynd, but Heraclius no longer heard.

The family wailed.

Strangely unsettled, Ofermynd withdrew from the lens and from the churning world of men. His curiosity was finally sated, but he promised himself another visit when mankind had matured. Maybe 3000 of their years would be enough.

Despite himself, despite the Community’s disapproval of attachment, despite that one sub-species should be no more important than any other, despite even the incredibly primitive nature of the idea that was Rome, and because of what he’d told Heraclius, he *really* hoped that when he returned, there’d still be some faint traces of purple left.

## **Bio**

Evolution is a passionate hobby for Andy, his stories often feature evolutionary mechanisms, from the 'big engines of history' to the tricky workings of memes. Andy's SF shorts are: 'Meme' in the webzine *Bewildering Stories* (also in the 'editor's choice' edition of April 07), 'Impasse' in the anthology *Dislocations* from Newcon Press (Aug 07), 'Rescue Stories' in the BSFA magazine *Focus* (March 09), and 'Mano Mart' in *Shoes, Ships and Cadavers*, also from NewconPress (Oct 10). Andy recently completed a joint novel with UK author Ian Watson, a techno-thriller, *The Waters of Destiny*. Andy and Ian are actively seeking publication now, as Andy is also for a three-novel SF series.

# **My Salieri Complex: An Untold Story of Griffin and Kemp**

*Marina Neary*

**Dedicated to H.G. Wells**

(University College, London, 1884)

“Awake, Samuel! Boarding with a genius will not transform you into one.”

That was the voice of reason, one that guided me through most of my career. Yet another voice, one of superstition and vanity, tried to persuade me of the opposite. How I wished to believe that a fraction of Jonathan Griffin’s brilliance could project onto me if I only spent enough time in his vicinity! I fancied our brains being like two communicating vessels, with grandiose theories and mysteries passing between them. Little by little, that toxic swamp of self-flattering fantasies sucked me in.

Griffin, a native of Cardiff, was almost three years younger than me but only one year behind in his coursework. He transferred to University College in the autumn of 1883, allegedly to study medicine. I emphasize the word “allegedly”. From the very beginning I had serious doubts that this man had any intention of treating patients for the rest of his life. As I learned later, medicine was the profession of his father’s choice. Griffin feigned compliance only to gain access to London’s best library and laboratory. He took most interest in optical density and refraction index, two topics that had very little to do with medicine.

We enrolled in the same physics seminar led by Professor Handley, my intellectual father, who promised me an assistant’s position after my graduation as well as the hand of his daughter Elizabeth. Everyone in the department regarded me as Professor Handley’s heir, the future king of the laboratory. At least, that was the case until Griffin’s arrival. In one week this eighteen-year old boy with a Welsh accent toppled the hierarchy that had been in place since my first solo demonstration in 1881. When Griffin would enter the lecture hall, all the chatter would cease and then turn into a collective sigh of veneration.

It happened so quickly that I did not even have enough time to grow suspicious, or indignant, or bitter. He snatched my invisible crown and placed it on his perfectly shaped head, atop a cloud of snow-white curls.

Griffin was the only albino I had ever encountered. At first he struck me as a member of an entirely different race, one that Darwin and Kingsley would declare as superior to their own, a race untainted by unnecessary pigment. Later I learned that the condition had its disadvantages. Griffin's eyes, garnet-red, were extremely sensitive to the light, obliging him to wear spectacles made of tinted glass and a hat. Between those eyes a permanent crease was forming, growing deeper by the month. I studied that crease furtively, as if it were some hieroglyph, a clue to the mysteries of his mind.

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As a child I suffered from respiratory distress. Slightest physical exertion caused me to pant and wheeze, cutting me off from the games of my sturdier peers. No, they did not taunt me. They simply refused to acknowledge my existence. At the time I would have preferred open ridicule to utter indifference. I found consolation in corresponding with Robert Louis Stevenson, who had also had a "weak chest" and spent much of his childhood in sickbed. He had shared with me the early drafts of his novels and poems. I read "The Treasure Island" long before it was published. His bewildering adventures distracted me from my affliction, provided me with an opportunity to step out of my treacherous, uncooperative body. By the age of sixteen I had reconciled with the thought that I would have no companions save for the merry crew of the schooner *Hispaniola*.

All that changed when I came to University College and discovered that in matters of intellect I surpassed most of my peers. Suddenly, my physical infirmities became inconsequential. A former outcast, I became the most sought-after individual in the entire medical department. My peers, who snubbed me during my adolescence, now fought for a chance to have me for a study partner. They rapped on the door of my flat, attempted subtle bribes, invited me to family outings. For once, I had the power of rejecting one companion in favor of another. I think back to the winter of 1881 and the succession of triumphs: my first public demonstration before the entire department, my first dinner at Professor Handley's house, my first evening with Elizabeth without a chaperone.

Unnoticeably to myself, I outgrew my malady. This spontaneous recovery prompted me to make a vow to God that I would devote my life to treating the ailments of the lungs.

Then the white-haired Welshman barged into my kingdom, and my wheezing attacks returned, with doubled intensity. When I was near him, I lacked for air. Griffin was stealing oxygen from me. As slender as he was, as few personal possessions as he had, somehow he occupied most of the two-bedroom flat that we shared. Every corner bore the mark of his presence. Some elusive spirit reigned there, leaving very little space for me.

Griffin's bedroom served as his personal laboratory where he would continue his experiments into midnight. His dowry included an assortment of glass tubes in which he would heat and mix various chemicals. I knew better than to pry into the nature of Griffin's experiments, but I suspected it was the fume seeping from under the closed door of his bedroom that triggered my coughing attacks.

Still, I had no grounds for complaints, as there was nothing criminal about Griffin's behavior. Who can fault a science student for diligence? If his work stirred my old illness, it was my private ordeal. Remains of pride forbade me to vocalize my growing discontent. Most of all I feared being accused of having a Salieri complex. There was nothing left for me to do except drive my anger deep into my inflamed chest. When the tightness in the lungs became unbearable, I would simply go outside or wander the corridors of the residence hall.

Nobody ever found out how many nights I spent on the cushions in the lounge. And nobody found out about the tempest inside my head. It was not my crown that I missed – it was my freedom. I learned what it meant to be a spiritual captive of another human being.

I knew that when my schoolmates knocked on our door, it was most likely for Griffin, not me. Rarely would he deign to come out of his sanctuary and greet them. Usually he would remain behind the closed door upon which our schoolmates would throw furtive, longing glances. With the immediacy of small children they would elbow each other and whisper.

“How long can he toy with explosives?”

“I know: he's making a bride for himself.”

“No, he's building a time machine.”

"Stop reading so much Jules Verne, dearest. It will do your pretty little head no good."

"At least I can read, unlike some of us."

"I tell you, albinos are all evil. It's a mark of the Devil."

"Listen to you! Sounding like you're straight from Oxford. Believing in the devil is no longer fashionable."

"Well, if Devil exists, Griffin is his incarnation."

"Bah, you're just envious!"

"I say, he's dissecting rats."

"Bosh! One doesn't need to go to a university for that."

"This is no university. It's a glorified butchery."

"Gentlemen, is it just my imagination, or does Griffin's hair look a bit whiter than it was before? I didn't think it was possible. And his skin! Did you see his skin? It's translucent. You can see the veins and everything."

"Here's an idea. Why don't you knock on his door and ask him?"

"Like hell I will! You knock first."

"After you."

"No, after you!"

"Coward!"

"Idiot!"

Those were the typical conversations. Griffin this, Griffin that...

Yes, they still consulted me on academic matters. I convinced myself that they were doing it out of habit, or duty, or, perhaps, pity.

And yes, I was still welcome at Professor Handley's dinner table, but so was Griffin, although he did not take advantage of this privilege frequently. On those rare occasions when he joined us, Elizabeth would become noticeably distracted. She would study Griffin's face, as deliberately and as blatantly as her upbringing allowed, while he remained oblivious to her presence. He spoke very little and ate even less. Between courses he scribbled in his notebook with which he never parted. His colorless lips kept moving, whispering formulas. His garnet eyes would squint and widen, as if from flashes of light. In those moments he resembled a monk immersed in perpetual prayer. And Elizabeth would

sigh and smile sadly. Apparently, the white-haired genius struck a chord that I never had. Not that it mattered to me. One more defeat made no difference.

Handley, delighted to now have two adopted sons, nurtured his own designs. One Friday afternoon, towards the end of the seminar, he suggested before the whole group that Griffin and I should collaborate on a study.

Science professors cannot boast about being the most tactful men in the world. This is no earth-shattering revelation. Handley was no exception to the rule.

“Every semester my students grip each other by the throats for a chance to partner with Samuel Kemp,” he said, beaming at his own ingenuity. “This time I decided to try a different approach. I will remove both Kemp and Griffin from the battle and assign them to each other. It would be presumptuous on my behalf to speak for the entire University College, but personally I am very anxious to see what miracles these two brilliant young men can concoct together.”

For a few seconds everyone in the hall ceased breathing and looked at Griffin, for he, apparently, had the final say.

“Is this a mandate?” he inquired, tapping his lips with the tip of his pencil.

“Not at all,” Handley reassured him hastily, “merely an unobtrusive proposal. Since you and Samuel Kemp already spend a considerable amount of time under the same roof, perhaps, you would use this time more constructively, for the benefit of your respective careers.”

Griffin straightened out and clutched his notebook to his chest.

“If this is a mere proposal, then I fear I must politely decline it, Professor. You see, I am not quite ready to share my work with anyone, even Samuel Kemp – with all due regard.”

There was no deliberate hostility in his voice. Still, his declaration solicited a number of stifled gasps from the audience. What? The earth stopped spinning. Samuel Kemp received his first outward rejection! Now everyone was staring at me.

My chest tightened. I felt a sudden need to unbutton my collar. The prospect of having a coughing attack in front of my schoolmates petrified me. God be my witness, I tried not to be angry with Handley. Nor did I doubt his benevolence. The man sincerely believed his idea brilliant.

“Professor,” I mumbled, raising a sweaty, trembling hand. “I was about to present the same objection, but Mr. Griffin preceded me. I believe it is in everyone’s best interests that we work separately. Following his example, I will take no partner this semester. I would like to think that I have earned my autonomy.”

Handley looked perplexed, not heartbroken.

“Who am I to argue with geniuses?”

He turned his back to us and began wiping the blackboard, letting everyone know that the class was dismissed.

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Several weeks went by. I remained faithful to my promise to work alone for the semester, spending my time in the mezzanine of the library, avoiding my schoolmates and Handley in particular. The date of my graduation was approaching, which meant I needed to start thinking about my impending marriage. Elizabeth had begun making wedding preparations, and I had no idea what that ceremony entailed. She had mentioned names of places, churches and reception halls, I had never heard of. In truth, my knowledge of London outside Bloomsbury was rather sketchy. I simply never had a reason to leave the cluster of buildings that comprised University College.

One Sunday evening, after the library had closed and I returned into my flat, something unthinkable happened. Griffin emerged from his laboratory and actually spoke to me.

“Samuel,” he began with uncharacteristic softness.

I shuddered at the sound of his voice and pinched myself. Griffin had never addressed me, let alone by my given name.

“I was made aware of the inconvenience I have caused you over the past few months,” he continued. “I did not know until recently that my experiments were harming your health. You should’ve informed me at once. And then that horrid incident at the lecture hall! Handley took me by surprise. I suppose, I haven’t grown accustomed to his antics. That buffoon of a man...”

I interrupted him quite coldly.

