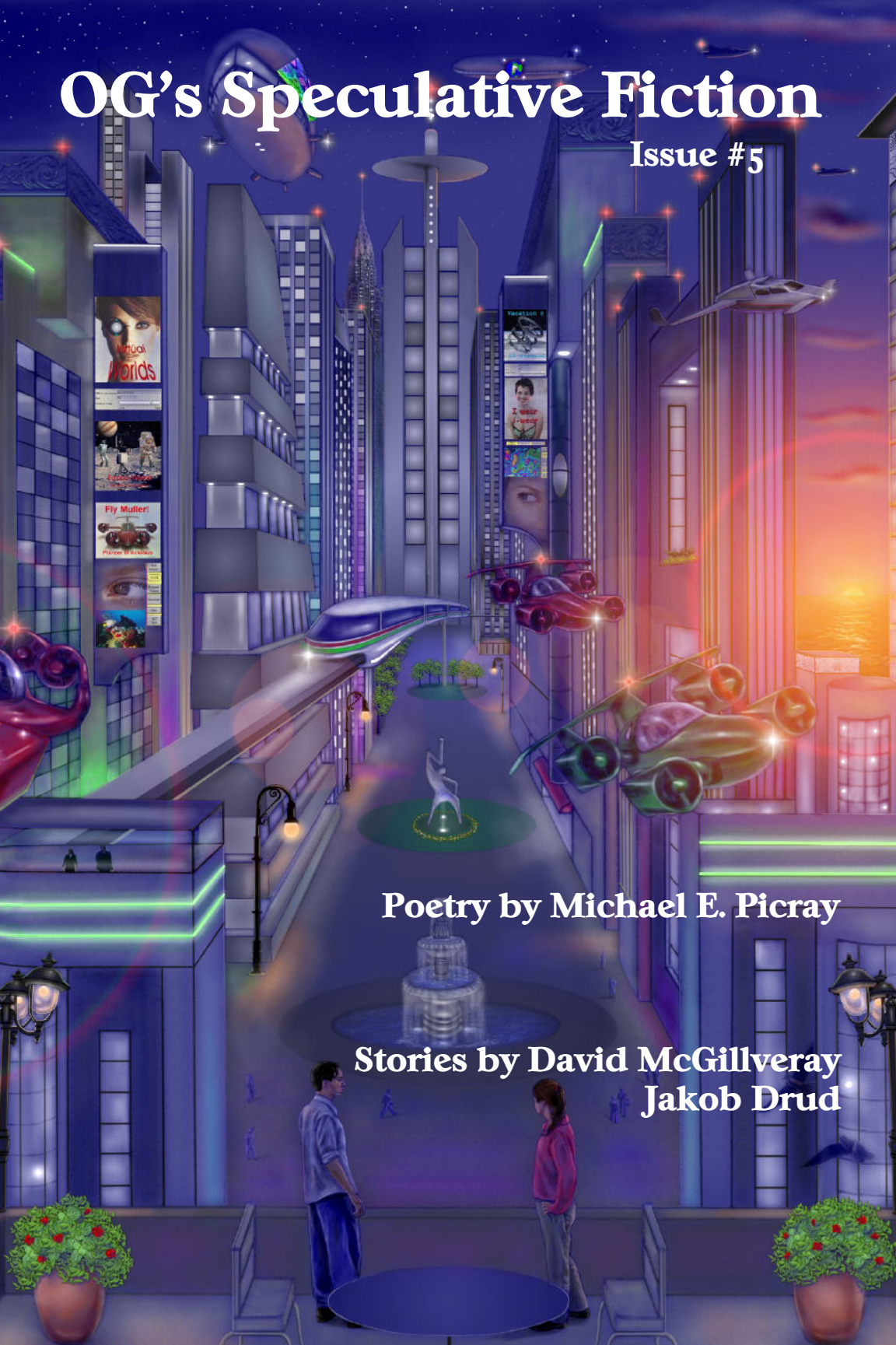


OG's Speculative Fiction

Issue #5



Poetry by Michael E. Picray

Stories by David McGillveray
Jakob Drud

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March

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Anselmo Alliegro's Cover Art: *Beyond Park Avenue*

Anselmo was educated at Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, where his work with some of the best artists in the country earned him a scholarship to Parsons School of Design in New York City. He currently works on his art full time, with themes in all genres. If you haven't seen his work, take it from us, you must. He has appeared in exhibits and galleries in both New York and Miami.