“You were about to say—“

Did Griffin truly believe it will take a few words of gossip to melt the ice?

"I was about to say that an apology would not be out of place."

"An apology?" I asked, shaking my head in confusion. "From me to you, I suppose?"

"Samuel, I would be honored to have you for a study partner. I was simply waiting for the appropriate moment to initiate you into my discoveries. I did not wish to do it before the entire class. Most of our schoolmates are sheep. But you know that already, don't you? Listen, I'm very glad that I met you, even in a place like this, amidst this bureaucratic circus."

I opened my mouth, but no words came out, only a hoarse wheeze. The glass tubes on the shelf began to blur.

"We have much to discuss, Samuel. It will take some time."

"Honestly, I'm flattered," I muttered, wiping the sweat off my cheeks and neck. "However, I meant what I said in the lecture hall. It isn't in our best interests to collaborate. You see plainly that I am in no state to argue with you. I simply don't have enough air in my lungs. Let us leave things as they are. Please, excuse me."

I turned around, preparing to leave, but Griffin, my idol, my tormentor, stepped towards me and caught me by the shoulders.

"I need one full night to work," he continued, as if he had not heard my objections. "Come back in the morning, and I will be ready to share my findings with you. This will be the last inconvenience to which you'll be subjected, one last favor. It will be worth your wait, Sam. I promise."

Losing footing, I leaned forward and buried my face on his chest, convinced that I was dying. The fumes from his shirt and his white hair were poisoning me. It was the first time we came into physical contact. Before then he had not as much as shaken my hand. Even on the verge of a swoon I could not help noticing how hot his skin was. Any other human being would be delirious at such body temperature. The protein in the blood begins to curdle at forty-two Celsius. It was one of the first facts I learned in my medical coursework. And Griffin's temperature must have been close to forty-five. But then, he was no ordinary human being. His body chemistry must have been different, either from birth or as result of mysterious manipulations on his part. And now this alien creature was embracing me, trying to cajole me into his plot.



Terrified and jubilant at the same time, I threw my arms around his neck and clung to him, coughing and laughing.

Suddenly, I heard him whisper.

“Collect yourself, Samuel.”

It was neither a plea nor an attempt to comfort me but an order. Of course, he had no time for this.

Still panting, I released him. He escorted me to the door and, with a slap on the back, pushed me into the dark hall.

“Good night, Samuel.”

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When I came to my senses, I was walking down Gower Street, where every stone in the pavement was familiar to me. Over the last few months I had learned the pattern of the cobblestone. Those clusters of ovals and lopsided rectangles had turned into a mosaic of bewilderment and muffled fury. But that night I felt strange heat radiating from those stones, like the heat from Jonathan’s hands. Those stones were alive. They whispered to me, as I was still trying to make sense of the sudden reversal of fate.

He and I... How blind, how inattentive we both had been!

I must confess that the promise of partnership and camaraderie with Jonathan thrilled me more than my engagement to Elizabeth. Her acceptance of my proposal held no triumph for me. I never pursued her aggressively, and she never resisted. One evening Professor Handley, as unceremonious a matchmaker as he was a peacemaker, simply seated us side by side at the dinner table. It was a marriage of reverence that we shared for her father. When we said “yes”, it was not so much to each other but to Professor Handley.

Elizabeth was sturdy and well-mannered, though not remarkably beautiful, not in the same sense that Jonathan was. Before meeting him, I had never regarded other human beings as beautiful or ugly. My aesthetic sensibilities awakened fairly late. Suddenly, I discovered the desire to look at another face, marveling at the clean, elongated lines of the profile and the exquisite translucency of skin. It struck me as strange that the elation, the source of which should have been Elizabeth, was instead sparked by Jonathan. Strange, but not in any way wrong.

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In the morning, when I stopped by our flat to change my shirt and fetch my textbooks, I found Jonathan's room empty. I assumed I would meet him in the lecture hall. I could not help wondering how we would behave in front of our schoolmates. Would we publicize our newly formed friendship? Perhaps, he would prefer to keep it a secret and then stun the entire department at the end of the semester.

I have witnessed, on more than one occasion, scenes of jubilation when study partners, after receiving an award for a successful demonstration, would hang on each other's necks, skip, squeal like pups and kiss each other "on the brain" as they called it. Then they would rip off their ties and give each other back rides up and down the hall, to the applause of their mates. It was a chance for these future high priests of science to temporarily turn into savages. Thankfully, they did not practice such boorish antics with me, knowing my distaste for them. Perhaps, I had a stricter upbringing. Undoubtedly, even the most civilized men need a release, especially if it is well-earned. Still, I could not fathom embracing Jonathan by the shoulders in public, no matter how much I wanted to.

When I entered the lecture hall, I saw Handley's assistant. The professor himself was absent. So was Griffin.

When the assistant saw me, he pulled me aside.

"Mr. Kemp, Professor Handley wishes to see you in his office."

The request to see the professor in private did not disturb me. I could not recall doing anything that would lead to repercussions. I assumed that the nature of the conversation would be purely academic. Perhaps, Griffin informed Handley about our decision to collaborate and requested some funds from the department.

With a fairly light heart, I came into Handley's office. He was there in the company of another professor by the name Ellsworth.

"Please, sit down," Handley commanded, pointing at a vacant armchair. "I am afraid I have some disturbing news. Your flat mate Griffin was taken to the infirmary earlier this morning, in a very grave condition."

"God help him," I mumbled, sitting down on the edge of the chair. "What happened?"

"Nobody knows for certain. He won't talk to the doctor. He exhibits every symptom of severe poisoning: vomiting, pallor, listlessness, reduced circulation in the limbs."

"Well, can I see him?"

"Not yet. The doctors insist on keeping him secluded."

"Why on earth?"

Here Ellsworth intruded.

"Samuel, do you know why we called you here?"

"Because I am Jonathan's friend, naturally."

"How odd," Ellsworth commented, rubbing his chin. "I did not think that Jonathan had any friends. But he certainly had his share of enviers. The doctors have reasons to believe that what he is suffering from is no ordinary infection. There is evidence of highly toxic substance in his bloodstream. The director is contemplating bringing in the constable, who may wish to question those with whom Griffin has had contact. We wanted to prepare you for this possibility. You may be among the first ones to be interrogated."

Had I had any strength left in my legs, I would have leaped up from the chair. All I could do was press my fingers into the wooden arms.

"Don't fear, Samuel, we aren't trying to incriminate you," Handley chimed in hastily. "On the contrary, we are trying to protect you."

"I know what made Griffin ill," I blurted out, staring into the floor. "He drank one of his concoctions."

The professors shook their heads in tandem.

"You aren't implying that it was a suicide attempt, are you?" asked Ellsworth.

"Nothing of the sort! It was an experiment."

"An experiment?"

"Yes! The substance he took was supposed to destroy the pigment in his blood without altering its properties. I've heard him mumble formulas in his sleep. Pigments, optical density, refraction index, transparency of living tissues, radiation machine..."

The professors assumed the same pose – arms crossed, heads tilted. As I continued, Handley's eyebrow kept arching steeper and steeper.

"So, what was the objective of his experiments?" he inquired. "In your opinion, what was Griffin trying to accomplish?"

Handley's dimwittedness infuriated me indescribably. How long would it take him to assemble the pieces of the puzzle?

"Gentlemen," I said, struggling to keep my voice steady, "is it not obvious that Griffin's goal was to turn invisible?"

Both professors burst out laughing. Handley was so amused that he needed to pour himself a glass of water from the carafe on his desk.

"Scientific impossibility aside," he resumed after the first sip, "why would a young man endowed with Griffin's appearance wish to make himself invisible? I couldn't help noticing the effect he has on the fair sex."

"Griffin doesn't care about women!" I exclaimed. "You don't understand. He doesn't care about anyone, least of all himself. He will risk his life for his work. I've grown to know Griffin like no other. You can laugh at me now to your hearts' content. You didn't stand behind the closed door of his bedroom for hours, listening to him rant in his sleep. Please, let me see him. I can persuade him to let the doctors treat him. He'll listen to me. We can save him. I've been thinking of little less for the past four months."

My eyes must have been tearing, because Handley offered me his handkerchief. Ellsworth leaned over to his colleague and mumbled loudly enough for me to hear.

"Something tells me that this is no longer a story of Mozart and Salieri. Rather, it is a story of Byron and Shelley."

Handley, who was not very versed in romantic literature, did not understand the allusion at once. He began chewing on his lower lip as he usually did to mask his ignorance.

"This would be far worse for the school's reputation," Ellsworth continued hissing in his ear. "Sensitive young men, when deprived of female companionship for prolonged stretches of time, can fall into all sorts of unwholesome, unnatural affections towards each other. Don't you know? In ancient Sparta..."

The more Ellsworth spoke, the more perplexed Handley grew. History was another subject outside of his expertise. Both carried on as if I were not present.

"Of what crime exactly am I being accused?" I asked at last, glancing up. "Let us be clear. Is it attempted murder or homosexuality?"

Now that was a word that Handley understood. His jaw dropped, and his hand grasped his tie as if it were choking him.

"Young man! Have you no shame?"

“Shame? Shouldn’t you be posing this question to your colleague? A student is dying, and Professor Ellsworth revels in the most piquant practices of ancient Spartans. Apparently, that is where his mind dwells. Those night walks that he took down Gower Street with the drama professor must’ve led to Sparta. But who am I to judge? After all, this is a secular, liberal university, a cradle of progress. Still, all you care about is your precious reputation. It comes before everything, even science. And then you wonder why students hide from you.”

Handley threw a plaintive glance at his colleague.

“My weak heart won’t take it. I’m getting much too old for such an ordeal. What is happening to our institution? And above all, why is this happening on my watch? Two of my best students... After everything I’ve done for them! I gave Samuel a seat at my dinner table and my beautiful daughter in marriage. And this is his gratitude I receive!”

“Right before the end of the semester, too!” Ellsworth replied sympathetically.

“Let me see Griffin,” I demanded through my teeth. “I don’t care whom you drag into this. I will stand before the entire Scotland Yard if necessary. I have nothing to hide, and I don’t need anyone’s protection.”

Handley pulled his tie off his neck and wrapped it around his fist.

“Go,” he muttered half-audibly, swinging the silk ribbon towards the door.

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The drowsy nurse on duty barely stirred as I entered the chilly hall of the infirmary. All curtains were closed tight at Griffin’s request, who was the only patient there that day. For a minute I lingered at his bedside, studying the outline of his scrawny body under the white sheet. He did not acknowledge my visit in any way, even though he was wide awake. His eyes were fixed on the ceiling, and his hands were still clutching his notebook.

A malicious thought flashed through my head. This was my opportunity to exact revenge, however superficial. I could threaten to expose his failed experiment to our schoolmates, to make him the laughing stock of the entire University College.

But that moment of gloating lasted only a second. I reminded myself that I was a doctor in training and, as such, took the liberty of feeling his forehead. Now, it was not much warmer to the touch than the metal bedpost. I estimated that his body temperature was barely hovering above thirty degrees.

Judging from the hue of his skin, his experiment was not a complete failure. He looked even paler than before, which led me to conclude that he succeeded at destroying some of the pigment in his red blood cells.

“What a shame, Samuel,” he began, still staring upward.

His voice was surprisingly strong, given his wretched condition. He did not look defeated in the least.

“I had every intention of initiating you into my work,” he continued, “but you simply can’t keep your mouth shut.”

“Neither can you,” I retaliated, sitting down on the edge of his bed. “You ought to consider gagging yourself for the night.”

“How much did you hear?”

“Enough to confirm my theory that you were not here to study medicine.”

“I wish I could,” he lamented. “Sometimes I wish I could take interest in something as mundane as medicine and practice it for the rest of my life. I wish I could be content with Handley for a professor and his homely daughter for a wife. But I’ll never be like the others. I always suspected it, but when I came here, all doubt was removed. This is no place to practice science.”

His head twitched on the pillow, and his gaze shifted to me. This sudden attempt to make eye contact threw me into a state of slight panic. I came close to jumping up from his bed. His icy hand released the notebook and seized my wrist.

“I must leave at once,” he declared.

“Perhaps, it would be for the better,” I muttered faintly. “No need to stay in a place where you feel stifled.”

For an instant I thought that he was going to ask me to abandon everything and follow him, to the end of the world, wherever he was going. I don’t know what made me think he would propose such a thing.

He released my wrist as suddenly as he seized it.

“By the way, you need not fear,” I continued. “Nobody will find out.”

“Oh, yes, they certainly will find out,” Griffin objected. “The whole world will – in due time. And those rotten hogs from the academia who scoffed at me will tremble. The whole world will tremble.”

The whole world! Griffin despised it enough to want to hide himself from it, yet at the same time he coveted it enough to want to dominate it.

"Will I ever see you again?" I asked.

"Not if everything goes according to my plan. I'll be sure to visit you when my work is complete. You won't see me, but you'll hear my voice and feel my grip."

He arched his back on the mattress and laughed.

"Jonathan, you'll kill yourself!" I said, rising to my feet and backing away from his bed.

"Don't let your hopes soar."

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Five days later Griffin left the university, citing poor health in his exit letter. One afternoon I returned from the lectures and found the flat cleared of his possessions except for one cracked tube that he left behind and which I kept it as a souvenir.

Once again, I could spend the nights under my roof without the fear of suffocating. Once again, I was the king of the laboratory. Not that it mattered anymore. My schoolmates began flocking back to me, their demeanor being apologetic, almost servile. I did not respond to their insinuations. Their voices blended into one indistinct buzz. The only voice I heard distinctly was that of my former flat mate. Jonathan succeeded at infecting me with his contempt for the University College. I began viewing that place with his eyes and feeling stifled there. Once my coronation site, it suddenly became my prison. Graduation could not come soon enough. I did complete my solo demonstration and even received an award which left me completely indifferent.

Needless to say, I never accepted the teaching position that Professor Handley had promised to me. Nor did I end up marrying Elizabeth. It was difficult to say which one of us was more relieved to break the engagement.

Stevenson continued writing to me, sending drafts of his stories and poems, but I never responded.

I felt that by continuing to love my respectable, philistine life that Jonathan despised so, I would somehow betray him. Perhaps, if I proved myself worthy and denounced all things ordinary, he would return to me and share his secrets at last. Those sentiments

were completely absurd and ludicrous. I owed Griffin nothing. No man should have such power over another.

When nobody was watching, I would pinch, slap and shake myself, trying to break free from that bizarre vision of Jonathan, the white-haired, garnet-eyed angel dissolving into air.

## **Bio**

Marina Neary is an award-winning historical essayist, multilingual arts & entertainment journalist, novelist, dramatist and poet. Her novel *Wynfield's Kingdom* is featured in the March 2010 edition of *First Edition Magazine* (UK). Her play *Hugo in London* was acquired by Heuer, and the sequel *Lady with a Lamp* was published by Fireship Press with the photos from the show. Neary also has a book of poetry *Bipolar Express* published by Fireship Press. She is currently an editorial reviewer and steady contributor for the *Bewildering Stories* e-zine.



# **The Truth About Buddy Bolden**

*David Perlmutter*

What you mean, you never heard of Buddy Bolden? That crazy, man! What kind of historian of jazz are ya that you ain't never heard of BUDDY BOLDEN?

I'se sorry about that, man; the gin be gettin' to me. But I'se still can't believe you when you never heard of Buddy Bolden, the baddest trumpet-playing cat ever to come out of right cheer in New Orleans. He had this whole town under his thumb when he was alive and well. And here it is the year 19 and 41, and he been gone for ten years, and nobody knows about him no more! Not even you educated university cats who is only just now startin' to pay attention to what we been doing with jazz all this time!

Bein' that as it may, though, and bein' as you has been so kind to lubricate me with this fine gin here in this fancy saloon-type establishment, I'll 'tempt to put you straight about Buddy. Correct and confirm all those rumors that's been goin' 'round since he died, y'understand. I can do that 'cause I happen to be friends with the man myself back in the day.

\* \* \*

Buddy and I, we grew up together on First Street in New Orleans. Only he wasn't Buddy then, he was just plain old Charles Joseph Bolden; the nickname came up later. We attended school together until he quit when he was thirteen. He was determined to make it in music professionally without having to support himself with no day job, although he ultimately did have to get some work plasterin' to support himself once his family came along. Myself, I played a little piano, and sat in once in a while with his group when he needed some help, which weren't often, but I was just pleased to hear him play as loud as I did. It's the truth that he could be heard playing fourteen miles away on a clear night; he and his band got plenty complaints in the wards for bein' too damn noisy! It's also true that he had four or five women on his arm all the time, and more besides following behind him! Buddy attracted women the way that Pied Piper attracted rats and kids!

I had to wonder, though. It wasn't until about 1900 that this started goin' on. And so, one day, when Buddy was walking flamboyantly down First Street playing his cornet with

his shirt busted open to the waist and his red flannel undervest, I collared him, since we hadn't seen much of each other lately, and I asked him about how he'd managed to improve his technique so well since the last I had seen of him.

"I can't tell ya nothin' 'bout that, Slim," he say, "but I can just say it weren't nothin' of this earth that helped me out."

Now, even then Buddy had a reputation for stretchin' the truth about hisself a bit too much, so I had to be a bit skeptical 'bout that one.

"What 'chu talkin' 'bout, Bolden?" I say.

"I told ya, I can't tell ya nothin', Slim!"

"Sure? I mean, we *is* pals and all, and..."

"Well, I'll just say it's got something to do with my new horn here. Once I got it, everyone start dancin' to the tune I was playin'. I figure this horn, it gonna help me be BIG, Slim!"

I shook my head, disbelieving. I believes that it ain't the instrument that supposed to help the player get his way, it's the player hisself. So I disregarded what he had told me.

But soon afterwards, though, Buddy start makin' a name for hisself. He gets popular leadin' his own group. He gets gigs all over New Orleans. Everyone be wantin' to here him! (At least everyone who be *black*; white folks like yerself weren't at all into the music back then.) By 19 and 4, they're callin' him the "King". He at the top of his game.

I see him and his band play, and I know that. You shoulda SEEN the way he made the people dance! All it took was one note, and they stood at attention. And when he start to wailin' the blues and poundin' out that ragtime beat, they was pretty much his *slaves*! If he'd wanted them to walk past Rampart Street into the white section of town, they woulda done it even if the white folks killed 'em all! He never got to make any records, which is probably why most people ain't never heard of him now. If he only had, and them suckers had been played on the radio in the twenties and thirties, when the jazz stuff finally caught on with you white people, the world would be plenty different now for us black folks, let me tell ya. That's the kinda impact Buddy had on them crowds.

Trouble was, Buddy had himself a problem with the liquor, which was caused his downfall. See, he was performing in a Labor Day parade in 19 and 6 when he just went chicken crazy. Plumb loco! He had a few drinks before the parade, and so he went into

playin' with a bit of extra verve. And suddenly, when he's in the midst of hittin' them high Cs and Ds like he did so good, a riot breaks out. His music started transfixin' the black people. Not just dancin' and all; we're talkin' political action! Black folks get their guns and knives out and start right out declarin' they're gonna off as many white people as they can. Buddy keeps playin', and they get even more determined. Finally, blood starts bein' spilled in the streets; *white* people's blood. And the white poe-lease, they ain't standin' for none of that! They stops the parade and puts them black people who went crazy under arrest. They fingers Buddy as bein' the cause of all of it, and he gets booked.

The thing was, especially back then, no white people in charge of a city was gonna let a nigger like Buddy have his way over a crowd like that. Maybe now they'd be okay with it, but not then. New Orleans was divided between the whites and the niggers, and the last thing them white people wanted was a nigger revolution! So them cops went ahead and captured Buddy and beat him up *bad*. Then they went ahead and busted his cornet up so he couldn't play no more for anybody.

He had to move down to a lower-rent district of town, and I never seen him no more. Word was that he kept getting' more and more drunk, and then he started goin' insane! Well, wouldn't *you* go insane if you couldn't do the thing you loved more than life itself? Especially with that supposedly "magic" horn of his busted up to shreds. Finally, his wife got fed up with him, and she called the cops. They arrested him but they couldn't deal with him so they sent him off to the Jackson Mental Institute just outside of town cheer. That would've been about 19 and 7, but he stayed on living until 19 and 31. And, of course, that was around the time that the young jazz cats came on the scene: Armstrong, Beiderbecke, Ellington and so on. Sure, they got their success and all, but, like I said, if they'd only put Bolden in front of your fancy recordin' equipment and let him blow, things would have been plenty different. For you, for me, for him, and for ALL of us Americans!

Well, I thank you mighty kindly for the gin, sir, but I gots to get home 'fore my wife starts hollerin' for me. And her voice carries just as loud as Buddy's horn used to, only it ain't nearly as musical soundin', so you don't wanna hear it! Evenin', Mr. Lomax!

## **Bio**

David Perlmutter's work has been published in *Ethereal Tales*, *Kalkion.com*, and *Broomstick Books*, as well as being featured in many fantasy anthologies.

# **The Tale of the Laundromat in a Parallel Universe**

***Stephen Weinstock***

If you have ever visited the Pyramids and marveled at their stunning monumentality, that is truly a shame. For these are structures that were motivated not just by the thirst for immortality and the slash of the whip, but also by the urgent complex of Gods worshipped in ancient Egypt. So it is unfortunate to drink in this divine elixir, all the while knowing that the Egyptian pantheon was in fact a group of Laundromat attendants from another dimension.

There was an ancient Egyptian document lost during the transition from the Old to Middle Kingdom dynasties that identified a priesthood cult who believed they could contact the Place of the Gods. The Great Ennead, the Pantheon of the Nine, was expanding to include new Gods, so perhaps these priests brought to light the new divinities.

Time wormholes are funny things. Like space wormholes, you can travel a huge distance in a crimped amount of time, but there's no telling what you leave behind along the way. If you start from Moment A in one world and travel to Moment Z into a parallel universe, parts of you might end up in Moments B through Y in the other world.

The document of the priest cult identifies any number of Egyptian characteristics that may have originated in the Place of the Gods, fully justifying the divinity of Pharaoh: if the white linen robes or shoulder-length headdresses of the Egyptian people were all the fashion in the Place of the Gods, then all adornments of Pharaoh must be divinely inspired.

If time wormholes aren't bad enough, spirit wormholes are incorrigible. The beauty of transmitting consciousness from one world to the next is uncontestable, but what travels from one soul is usually mistaken by another soul. What is worse, a soul from 21st Century New Jersey might inadvertently act as a conduit between her incarnation in a parallel universe and an ancient Egyptian cult of priests.

Which is imprecisely what happened: precisely describing what happened requires some advanced physics explaining the intersection of the space, time, and spirit wormholes involved, so let's leave the 21st Century out of this. What happened was that although the

priests thought they were witnessing the Place of the Gods, they were actually spying on a group of washerwomen in another dimension.