He has published art in The William & Mary Review, Beyond Centauri and The Gobshite Quarterly...and now us.



Publisher, Seth Crossman

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Issue #5 March 2007

OG's Speculative Fiction is published every other month as an online and print magazine featuring speculative writing and art, by Golden Acorn Press, a division of the Opinion Guy. It can be found online at <http://theopinionguy.com>. © 2006 by Golden Acorn Press, a division of the Opinion Guy, all rights reserved. Protection secured under the Universal Copyright Convention. Reproduction or use of the editorial or graphic content in any manner without express permission is prohibited. All stories are fiction and any similarity to real persons or events are coincidental. Contact the editor at editor@theopinionguy.com.

Editor's Letter

There is a certain respect that must be given to the past masters of science fiction and fantasy. Just as we study history, the people who made significant advances in thought and invention, so must we study the past masters of our art. It is among them that we shall receive a teaching more thorough and thought provoking than any creation of our minds alone. True, my mind can conceive of incredible things, amazing things, but it is with the inspiration, the example, the forging of others that I am expanded even more.

We must pay homage to talents like Arthur C. Clark, Tolkien, Shakespeare, Moses. It is heritage, it is our future.

With that in mind, here is a list of some of the books I consider classics.

The list is not exhaustive. There are so many great books out there, so many great authors, that I cannot include them all. I am bound to miss some great authors, some great books. And everyone reads differently. Books I consider classics, you may hate, and vice versa. However, the point here is to expand, broaden, inspire, and enjoy.

Dune, Frank Herbert

The Once and Future King, T.H. White

Lord of the Rings, J.R.R. Tolkien

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Pearl Poet

1984, George Orwell

Fahrenheit 451, Ray Bradbury

The Foundation Trilogy, Isaac Asimov

Ender's Game, Orson Scott Card

Slaughterhouse 5, Kurt Vonnegut

Atlas Shrugged, Ayn Rand

2001: A Space Odyssey, Arthur C. Clarke

Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea, Jules Verne

The Chronicles of Narnia, C.S. Lewis

The Canterbury Tales, Geoffrey Chaucer

Book of the New Sun, Gene Wolfe

If you haven't read them, by all means, pick them up.

Loriana

By David McGillveray

David McGillveray was born in Edinburgh, Scotland but now lives and works in London. His fiction has appeared in a wide variety of print and online venues over the last two or three years, including Futurismic, Neo-Opsis, Far Sector, Fictitious Force and Read by Dawn Voll. He has an e-book scheduled for release from Mundania Press this year. "Loriana" is set in the same universe as stories previously published in Deep Magic and Kaleidotrope.

The storm spat at Tinwa City like a lover betrayed. The Plaza of the Heroes covered under hard washes of rain and sheets of lightning that illuminated the fallen figures in harsh negatives. Electrical ghosts played up and down the flagpoles that ran around the square, worrying at the sodden rags of enemy flags. Thunder broke and the ground shook.

Perhaps it was the fury of the storm. Perhaps it was the simmering, suffocated resentment of the Tinween, trapped in their homes not only by the elements but also by the Union curfew, strictly imposed. Or maybe it was the rage of Loriana herself, watching her stolen city suffer from behind the curtain of the Afterworld. But *something* happened that night to bring life to stone.

Loriana's beautiful face lay against the wet flagstones. Rain poured off her rigid cloak, her sandaled feet, her frozen hair and washed away the dust and the leavings of gulls. Her face was a hero's face. The white eyes held an idealized mix of determination and compassion, the lips just the right hint of humour. A crack led from behind her left ear to the corner of her mouth so that a portion of the jaw had broken away. Slowly, with the fluidity of lava, the crack began to heal.