At the Universal Wash and Dry, where they guaranteed to clean any type of fabric in the cosmos, the specialty was the removal of stains from the whitest of garments. Hence the preponderance of white robes on the premises, which the Egyptian priests mistook for the vestments of the Gods. The washing devices at the Universal were pyramid-shaped; the laundresses flipped open the top of the pyramid to add detergents and softeners. The first Pyramids were up and running a few centuries before the cult, but given that swath of time over which a wormhole can splatter its contents, it is entirely possible the Universal's pyramid washers had an earlier influence on the Old Kingdom.

The first new deity welcomed into the Ennead was Nun, who symbolized a great Ocean that existed before the Creation of Heaven and Earth. Of course most of the Egyptian Gods and myths were derived from agricultural, seasonal, and astronomical phenomena; the next convert, the sun God Ra, came with symbolic tales depicting solar orbits and conjunctions. But if the cult priests helped to introduce the oceanic forces of Nun, they were less inspired by the Nile and the Mediterranean than they were by the waves of soapy water in the washerwomen's machines.

The manager of the Universal Wash and Dry had a noble bearing for a laundress. She ran her establishment like a perfect hierarchical society, based on seniority, ability, and obedience to law. In this case, the law was hers, for she had formulated the most particularized methods for the proper care of customer apparel. Her demand for laundering precision earned the washhouse a reputation for perfection, transforming the tawdriest, neglected items into new outfits. If customers complained, she would refund their payment, but only after a full tour and inspection of her operation in defense. If one of her employees faltered, the punishment was nine days of retraining.

The priesthood cult believed they were envisioning the arrogant pride of the Gods as they witnessed their superiority, power, and nobility over the common souls who journeyed in and out of the Place of the Gods. Surely this must be the gateway to the afterlife, where perfect divinity holds sway over the fate of every soul who has either lived in accordance with divine law or not. The cult worshipped the Gods' orderliness.

The manager hated being outdoors. Her employees hung around out back or lingered in the street at every break, smoking reeds and munching Sphinx snacks. She preferred to rest in the lulling, repetitive rhythms of the machines. She never traveled: her laundry was workplace and home and world enough for her. She was content and safe inside; the order she created gave her a feeling of limitless power within the limited space.

The priest cult perceived the Gods' insulated attachment to their Place as an embracing of the cosmos from wherever they stood. To enhance their own connection to the divine, the priests walled themselves up inside Pyramid tombs, the more enclosed the more limitless their reach toward the divine. The lost document revealed that at one time they convinced the Pharaonic hierarchy that they had found the secret to traveling to the Place of the Gods and returning to the almighty source of things.

Thus Pharaohs had insisted on being holed up in burial chambers to insure immortality. After the days of the cult, families were buried in tombs filled with objects that were considered either sacred boons to enter the afterworld or a world of needed goods for that time. The power of the enclosed tomb, the all-in-one chamber as the vessel directed toward the eternal, spread throughout the Middle Kingdom.

Often disturbed by their boss' refusal to leave the premises, the employees of the Universal Wash and Dry started rumors that evil things lurked behind the machines, hid in the hoses, or appeared after hours. Like many rumors, they took on an edge of truth, and the workers believed the laundry was infused with sinister spirits or watched by divine intercessors. They insisted their manager reveal the truth, like a powerful being called on to expose a dark secret. The manager felt strange premonitions at times, as if someone was watching her; she even wondered to herself if souls from the future could hold sway over those in the past. But she considered all of it idle nighttime fears, pronounced it all nonsense to her workers, and added a rule that all such talk was banned from the workplace.

In the end, the manager stopped listening to any complaints from her workers, her customers, or the owner of the establishment. Throwing herself deeper and deeper into the intricacies of her operation, she lost touch with everyone and was resented for her arrogance and compulsion. Turnover of her staff caused shoddy service; lack of customers forced the owner to fire her. She lived out her days looking for a new hole to inhabit,

always sensing she was being watched. But the link had been broken and the cult's visions ceased. They attempted to recapture their knowledge in the document, but it too was lost.

Still, the Pyramids stand against Time. Hidden rooms house objects whose magic reverberates through the ages. And white garments contain a magnetic power to attract stains.



## Vaticinium Ex Eventu

**Mark Brandon Allen**

*Life must be understood backwards;  
but ... it must be lived forward.  
– Soren Kierkegaard*

On this bitterly cold Tuesday in January, the dark-complexioned young man stood across from Supreme Court Chief Justice John Roberts on the west front patio of the capitol building. He placed his hand on an antique Bible extended to him by his wife.

“... do solemnly swear ... that I will execute ... the office of President of the United States faithfully... and will to the best of my ability ... preserve, protect and defend the Constitution of the United States ...” he repeated after Roberts.

#

Paterman was mining the Council’s postdiction imaging links for potential shifts when his reader hooked the disparate event. He patched the tachyon link’s merb reading to the reductive control node on Jim St. Clair’s imaging portal.

“Did you get that?” Paterman asked.

St. Clair, the Council’s history handler nodded – yes! He flicked at switches and moved adjustment disks to refine the tachyon scanner’s core processor. The processor moved huge petaflops of memory to redirect his imaging search readings to January 2009, and the anomaly that could change the Council’s selected now of 2325.

“God damn! St. Clair shouted. “That’s not supposed to be happening.”

“You want me to grab the event’s precursor link, Jim?”

“Damn right, Charlie,” St. Clair answered. He was agitated. The frown on his face indicated his annoyance and his voice rose in volume as well as pitch. “Who the hell is the savant for that fucking tachyon pod, anyway?”

Paterman pulled up a gork sidebar on his imaging portal and then scrolled down the list. “Got it ... name’s Ben Wilmer,” he replied, “... pod covers the postdiction of Martin Luther King’s events.”

“Damn!” St. Clair sucked in a deep breath. “His only fucking job is to keep King alive.”

St. Clair reset the paradigm mode of his link. He carefully selected the base of precognition operation, taking it back to the antecedent of the January 2009 irregularity. The tachyon movement that sprang from his search combed the historical knowledge base thoroughly for the postdiction modification. It reached out through the merb's hindsight screw holes into the timeline continuum and selected the precursor event in the now of 1968. It allowed St. Clair to view the Ben Wilmer pod's activities.

"Oh my God!" St. Clair gasped. "He's screwed up."

#

From the sensory vortex tank he inhabited, Ben Wilmer manipulated his personal object device in the existent now of 1968. Connected by a tachyon tether he guided his alter ego to respond to each vital occurrence that the Council's historical hindsight bias selected for his subject. Cognitive presence flowed along the tachyon from Ben, the savant, to Ben, the pod construct. In the hydrodynamic solitude of the tank Ben Wilmer ministered delicate adjustments through this connection to modify outcomes, ensuring the status quo for the now of 2325. Ben's pod moved freely within the timelines associated with Doctor Martin Luther King, Jr.'s pivotal activities, from location to location and event to event.

#

All of the pod's mannerisms and voice inflections were pure south side Chicago. With its close cropped hair the Ben construct looked taller than the trim, six-foot-three frame it formed. Bright, coal-black eyes and easy smile radiated trust and compassion. A pock-marked face with a light scar across the chin and work-roughened hands completed the pod's corporal appearance. A well worn cable-knit sweater, pleated brown dress pants, argyle sox and penny loafers labeled Ben Wilmer as a middle-class college student.

Without any difficulty the handsome, bronze-skinned young man joined the inner group of Freedom Marchers at the Atlanta airport. The entourage that included Jesse Jackson, Andrew Young and Ralph Abernathy was following King south to Memphis, in support of the black sanitary public works employee union, AFSCME Local 1733. Waiting for the plane to be released for takeoff by the FBI, Ben Wilmer positioned himself to be befriended by Jesse Jackson.

Jackson believed that the athletic-looking student was a newly recruited member of Operation Breadbasket on layover, heading to Memphis from Chicago's O'Hare Field.

Impressed by Ben's knowledge of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, Jackson invited him to visit the movement's unofficial headquarters in Memphis so that he could introduce the new activist to Doctor King.

"Martin," Jackson called through the Lorain motel room's second floor doorway, "Here's another brother from Chicago joining us, Ben Wilmer." He gave a hand sign to King and then added, "a new young marcher who arrived with us on the flight from Atlanta this afternoon."

"Ah, yes ... Jesse," King signaled his acceptance to Jackson. "Send him on in."

King had just finished rehashing his speech for the evening's AFSCME gathering. Cue cards in hand, he was nervously picking at imaginary lint on the sleeve of his dark blue suit when Jackson interrupted him to introduce the tall, young activist. When Ben entered the room, King stepped forward to greet him and clasped his hand in a show of fellowship.

"Glad, Ben ..." King said, "Just glad that all you strong young brothers think well enough of this noble cause to join with us."

"Justice and equality," Ben replied, holding King's hand for an additional moment. Ben glanced back at Jackson, who stood just inside the open door. Then, *sotto voce*, he asked, "Doctor King, may I have a private word with you?"

King thought for a moment. "Yes...yes, sit a while," He said. "There's time to talk. I'm just reviewing my notes for tonight's meeting."

King moved across the room to sit down behind a narrow writing desk in the sparsely furnished suite. Pushing the telephone aside to make room for the note cards on which he had been working, King motioned Ben to the side chair at the desk. Ben sat, his back to Jackson and the open door.

"Jesse," King called to Jackson over Ben's shoulder, "let's make sure we're all ready to leave for the meeting on time ... and ask Abernathy or Young to check on Jones and the loaner car. The weather looks mighty threatening tonight."

"Already rainin'," Jackson said as he closed the door to leave. He moved off along the motel's open air walkway to do King's bidding, his footsteps noisily splashing in newly formed puddles.

#

“Doctor King,” Ben began, “I didn’t really want to be here tonight... it’s not how I usually work, but I’ve come a long way to ensure your life.”

A shocked look crossed King’s face. He pushed his chair away from the desk to stand; his arms outstretched and his hands upraised toward Ben in a defensive posture.

“You’re telling me you’re one of Hoover’s?”

“No, no, Doctor King ... not Hoover,” Ben responded as he carefully stood up. “I’m here for the good of the Council.”

“Council ... what Council?” King relaxed his stance and then glanced quizzically at Ben. He stepped away from the desk, careful to maintain eye contact, watching for any sudden movement.

“An administrative agency that is concerned for your safety ... I’m one of their, uh ... agents ... Tomorrow night, you ...”

“Now wait a minute, young man,” King broke into Ben’s explanation, “there’s nothing on the Memphis schedule for tomorrow evening.”

“The dinner at the home of Billy Kyles.”

King’s face brightened. “Why yes...I’d almost forgotten,” he said. “How do you know about that?”

“I’m a special kind of agent, Doctor. I came here armed with certain information in order to adjust tonight’s happening ... to help you change tomorrow’s night’s outcome.”

“What ... I don’t quite understand ... why?”

“So that it will coincide with the Council’s retrodiction preferences.”

King was a bit bewildered by Ben’s attempted clarification. He didn’t quite know what to make of the strapping young man. Reflecting on what he had heard from the young man, King wasn’t sure if the college student was a fool or just a misguided soul. He focused on Ben, trying to read the newly introduced Freedom Marcher’s body language for anything other than empathy. Jackson or Abernathy would be back soon, he thought to himself, so all he had to do was stall.

“Um ... so ... you’re saying that I’m in danger?” he asked.

“Yes ... If you make your planned speech tonight it will arouse some deep feelings in a group of white malcontents ... so much so that one of them will assassinate you ...”

Incredulous, eyes widening, King interrupted. “Here in Memphis?”

“... when you step out onto the motel walkway tomorrow night ... as you leave for dinner at Kyles’ home.”

“You can’t be serious?”

“Please understand, Doctor King, your welfare is my only concern. I was the informant that called the FBI about the bomb aboard the Eastern Airline flight in Atlanta today. In 1956, I managed to delay the group with the explosive until a time when you were away from your home. I was the one who bumped Izola Curry’s arm, causing her to miss your aorta with the letter opener at the book signing.”

King suppressed an uneasy laugh, “You’re saying that, um ... you ... an agent, as you call yourself, can see ahead ... change the future?”

“No, we can only assist in creating retrodiction occurrences of known history. Information learned from past history is managed at critical junctures in time ... Our technology can reach back ... from the future into the past ... adjust certain historical facts and principles to maintain our status quo. We manipulate this hindsight to produce the recommended outcome that the Council prefers.”

King clenched his hands and pursed his lips. “I ... I just don’t quite understand all that talk, about retrodiction, Ben,” he said.

“Surely a man as well read as you has covered biblical prophecy that is explained by *vaticinium ex eventu*. Just think of it as a tentacle. Sort of a way to reach back in time ... knowing what has happened at a specific event, with the ability to make subtle changes ... create a history with a slightly different outcome of what was.”

“Hum ... *vaticinium ex eventu* ... prophecy after the event.”

“Yes!”

Ben watched as King struggled to absorb the rationalization. He wasn’t sure if King understood his reasoning or believed any of the information he offered. Nodding his head in thought, King began to pace absently around the suite.

“So some sick white brother ... will change the future tomorrow night,” King blurted out.

“No, Doctor ... no! Not if you do as I suggest. Your death tomorrow night can be avoided. You can live a long life ... on through the turn of the century. Excuse yourself from tonight’s meeting at the church ... Tell Reverend Abernathy that you are too ill to attend.”

“Why not point out this so called assassin ... Stop him?”

“I can’t. History doesn’t name the true assassin or his actual location tomorrow night. If it did, I could delay him ... change his aim ... disrupt his timing. All we know is that he is a white man. He will use a rifle ... tomorrow night ... he will be waiting for you to walk out onto the outside hallway on your way to Kiles. Believe me, Doctor King, the only way to avert the occurrence is not to speak at the Harrison Mason Temple Church tonight. It is the only way!”

King stopped pacing and turned to look Ben in the eye. “And ... at what cost to the movement?”

“None ... none, not right now, anyway. It will take a few more years for the effect to show up. Eventually the changes will blend so gradually and seamlessly over time that it will become impossible to say where one became the next.”

“Then what does this so-called Council of yours gain?”

“Just ... the status quo. You live on into the twenty-first century ... honored ... respected. No other black leader emerges to follow in your footsteps. The Council’s now continues as it is and the status quo is retained.”

“Status quo?”

“The existing now.”

“Hum ... Status quo,” King mused, “as things are ...”

With head down and hands together, King sat on an arm of the room’s convertible sofa. He was in deep contemplation considering Ben’s encroachment into his life when there was a sharp rap on the door. King looked up. Ralph Abernathy came into the room, a dripping umbrella in his hand.

“Are you ready Martin?” Abernathy asked. “The Caddy’s here ... Waitin’ downstairs ... Bring an umbrella ... Rainin’ pretty hard.”

When King failed to move, Abernathy admonished him. “Martin ... It’s almost time!”

King unclasped his hands to glance at his wristwatch.

“Ralph ...” King began and then smiled deliberately at Abernathy. “You go on ahead. You know what has to be said ... I’m not feeling well ... We’ll talk tomorrow.”

“But Martin ...”

“No ... No,” King waved him off. “Tell the others. Go along now.”

Abernathy took in a deep breath, stared at King, and then slowly backed out of the room. With his shoulders raised in an uncertain shrug at King's request, he reopened the umbrella and stepped out into the pouring rain.

A few minutes later, the anxious voices of Jackson, Abernathy and Young blended with the sound of falling rain and the clatter of leather-soled shoes moving down the metal stairwell. Ben listened to the rumble of the automobile's exhaust as Jones started up the loaner Cadillac's V8 engine. Tires, skidding into motion on the wet pavement, signaled the car's rapid departure into the stormy night.

#

Ben stood facing King who remained seated on the arm of the sofa. Neither of the two talked or moved for several minutes. King was lost within his thoughts. Perspiration beaded on his brow, and he removed his lapel pocket handkerchief to dab at the moisture.

"You did right, Doctor," Ben broke the silence. "Hindsight bias ... the ability to use a predicted occurrence ... or event ... then achieve a predisposed actuality. Your tomorrow night is safe now," he said. "You'll live a long life."

"I'm not at all too sure about that, young man," King said. A somber smile crossed his face as he studied Ben again. "Tell me, if I live this long life... will the civil rights movement go on?"

"Of course ... but the movement becomes violent after the AFSCME march and the federal government steps in to abrogate minority rights."

"Abrogate?"

"Maintain the status quo ..."

"Hum ... status quo. And ... if I were to die tomorrow?"

"There would be changes too ..."

"And the movement ..."

"Abernathy, Jackson ... your wife ... others would continue the movement."

"Then why, Ben ... what is the quid pro quo?"

"If you were to die tomorrow, history indicates that the civil rights movement could reach its end result ... early in the next century. A young black political organizer from the south side of Chicago could become president of the United States. That would change the preselected now ... alter the status quo."

"Hum ... the status quo again ... You said 'could'?"

"There are always slight variables in a timeline's retrodiction ... but that won't happen as long as you're alive."

The telephone rang. King moved off of the sofa and crossed the room to answer the call.

"Let it ring," Ben warned as King reached across the cluttered desk for the telephone receiver. "Don't pick it up. It's not important, Doctor."

"You're sure?"

"It's Abernathy ... Just let it ring."

"You know that?"

Feeling some trepidation, King hesitated. He finally answered the telephone after the fifth ring. "Hello," he said. "Ralph?" King shook his head up and down at Ben in surprised affirmation. With his free hand he motioned Ben to the sofa.

"It is Abernathy ..." King whispered in an aside. "He's calling from the payphone in the Temple's vestibule."

"Doctor, don't listen! Please ... hang up!"

Ignoring Ben, King continued to concentrate on Abernathy's voice, with his ear tight to the telephone receiver as he walked around the desk.

"Ralph says the turnout there is small ... needs me to come down ... keep the faith with those who came out on this stormy night ... the cause ... the reason that I came to Memphis ... the people ... equality ... civil rights ... the future ..."

After Abernathy hung up, King sighed deeply. "I've got to go," he said. He hit the telephone's switch hook and began to finger the rotary dial to call for a taxi.

Ben moved from his position on the sofa to stay King's hand. "Doctor....don't! If you go, tomorrow doesn't change ... you ..."

King continued dialing. "I don't need to know any more, Ben," he said. "You're a captivating young man, zealous for your cause ... well meaning ... perhaps ... You've taken me to the mountain ... without a full of understanding of what it would be like to look down ... to see the promised land ... but I think I know now. "

#



Under a heavy downpour, amid flashes of lightning and the sound of rolling thunder King's cab arrived at the vast, Art Moderne, Harrison Mason Temple Church.

The small but vocal crowd of ASFME workers seated around the oversized two level auditorium recognized King immediately. They greeted him with applause and shouts. Abernathy quieted the audience and quickly ushered King, across the temple's lower floor to a lectern on the stage at the end of the hall.

King thanked the workers and Abernathy in a short, self-humbling introduction and then began a rather rambling address. Without his prepared notes, he touched upon history, workers' needs, the Poor People's March and then proceeded to cover some of his own personal trials and tribulations. "... And then I got to Memphis," he said, ending the lengthy speech.

Tears began to glisten at the corners of his eyes and he unexpectedly continued on. "And ... some began to say the threat ... or talk about the threats that were out. What would happen to me from some of our sick white brothers? Well ... I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead."

King paused, and his voice trembled. "But it doesn't matter with me now ... Because I've been to the mountaintop. And ... I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life ... Longevity has its place."

As though on cue, thunder echoed through the auditorium. The unremitting rain intensified. It drummed down loudly upon the building's roof as the audience fell silent, waiting for King to go on.

With an inspired exhalation he continued, "But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will."

Several voices from the assembly cried out "yes" and "amen" to King's declaration.

"And ..." King answered back, "He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And ... I've looked over. And ... I've seen the Promised Land." Pent-up passion began to show in King's eyes. A hint of a beatific smile crossed his face. "And... I may not get there with you," he soothed as his voice began to rise again. "But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land. And ... I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord."

Overcome by emotion and near tears, King ended abruptly. He turned and stumbled back from the lectern into the open arms of Abernathy, who was standing directly behind him. Abernathy held King tightly in a strong affectionate embrace.

*"Vaticinium ex eventu,"* King whispered into the minister's ear.

"What...what?" Abernathy asked.

With tears streaming from his eyes, King answered, "Think of a tentacle reaching out to a future time in history, able to know what is to come, with the ability to make a subtle change to what that history will be."

#

Paterman and St. Clair worked frantically, moving through thousands of historiographical events to find an occurrence that could keep the Council's preferred now intact. Each timeline possibility merged progressively into the next, slowly forming the existing now of 2325. Every new postdiction from the merb's retrospective readings exposed the same ominous result.

St. Clair's face became ashen. "Oh, my God!" he croaked. "Oh, my God!"

Paterman watched the truncating timelines show the outcome of the 1968 event precursor that led directly to the 2009 anomaly he had uncovered. The irregularity faded seamlessly from his merb reader to become the disambiguation after the fact. Changes blended into each other so gradually that it was impossible to say where one became the next.

"Shit!" was the last word that Paterman uttered as the tachyon's aspect became static.

#

With his hand on the small red Bible, Barack Hussein Obama concluded the oath of office that confirmed him as the forty-fourth President of the United States of America. "...So help me God!" he pledged.

## Bio

A. L. Gengler is a retired marketing consultant. He began writing science fiction and fantasy under the by-line Mark Brandon Allen for the amusement of his children and grandchildren. His extended family includes eight children, eleven grandchildren, two great grandchildren and one vicious three-pound Yorkshire terrier who holds both him and his wife hostage in Valparaiso Indiana. His work has appeared most recently in *The Last Man Anthology*, *WordPlay*, *Polluto Magazine*, *Cast Macabre*, *Bull Spec*, *Sounds of the Night*, and *Anthro Dreams*. The July issue of *Pulp Empire Magazine* will feature his novelette "Espacio:Space."

# **The Recruit**

***Margaret Karmazin***

Nisrokel hoisted his bag onto a muscular shoulder and made his way down the gangplank from the ship. This was Soondari, the blue-green planet of history, the place of genetically designed slaves. The source of many necessities for life on his own world.

Though he'd been prepared physically and mentally to survive in this world, he took his first breath with some trepidation. Nothing happened; the air entered his lungs and nourished his body without mishap. It smelled of strange perfumes, vegetable, animal and mineral, though of course he was deep underground.

He was one of thirty new recruits. Nisrokel admitted to himself that he was frightened. Naga were not supposed to be frightened, but that was just one of the many lies perpetuated by the rulers. One learned early to keep observations of such to oneself if, as his father Vajakel had taught him, one wanted to live a long life.

The Commander met the recruits after they were herded into a small chamber off the cavernous one housing the ships. Nisrokel did not like the underground living thing, though he'd been instructed on the necessity of it. The slaves dwelled on the surface and were kept ignorant of Naga existence. Slaves occasionally witnessed their flying vehicles, but nothing was ever admitted officially. The Naga, the first and Supreme residents of Soondari, preferred the privacy of living underground. This environment was also healthier for their pale green skin and large golden eyes. For the most part, slaves were entirely ignorant of the existence and presence of their Masters.