Lightning flared under a tortured sky. Loriana had fallen in the center of the Plaza, at the confluence of two wide avenues of trees that bent in the wind like a parade of old soldiers. All the other Heroes lay toppled from their plinths, desecrated and broken. The invasion force of the Western Union had made a symbol of them when they took the city. Even the champions of a nation's history had been unable to stop them. Two burnt out tanks still sat by the roadside as a further reminder. Around the perimeter of the Plaza were the seats of Tinwa City's wealth and power: the richest merchants' houses and the buildings of government. Windows dark behind air raid curtains no longer needed. Under new management.

A kind of sigh, lost in the wind, slipped from those marble lips. Fingers twitched, joints forever immobile flexed. A huge hand pressed flat on the flagstones, testing weight.

In the year 87, Tinwa City was besieged from the sea by a barbarian fleet from the unknown lands to the south. A hundred ships barricaded the harbour and raiding parties savaged outlying farms and hamlets. The Lady Loriana alone had anticipated the threat and had used her influence with the Fifth King. Catapult engines of her own design were placed along the headlands above the city. Loriana saw to the stirring of the siege oil herself until it was viscous and dangerous. Then her engines had filled the sky with fire and death and the barbarian fleet burned in the water. So goes the legend. The Plaza of the Heroes was built for her. The city survived another six hundred years before it fell.

The face remained immobile, but somehow there was emotion there. The vast limbs were not of flesh and muscle, but still there was grace. Up on one knee. The neck arched back and the head turned, first one way and then the other. Fingers curled. Thunder and lightning and magic.

Loriana rose to her feet. Cracks and bullet holes healed as if soothed away by the rain. She raised her stone sword above her head and waved it above the treetops, those old soldiers now bowing before her. She turned and looked down the hill from the Plaza towards the harbour where another enemy fleet was at anchor, given protection by a sea gate that had not been there six hundred years before. But there was a street she knew, a broad and ancient avenue that had led from here to the waterfront for centuries. Loriana began to walk.

#

Auld Daddio shivered in the short tunnel that led to Conduit Mews from Broadbow Patters. He often came here to shelter from rowdy weather, but in forty years living on the street he had never seen the like. A river of rainwater ran over the cobbles and his toes were cold and wet inside his old boots. The wind whipped sheets of rain under the stone roof and soaked his rags. Daddio shook and coughed and twisted water out of his beard.

"Signs," he muttered. "These is all signs."

No, not signs. This is just the way, now, he thought. Hideous rain and invaders with guns and empty bins. Even the baker on Eleanre Street had no leavings to spare these days, and he'd been feeding Daddio stale pastries for twenty years. Summer seemed such a long way away, like a different country. But then a different country had come to Tinwa City.

"Knickers," Daddio remarked.

The city had been good to Auld Daddio. For as long as he could remember, it had fed and clothed and sheltered him. If there had been a time when Daddio hadn't lived the Free Life, it was lost to history and memory. Sometimes at night, curled in one of his favourite doorways, he saw faces emerge from his dreams -- a woman, a young boy with black curls and a wet nose. But no names. Nothing to regret, or nothing that he chose to.

The streets were his house, the other Free, his family. They had chosen him as much as he had chosen them. Daddio didn't believe much in ownership, but the way he felt towards the city came close. He loved the smells of the docks, the curve of the bay, the narrow streets of the Shambles and hot days in the Plaza of the Heroes. All changed. There was a bitter flavour to the place now.

With the Western Union had come the curfew and the rationing, the clearance of the streets. Almost all the street people had been rounded up and taken away, they said to one of the work camps in the interior lands. Daddio chuckled at the thought of Shaky Pete and Trolley Melvin stuck in a camp with the army officers and government ministers and the intelligentsia. What they'd have to talk about, that lot!

He subsided in his rags again. Not many had been smart enough to escape the clearance squads. But the Free Life was no good without the Free Community. His arthritis was playing murder in his joints and no one had anything to give any more. Those that did were too scared to show it, even among their own. Suspicion was contagious when you never knew if there was an informer sharing your dinner.

No matter how he tried to rationalize it, Daddio was hiding. And he was miserable for it. A gust of wind blew more rain into Daddio's meager shelter. He sniffed and tried to retreat further against the painted brickwork, thinking how the sewers would be full for days before the rain finally found its way out to sea. One less place to spend the day. It would be harder now, dodging the patrols and he knew he would die if he ended up in one of those camps. Daddio was a free thinker, not a worker, and he was no longer young.