"You're mine now," growled the Commander. "Your job is to follow orders. You will never give in to temptation to observe the slaves beyond the limit of your own assignment. You will strive to never let them see you and should they nevertheless do so, you will immediately take action. Do you understand me, slime?"

"We understand," intoned the recruits, though they did not. Their young skin glistened in the underground lighting.

The Commander's was darker with age. "You, you, you and you!" He indicated four Naga, including Nisrokel. "You'll go out early tomorrow. The rest of you will receive your

assignments after. Now report to your chamber for showers and feeding. Get moving!" he snapped.

Nisrokel suffered a terrible stab of homesickness. He wanted to feed with his father, to soak in the baths with his old friends, wanted anything from home, anything at all, not this underground claustrophobic hell. On Dareem, it was comfortably overcast, the weather warm and caressing, the rivers and ponds deep for lounging, the air moist and fresh. Why, why had he agreed to come? Why had he allowed his uncle to persuade him?

Uncle Kernel, brother of his father, was a hard Naga, heavily fond of rigid social hierarchy. There was rustling in the ranks on Dareem; factions quietly protesting and plotting. But Kernel, knowing nothing of secret student organizations and, being of the older generation, had influenced Vajakel to apply pressure to Nisrokel. Next he knew, he was bound to a planet where long ago his ancestors had genetically altered upright animals, mixing Naga DNA with their primitive variety and creating a self-replicating labor force and occasional food source.

"Good for a young Naga to know where things he takes for granted originate," old Kernel had intoned, his pale eyes glowing as he sipped his britta beer.

Nisrokel's mouth and throat were painfully dry, but he did not know where the water was. He could not see in the pitch dark, though he could hear the occasional snorts and grunts of his sleeping fellow warriors.

A rude blast from somewhere above woke them, followed by the boom of the Commander's voice. "Up, up up!" he bellowed and soon they, nervous and sleepy, were aboard a vessel whose core was working up to lightening pitch. Their breakfast consisted of a bag of mealy mush, followed by a tube of tasteless red liquid.

Nisrokel whispered to his fellow recruit, Jordel, "What are we expected to do?"

But Jordel did not respond. The Commander stood directly in front of Nisrokel.

"You're wondering something, slime? I'll describe your assignment."

As he spoke, their vessel, one twentieth the size of the ship the recruits arrived in, accelerated to tremendous speed.

"We've entered one of the evacuation tubes and will, in a matter of minutes, emerge into ocean. We'll leave ocean almost immediately, accelerate to hyper dimension and arrive

at our target destination in nineteen minutes. Once there, you, Jordel and you, Nisrokel, will use the screen to your left to release spray into the atmosphere. You will continue until tanks register empty. You, Cosine and Brogel will....” He continued till everyone had received their orders.

Nisrokel raised a finger in the polite signal for questions.

The Commander snarled, “*What, slime?*”

Not in the mood now to ask, Nisrokel backed off, but the Commander would not let him go. He growled dangerously, “Ask your pathetic question!”

Nisrokel squeaked, “What are we spraying, Commander?”

The older Naga’s eyes with their vertical pupils seemed tired, as if their continuous fierce expression had worn them out. “The emission is a chemical/biological mixture that will infect a high percentage of the slave population in that area. The genetic strain there is undesirable.”

Nisrokel felt an almost uncontrollable urge to ask more, but stifled it.

All heads turned to the windows, which ran around the circumference of the vessel. The Commander said, “The slaves cannot detect the existence of our vessel. They see only clouds in the sky. Command has determined this area’s population is to be culled to half or less. The eventual goal is total elimination. They have served their purpose.”

The land was green below, rich with living things, flora and fauna. Nisrokel saw that it was beautiful.

Under the Commander’s eye, the mission passed effortlessly and within a couple of hours, they were back at the base. Then, at the evening meal, the Commander partially ruined Nisrokel’s normally robust appetite. “In twelve hours, you same four will take the vessel out yourselves and repeat today’s mission.”

Before the young Naga had time to react, the Commander moved on to other recruits, passing out assignments.

Jordel hissed to Nisrokel, “Do you know how to do it all? I only saw our own job. What did the others do?” His pale skin had gone ashy; his nose seemed to quiver.

Nisrokel glanced around before replying. “I don’t know how to drive the vessel, do you? It’s nothing like I’ve seen at home.”

Jordel panted slightly. “May Mardon help us!”

“Did those other two drive it or did the Commander do it and they just watched?”

“I don’t know, I was too busy,” Jordel said.

They took off exactly on time, the vessel programmed to arrive at the target. However once there, the other two recruits, Cosine and Brogel would be using manual control while Nisrokel and Jordel sprayed.

“How do we get this back on remote for the return?” Jordel asked nervously.

“Just hit this,” said Brogel, waving his hand over a black area on the controls.

Nisrokel jerked his head in acknowledgment and proceeded with the sprayers. It wasn’t long before he and Jordel had emptied them.

“We’re finished,” they announced.

“Want to take a quick dive down to see the land?” said Cosine.

Nisrokel felt a warning jab in his gut. “I don’t think-” he began, but Brogel, piped up eagerly. “Why not? We finished early, didn’t we?”

“How do you know we finished early?” asked Nisrokel. “There was no time limit!”

“Because it took longer the other trip,” said Brogel reasonably.

“No, I really don’t want-”

“We know what we’re doing,” Cosine shouted. “I was number one in flight training and Brogel was three!”

“No!” screamed Nisrokel, but it was too late. The eager drivers aimed the vessel to a lower altitude and were now skimming over the surface of a vast forest.

“Look!” said Brogel, bouncing in his seat, “A village of the slaves! Look at them down there like insects crawling in the mud. I wonder how soon the disease will strike them!”

A sudden horrible crunching noise issued from somewhere behind them. Nisrokel didn’t know what was behind the wall that divided the control room from the rest of the small vessel. Everyone shut up and looked in that direction. The vessel slowed down.

“Did you slow it down?” asked Cosine.

Brogel didn’t answer.

Jordel was across the small space in an instant and had Brogel by the throat. “You slime, you piece of-”

He might have strangled him if not for Nisrokel pulling him off. "No point," he said. "We need to concentrate." His voice was calm, though his insides felt like a gurgling mass of lava.

The vessel was descending and about to crash. Next thing they knew, they were on the surface, sliding at breakneck speed through the village, slaves and domestic animals screaming as they were mowed down. Clearly, the recruits were in serious trouble. Quite possibly their careers would be ruined.

"Can they see us now?" croaked Brogel, his voice rough from the strangling.

"Even if they can't," snapped Jordel, "they can obviously see something mowed them down, you idiot. I'm going kill you for this." His eyes glowed reddish.

Outside, the slaves shrieked and wailed. Others stood about staring openmouthed at the vessel, which clearly they *could* now see. Someone threw a rock, followed by more and soon the recruits were bombarded. They heard a rat-a-tat sound and felt something stronger hit the sides of the vessel.

"Mardon help us!" Jordel screamed, while Cosine hammered at the controls.

A voice boomed into the air, surrounding them with its rage. "What's going on? Have you crash landed, you fools? Our readings indicate that!"

Nisrokel answered, his voice a humiliating squeak. "We've landed, Sir."

"WHY?" blasted the voice. "WHO TOLD YOU TO DO THAT?"

More rat-a-tats slammed into the side of the vessel.

"ARE THEY SHOOTING AT THE SHIP?" the Commander roared.

A rescue followed with all the trimmings, employing a fog to disorient the locals while the vessel was reclaimed for repair.

"Can they see us?" Nisrokel asked the crew, who, while they worked, shot disgusted looks at the recruits.

"Of course they can, moron! As soon as the vessel came down the shields were damaged."

"Oh, Mardon," muttered Jordel, holding his head in his hands. The bright sunlight played on his pearlized scales causing him to glitter when he moved.



Dragged from their beds after hours of tossing and turning, the four guilty recruits shivered in the dark. The Commander looked as worn out as they felt. He looked directly at Nisrokel while he spoke.

"I'm taking you to see someone today, someone of importance on Soondari. You will learn a bit how things are run here."

Nisrokel and the others were speechless. Was there no punishment for their so obvious violation of orders?

All came clear in a moment. "The others are to return to their quarters," snapped the Commander. "They will be dealt with."

There was a collective gasp and a release of fear odor. The Commander waved his hand sharply.

As the others filed out, Nisrokel stood in a panic. He'd heard terrible stories of wayward recruits and even seasoned warriors who were dealt appalling punishments.

The Commander's pupils gleamed red in the gloomy light. "You four made an extremely stupid mistake. I'm going to assume, whether true or not, that you were not the one to instigate it."

Nisrokel opened his mouth to speak, but the Commander silenced him with a raised hand. "Your uncle Kernel is an old friend of mine. I owe him a favor and am now repaying it. You will be let off."

"W-what about the others?" Nisrokel asked through dry lips.

"They'll be executed."

Nisrokel's mouth dropped open.

"We don't tolerate screw-ups. You understand that from now on, you will obey and make sure that your mates follow orders. The favor I owed is repaid. You will not be let off again."

All the light seemed to drain from Nisrokel's mind. He regretted with his entire being allowing his uncle to talk him into coming to this place. Now there was nothing for it but to endure. The term of service was four Soondari years. Unbearable.

The Commander used Nisrokel as a servant. For secretarial work or information, he relied on his assistant, Lirrel. Nisrokel served to fetch or move objects. He found this

humiliating after his excellent rank at the Academy. It was clear that the Commander was getting a point across.

*Endure*, Nisrokel told himself.

They once again zoomed through the underground tubes, to emerge somewhere above a vast blue ocean. In a matter of minutes, they hovered over the coastline of a land mass, then descended into clouds to soar over another forest. This forest differed from the one before, containing a different type of foliage. They landed the vessel, which surprised Nisrokel.

"We are going out in the open?" he said, forgetting himself.

The Commander did not bother to answer.

The Commander, Lirrel and Nisrokel stepped into a wide clearing, containing a colossal stage at one end with a large, carved, wooden figure behind it, a seating arena and several rustic looking buildings. The only slaves visible were a couple of males raking up fallen leaves and others cleaning up in the seating area.

The Commander walked to the largest of the rustic buildings, Lirrel and Nisrokel following with Nisrokel carrying the Commander's bags. They entered a side door, walked down a hallway and into a conference room. The Commander and Lirrel seated themselves, while Nisrokel was made to stand behind the Commander's chair. Soon the door opened and a slave walked in; an imposing one, but a slave nonetheless. He seemed perfectly at ease, not the least startled to see Naga.

The Commander stood to clasp this slave's arm in greeting. Nisrokel was confused. Was this the Leader of the Slaves? Even if so, he would not be on equal footing with a Naga.

"How's it going?" asked the Commander.

The slave waved his hand dismissively. "As expected." His voice was slow, strangely similar to that of a Naga, though smoother. "It will appear that my opponent is going to win the election, but at the last moment there will be an issue with the voting apparatus and in the end, I shall win. As usual, the populace is working itself into a frenzy. So amusing to watch, how they imagine they actually have a say in how things go."

Lirrel put a finger up, meaning that he was receiving a message through his ear implant. "What is it?" asked the Commander.

"Barberu has dropped out of the running," he reported.

“Right on time,” laughed the slave.

The door opened and a low rank Naga walked in, carrying a tray of refreshments. He set out the tray’s contents on the table, then quietly left. Though hungry, Nisrokel was not offered food. The Commander chose a chunk of meat and dunked it into the fresh blood before popping it into his mouth. Lirrel followed suit, but when the slave did the same, Nisrokel could not contain his gasp. Slaves, he’d been told, did not usually eat blood. He heard the Commander chuckle.

Then for a split second, Nisrokel thought he saw the slave transform into a Naga and back into the slave. Nisrokel felt fear.

The Commander laughed again and they all kept eating until the food was gone.

“Do you need me to do anything?” asked the Commander.

“Yes,” said the slave or whatever he was. “We want you to make a diversion in the Vrin Quadrant. An explosion of some kind. Make it look like one religious group attacking the other there. This will propel their election toward the candidate most compatible with my coalition.”

“Will do,” said the Commander as Lirrel took note. “How many slaves do you want killed? What amount will look dire?”

“Twenty-thirty is enough.”

“Anything else?” asked the Commander. When the other indicated no, he stood up and signaled for Lirrel to gather his things, which were then handed to Nisrokel.

“Who’s the young Naga?” asked the strange one.

“Him? Nobody,” said the Commander.

“Sir, was that a very high slave we met with?” Nisrokel dared ask Lirrel a while later when the Commander had slipped out somewhere.

Lirrel said, though not unkindly, “Did they teach you nothing back home? When we created the slaves, we kept some of the bloodlines pure, some so high as half Naga. The visible rulers of this world are from that bloodline, all over the planet from the smallest division to the largest land masses. Anyone considered a ruler, no matter if their title is inherited or they are elected to the post is usually in that bloodline. Individuals in the bloodline are our eyes in the field.”

“Ah,” said Nisrokel. Why hadn’t his father or uncle explained this more thoroughly?  
“So that...that person there was half Naga? That’s why he drank the blood?”

Lirrel smiled. “That ‘person,’ as you call him, in just a few days, will be elected leader of the most powerful land mass division on Soondari. He is indeed half Naga, though he could pass for any normal slave. Indeed, he needs to drink slave blood regularly in order to stay in proper form.”

“That blood they were drinking in there was *slave* blood?” Nisrokel asked, his voice wavering.

“It was,” said Lirrel.

“What would happen should he stop the blood?”

“He would shift to a Naga-like appearance. Now enough questions.”

New recruits arrived on the next transport, but though they slept in the same chamber, Nisrokel did not have time to know them. They were usually asleep when he returned for the night. It was as if the Commander were trying to break him by depriving him of sleep and enough food and water. Not to mention the dispiriting underground existence.

Nisrokel wondered, since they could remain invisible when they flew, why they did not go up to the surface more often. He felt a craving to see more of Soondari.

“I don’t understand,” he said to Lirrel, “why Naga do not go to the surface more often since we can remain invisible.”

Lirrel pushed back his seat and said, “There are few of us and many of them. There are, at last count, seven billion slaves and only one and a half million Naga. This is counting the Hybrids in power positions. Invisibility is possible but takes much energy.”

Nisrokel considered this. “But there must be many isolated places on Soondari where no slaves would see us and we could enjoy the fresh air. Surely, no one relishes living in caves.”

Lirrel paused before going on, as if deciding whether Nisrokel was worthy of such information. “If Naga want a life of pleasure, this is not the place for it. We who work here to supply our fellow Naga are willing to sacrifice. Those out in the world working as hybrid slave leaders and in the control network are allowed to enjoy what personal pleasures they

can and occasional respites with their own kind, but in general, we who run things underground do with less. Most do not spend their lives here, so it's not a life sentence."

"Do the slaves have no real idea of our presence?" Nisrokel asked, deciding to milk as much out of Lirrel as he could.

"Should any of them find out, happen to see one of us, either we allow him to rant among his kind, which, fortunately only makes him appear insane, or if necessary eliminate him. Should a group of slaves see us, such action might be necessary. We're often culling certain groups anyway, though there are some we like to keep at higher numbers for various reasons."

"What was the largest number of slaves that ever witnessed a Naga," persisted Nisrokel.

Lirrel looked at him. His eyes were long and yellow green instead of the more common golden. "I'm assuming you're referring to modern times, within the past two centuries. I am not aware of everything that goes on, you understand, but I've heard of a case in one of the more primitive sections where fifteen individuals saw two Naga. They assumed that the Naga were gods. Another case in a more technologically advanced area had a grouping of twelve see three Naga. We removed those individuals and brought them underground for use in genetic experiments. The slave populace never solved the mystery of their disappearance. Now, I suggest you get back to work."

When Nisrokel presented himself for work a few mornings later, they climbed aboard a larger vessel than before and in minutes were shooting through tunnels. Two experienced soldiers were present and several sealed containers. They traveled a longer distance underground this time before shooting into open sea and eventually into the air. The vessel landed in a dry, partly desert area near some twisted trees.

"Unload," ordered the Commander. He jerked his head toward Nisrokel, so the young Naga jumped to help the other two.

"Put everything under those trees," said one. Both were much older than Nisrokel.

"What is this stuff?" Nisrokel whispered. The others ignored the question.

When Nisrokel repeated it, one answered with a snarl. "Explosives."

"What are they for?"

“You ask too many questions.”

After that soldier returned to the vessel to fetch another carton, the friendlier one spoke. “Hybrids will arrive to pick up the load and transport it to one of the sites from which they will distribute it to a slave military group.”

“What will the slaves do with it?”

“Perform terrorist acts or start a small war.”

Nisrokel was shocked. “Why would Naga want the slaves to start a war? Wouldn’t that destroy perfectly good livestock?”

The soldier snickered. “The higher-ups promote wars and divisions all over the planet. This keeps the slaves safely at each other’s throats. The object is to prevent them from ever joining forces entirely.”

“Because if they do?” Nisrokel asked.

“Because if they do, they might wake up and realize who’s controlling them.”

“And what if they did? How would that change anything?”

“Look around, soldier. There are few of us and many of them. Their technology, while behind ours, is catching up. There could come a day...”

It was some time before the Commander took Nisrokel to the surface again. Instead, they traveled underground, visiting the four cities: Natalie, Komanini, Mesh, and Azusa. Between the cities, the Naga had built a vast network of connecting tunnels. Natalie served as the major hub and was under the highest mountain range on Soondari.

Nisrokel made a friend of the soldier who’d explained about the wars. His name was Hadrozil and he was of a lower social class than the one Nisrokel’s family occupied. Normally, Naga did not mix outside their class, but on this outpost, rules were broken. Having a friend relieved some of Nisrokel’s tension, though they saw each other only occasionally.

“Natalie is a good city,” said Hadrozil. “Nothing like Kradoozen or Pin at home, but for here not bad. There’s decent entertainment – music of every sort, sensory expansion, and of course blood rituals.”

Nisrokel looked around. The city resembled any small one on Dareem though the buildings were shorter and there was no sky. His home planet, three times the size of

Soondari, was quite different in that Naga lived inside its interior, which was warmed by a plasma “sun” hanging in a sky of sorts. As above the surface of Soondari, clouds scudded across the interior skies of Dareem. The interior sun enabled Dareem to nourish life, though the planet’s vast orbit around its star carried it far into the cold reaches of space.

Hadrozil took Nisrokel on a tour of Natalie, which ended with a blood ritual. “You go ahead,” Nisrokel said to his friend. “I’ve never enjoyed blood rituals.”

“They replenish your energy,” said Hadrozil, “something you need on this planet. Underground living without a central sun is hard on Naga bodies.”

Reluctantly, Nisrokel agreed to accompany him. He had indeed noticed that his own body was feeling a bit rundown.

The place was an enclosed area on the roof of a large building in the center of the city. The two young Naga were handed glasses of blood. On Dareem, Nisrokel had drunk the blood of many animals along with their meat, but this was clearly different.

“It has a cloying taste,” he said to Hadrozil.

The other Naga laughed. “It’s from one of their large beasts, one they themselves often eat. But tonight you’re going to taste slave blood and that you won’t find so cloying.”

Nisrokel felt an uncomfortable flip in the pit of his stomach and both his hearts raced.

“I don’t know,” he said, but Hadrozil was not paying attention.

“Over here,” Hadrozil said. He seemed excited, almost in a sexual way.

Two large Naga of the next to lowest caste were holding a struggling slave by its arms and legs, a young male. They were tying it so that it hung head down. Nisrokel had only seen naked male and female slaves in holographic pictures, never in real life. He was, in spite of his feelings of foreboding, fascinated. Its body was so smooth and the hairiness of it slightly disgusting.

The slave screamed, then gurgled after one of the low caste Naga slit its throat. The other caught its blood in a large cup. Their eyes glowing red, the small crowd of Naga watching roared their delight, then rushed forward for what was next.

Hadrozil motioned for Nisrokel to move closer to the action. The two Naga lowered the still twitching body to a stone table and proceeded to skin and cut it into large chunks

of meat. Another Naga hacked these into smaller pieces, which he passed around to the crowd. They grunted in satisfaction as they tore at the flesh with pointed teeth.

Nisrokel looked around at the glazed eyes and bloodied faces of the participants and felt a strange emotion. A scene from his past flashed before his eyes, something he'd forgotten. Once when he was small, Vajakel had taken him on a pleasure trip with Nisrokel's mother, Ropress. They had witnessed a crowd of Naga protesting the government's use of Soondari and its inhabitants. Nisrokel remembered that they wore white robes and vines around their heads.

"They're pretty, Father," he'd said, but Vajakel had hurried them away from the scene.

"Can't we stay and watch?" he'd protested, but his father had been stern. "Best not to be associated with those Naga. Though I might agree with some of the things they say." This last, Vajakel had muttered so low that his son almost could not hear it. Ropress had walked ahead of them.

"Why, Father?"

"It is dangerous to disagree with the government on this particular issue, child. Some things are all right to protest, but this thing, no."

"But why?" persisted Nisrokel.

Vajakel sighed. "Soondari has been the major project of Naga for millennia. Thousands of Soondari years. Much expenditure of money, energy, time and blood has gone into this great endeavor. We have lesser projects on other worlds, but nothing to compare with Soondari. We use the livestock there for biological food sources, DNA material and energy food from certain of their emotions. Too much has been invested and too many Naga are involved for them to be open to upheaval on this issue."

Nisrokel had quieted for a moment. "Father?" he then asked. "Are there people there?"

Vajakel replied carefully. "You mean sentient beings? The beings there are primitive. We have genetically programmed them to live only a fifth of our normal life span. Their senses cannot detect outside a certain light and sound range, which causes them to remain prisoner within a small spectrum of sensory input. They cannot move outside of a very



small dimensional range. I would say, child, that they are only one step above domestic livestock.”

Nisrokel had not asked more questions. But now he asked himself, *what if these beings have souls?*

Sickened, he turned from the feeding fury and said to his friend, “I’ve had enough. I need to go and sleep.”

Hadrozil looked surprised. “You don’t want a taste of the meat, or at least a drop of the blood?”

“No,” said Nisrokel. “You stay if you like.” And he found his own way back to their lodgings.

He could not stop thinking about what he had seen and during his nights, dreamed terrible dreams.

Next day, the Commander took Nisrokel on a different mission. This time the vessel landed in heavy forest. The air was humid and hot. The Commander outfitted himself, Lirrel and Nisrokel with belts containing extra equipment and told them to follow. “We’ll walk the rest of the way. You’re now slightly out of sync with the slaves’ dimensional vibration. They cannot see you.”

“How are we doing that?” Nisrokel asked.

Lirrel replied. “Notice that our utility belts differ from the usual. See the black box on the front left; that’s the dimensional shift control. The Commander controls ours from his. There is a manual control on ours, but don’t touch it.”

They shortly arrived at a clearing and saw a road and small town. Battered looking vehicles were parked helter-skelter by the road. Several slaves were gathered around a flower strewn alter, which held a small statue.

“What’s going on?” asked Nisrokel. He’d counted forty-six slaves and two more vehicles pulling off the road.

“This is the place of a sighting,” said Lirrel. “Watch, there will soon be another.”

The Commander positioned himself to the right of the alter, removed a small apparatus from his belt and aimed it in front of him. Suddenly, a form took shape, that of a female slave in archaic dress. The crowd gasped. The figure stood still for some seconds,

then raised its arms. The slaves sank to their knees, heads bent back and eyes glazed with awe.

“So easy to impress them,” muttered Lirrel.

“Why are we doing this?”

“We occasionally project holographic images of their various gods. In this way, we keep alive the fanaticism of the conflicting religious groups. These groups are vast, causing global political movements which help maintain the planet in turmoil. Nothing causes unrest better than religion. There is one section of the globe that we maintain in constant upheaval, always threatening to end in destruction of the world.”

“So that we stay in control,” said Nisrokel. But there was little enthusiasm in his tone.

“Stay here and keep an eye on things,” said Lirrel, who trotted off to find the Commander.

Nisrokel did not understand what he was expected to keep his eye on, but he stood under a giant tree and watched the proceedings. Some of the slaves prayed aloud, repeating words, while others knelt and swayed with their arms in the air. One slave shouted and danced.

Nisrokel was anxious that his belt might stop working and he would become visible. What would happen? Would they rush and kill him? He felt a stab of panic.

He heard little voices and realized that two slave offspring were playing on the other side of the tree. Warily, he moved around the tree until he had them in view and, remembering the translators on all utility belts, fumbled to locate it. He ran through the offered slave languages till the little slaves began to make sense.

“Did you see her?” asked the female one.

“Yes,” replied the little male. “She’s pretty.”

“I don’t think it’s Her,” said the female.

The male seemed upset. “You’d better not say that, you’ll get in trouble. It’s Her all right. She’s going to heal Uncle. You wait and see.”

“*She* wouldn’t wear that outfit. She wouldn’t wear a necklace like that.”

“How do you know?”

The female considered, then answered, "Because I know. I think she's a fairy. Or a space alien."

"You're crazy. God will punish you for thinking that stuff."

The female shrugged. "We'll see. If Uncle is healed, then she's real. If not, it's not Her."

Nisrokel was fascinated. The conversation was the sort he might have had when a child with his cousin Narakel.

Just then an adult female appeared to claim the young ones. "What are you doing back here?" she demanded, wearing a fierce expression. "I looked everywhere for you!" She grabbed each of them and hugged them to her, then immediately slapped them. "Don't worry me like this again!"

Suddenly she looked toward where he was standing, invisible. She grabbed the offspring again and yanked them away from the tree. "I don't like it here!" she said.

Nisrokel was surprised. He saw through her anger to love of her spawn and he was amazed at her sensing someone was there. Were the Commander and other officers aware of this sensitivity in the slaves? Was it something newly manifesting? Should he warn the Commander?

But when the senior Naga returned with Lirrel, Nisrokel refrained from mentioning his concerns. Instead he said, "Perhaps the necklace on the apparition isn't a good idea. A slave offspring back there thought it was a fairy, whatever that is, as opposed to a religious figure."

"Point taken," said the Commander. "And good for you using the translator." It was the Commander's first and only compliment.

Nisrokel could not get the offspring out of his mind, nor the sensitivity of their mother. Never mind the naiveté and blind credulousness of the slave crowd, these he had observed up close showed more intelligence than mere livestock. Perhaps, if he got the chance, he could observe other, but how? The Commander rarely let him out of his sight except for off hours and he was not permitted to visit the surface alone.

The day arrived when the Commander took him to the center of a huge slave city. Their destination was a transmitter station of some sort. As always, he and his superior were invisible to slaves though they walked among them.

“This is a hub of their communication system,” said the Commander. “From here they broadcast to a large section of land mass. We’re to provide energy backup to an important hybrid. His genetic make-up leans slightly to the Naga side so that when under high emotional stress, he can lose form. We’ll provide him with what he lacks as he speaks to the viewers.”

“How do we do that?” asked Nisrokel.

“We surround him with a Rgel field, which enables any life form to hold its form. Both our belts are needed for amplification and only for the duration of his speech. Once it’s over, his stress level will lower. There will not be a question/answer period.”

As Nisrokel watched, along with the entire studio and probably a good portion of the population of Soondari, the important hybrid walked out and Nisrokel immediately recognized him. He was the one that the Commander had met some time before, the one who would be elected leader of the most powerful land mass division on Soondari. Apparently, the election had gone as planned.

Nisrokel would never be able to fully explain what possessed him to do what he did. For some time, he’d been stewing over the potential sentience of the slaves and had come to the conclusion that they were indeed sentient. And Nisrokel’s personal definition of sentience included containing a soul.

He’d brought up the subject with Hadrozil. “I’m sure that they do not,” Hadrozil had replied. “They’re animals, that is all.”

Nisrokel had dared to ask Lirrel and Lirrel had said, “They do. It doesn’t matter. We created them to serve and that is their purpose. Evolution of their souls would be accelerated by how well they perform their function as slaves. But it’s not something to worry about. Naga are, and always will be, their superiors.”

This rankled inside Nisrokel. Romantic as were many young Naga, he held deep principles on the subject of species equality.

Now he and the Commander took their invisible positions behind this high ranking hybrid and set their belts to emit a strong Rgel field surrounding their target.

As the elite hybrid settled into his seat and began his speech, first joking with the interviewer, Nisrokel watched him relax, confident he was protected by the Rgel field. After adjusting his translator, Nisrokel listened to the speech, full as it was of assurances to the slaves. Lies, all of it, promoting the idea that the slaves had any actual say in how things were run, that their elections were honest or effective. The hybrid was smug and his smugness seemed to eat into Nisrokel's very soul.

He shut his eyes, opened them, then without further reflection, flicked off his fifty percent of the Rgel field.

The result was instantaneous. The hybrid kept talking, unaware that he was morphing from slave to Naga. Within seconds, his skin grew lustrous and scaly, his body elongated, his eyes widened and changed color. The nails on his fingers turned black, his teeth grew pointed, his head domed, and the sides of his neck formed into bony ridges.

His interviewer fainted dead away in her seat, the camera slaves but one dropped their equipment and ran, various helpers screamed and scrambled to get away and lights flashed. One lone camera slave kept rolling, terror and determination registered on his face.

The hybrid realized what had gone wrong. He floundered, looking this way and that, then spotted the lone slave still running the camera and tried to speak, which came out a gurgly roar. The camera operator ran, tripping on wires to disappear around a dark corner. They heard banging in the distance.

"What happened?" the hybrid screamed as he turned to look at his supposed protectors. "WHAT HAPPENED?"

The Commander stood still, his eyes slitted. Then he looked at Nisrokel. His expression said everything.

The hybrid's followers claimed it was a trick by the opposing political party, carrying the usual fighting to bizarre extremes. The opposing party was jubilant over "their" unmasking of the true nature of their opponent, who was, anyone could now see, the Prince of Evil. The hybrid himself claimed to the news transmitters that he had suffered a serious vascular incident from the stress of the opposing party's vengeance. After some

time, the whole affair eventually simmered down with most of the populace believing that someone had played an excellent joke using computer generated graphics. There were some conspiracy theorists left who insisted what happened was real, but few listened to those “raving lunatics.”

The Commander was unable to save Nisrokel this time, nor did he want to. Within three days, the young Naga was executed. When asked if he had anything to tell his parents and uncle back home on Dareem before they administered the drug, he closed his eyes and turned away.

## **Bio**

Margaret Karamazin’s credits include over one hundred stories published in literary and national magazines, including *Rosebud*, *Chrysalis Reader*, *North Atlantic Review*, *Potomac Review*, *Confrontation*, *Absent Willow Review*, *Allegory*, *Pennsylvania Review*, *Wild Violet*, and one coming up in *ASIM*. Her stories in *The MacGuffin*, *Eureka Literary Magazine*, *Licking River Review* and *Words of Wisdom* were nominated for Pushcart awards and Piper’s Ash, Ltd. published a chapbook of her sci-fi, *Cosmic Women*. Karamazin helped write the introduction for and has a story included in *Still Going Strong*, stories in *Ten Twisted Tales*, *Mota 9*, *Zero Gravity*, and *Circling Uranus*, and a novel, *Replacing Fiona*, published by [etreasurespublishing.com](http://etreasurespublishing.com).

# Romance of Time

*max keanu*

Watchmaker's calculated art of divisible lines  
Only seconds gone, recovered, reconciled – times  
Confess! Sighs, spies, lies – sleepless unhappiness  
Watchmaker's devices, anxieties, deceptiveness  
Chronicles surreptitious relentlessness

Watchmaker, oh so smart, moving hands imperceptibly  
Only minutes on a lark, a mark, every man's destinies  
Of life, timeless reality, evolved haphazardly?  
Watchmaker's ticking; dialing death demonstratively,  
Defines our zeitgeist zigzaggedly

Watchmaker imparts, twelve more, twenty four  
Only hours, resounding earthly chores, draped revolving doors  
Elastic Mont Blanc, intestate estate, ravaged wolverine, fate  
Watchmaker's delicate; superfluous dates, aging mates  
Never my pretty, inveterate pristine state

Watchmaker's jouled entropy; never polymorphic prose  
Our days, love's repository, hung in eons of glorious tableaux  
Sea of timing, love-tides rent, horizon's bent, and you relent.  
Watchmaker's intent, time's dent, never heaven sent  
Diamond's movement, another lover's decent

Watchmaker's chime, mellifluous crime, a swindler's rhyme  
Only months behind, martyred time, denied love sublime

Back then, known, love binds, inamorata over time redesigns  
Watchmaker unwound, crowned tines, read between the lines  
Timed, stemmed love undermines

Watchmaker's chimera, fool's fantasy, restive two-headed paramour  
Of years desolate, suffering insubordinate, forever and for more  
Seconds, minutes, hours, days, months, years forever drawing blanks  
Watchmaker charlatan tick upon watchband, desolate heart sank  
Puller of the pranks, love's forever-deceptive mountebank

## **Bio**

max keanu is a long time resident of Hawaii. max began writing in 2007 after a back injury immobilized him for many months. He is presently working on his third novel and tuning up dozens of short stories and poems for publication. As a professional musician on the classical guitar, max performed at many hotels, restaurants, concerts, parties and wedding venues. max has a degree in computer science from the University of Hawaii and is married to a teacher, well known for her ceramic art. Max's works have been published in *Thrillers, Killers 'n' Chillers* and *The Fringe*.



## About the Editors

**John Fritzen** has been reading comics for many years, ever since he first happened upon half of *Batman Knightfall* at a garage sale and picked it up. The theme for the anthology came from wondering what it would be like if superheroes existed not only in one time period but in many.

**Alex Nisnevich** writes out of a closet somewhere in Berkeley, California, where he's kept for his own good. He transcribes his bizarre dreams on paper and passes them under the door to his roommates for submission. Somewhere along the way, they get proofread and typed up neatly. Alex's work has appeared in *The Shine Journal* and *Twisted Dreams Magazine*. Along the way, he began to wonder what it would be like to be an editor.