Another bombardment of thunder detonated above the city, almost immediately followed by a flash of lightning that left colours swimming behind Daddio's eyes. It seemed as if the storm was shaking the very world. He remembered how artillery had rumbled during the assault on the city, how the Union had pounded the suburbs as they pushed the city's militia back towards the old town. It had gone on for two days. Not long, really, not long for history to change. The things they had done in the Old Town. It had been like taking a knife to an actress' face. A desecration.

The ground shook again and Auld Daddio looked up, synapses firing on danger. There had been no thunder this time.

There, again.

A vibration in the earth. He had felt it through the cobbles.

Again. A little loose plaster fell from the arch above him. Again, like a vast heartbeat over the wailing wind. Daddio half pushed himself up against the wall, caught in indecision. Flight had always been his natural response, not that he'd been spared his fair share of fights and squabbles and arrests. But now an immense tiredness wrapped itself around him, constricting the breath in his lungs. Where was there to run to, and to what would he be running? The Free Life was over and his friends were gone.

"Knickers an' arse." He said it sadly and began to slide back down the wall.

The ground shook again. Daddio thought of funeral drums. Boom! He could hear it now, not just feel it, something wrong out there on Broadbow Patters: the sound of tumbling masonry suddenly cut off and then repeated. More dust fell and Daddio coughed into his rags. He would wait it out, face it down. The city had thrown too much at him at last and he was too tired to run.

The sound once more. An enormous footfall and then another. Daddio squinted into the wind and rain and the lightless night. His heart thumped but he couldn't draw a breath.

And then, quite clear, lit from within by its own strange unlife, a pale foot the size of a rowing boat stamped down on the paving stones of Broadbow Patters. The road cracked and broke, snapping like a fire. An alabaster ankle filled Daddio's arched view and his eyes grew wide. He jerked and breath wheezed into his lungs. He stumbled to his feet, slipping on the wet cobbles. He fell in a deep puddle and stood again, heedless.

The marble foot disappeared and Daddio ran forward into the full fury of the storm. A smile broadened his mouth and the warmth that grew in his heart and belly kept out the cold. There was a crash as Loriana took another step.

Daddio looked up, saw the great sword held high as the statue headed away from him towards the harbour. Its movements were somehow off-kilter, not quite human, but there was no question of her intent. He ran after her, a few steps, just to see the expression set on that famous face. He laughed under the flickering sky and raised his fist after her.

"Yes! Loriana, the Lady Loriana! You go an' sort them feckers out. You do it, girl. Tinwa City loves you! I love you, girl."

Auld Daddio danced in the puddles.

#

Valentin Kesh, Lieutenant-Secundus of the victorious Union occupation force, opened the door of the girl's house on to a torrent. He stood on the threshold as a cold wind ruffled his already tousled hair. A river of rainwater was running in the street, washing trash over the cobbles and spilling out of the inadequate Tinween drains. Bloody primitive place, this foreign city. Perhaps another hour? He glanced at his watch and grimaced. He had to be on duty at six and it would take a good forty minutes to make it back to the barracks across town, maybe more in this damn weather. His uniform would be ruined.

Kesh glanced back up the stairs, but she had already put out the light and the hallway was dark. Not everything about this city was bad. Angel was the name of this one. Kesh grinned to himself. He'd made sure her halo had slipped tonight, no mistaking. They were all so . . . grateful, the girls of this city, so *abandoned*, once the preliminaries were over and done with. They pretended their disdain, pretended they were above the affections of a *Union Barbarian* -- her very words! -- but between the sheets it was different. It always was.

And it was nothing to do with the favours Kesh could spin for them, either. It was true that things were tight for the Tinween since the city fell; resources were needed to pursue the dregs of the war in the Eastern hinterlands. Food and fuel were tightly controlled and sparingly rationed. And if you wanted a joint of meat, or a bottle of beer or something sweet, well, that was a test for one's ingenuity. Every man prospered on his own wits, or every woman. It all depended on what you had to offer. Life was a marketplace, wasn't it always. And Valentin Kesh, Lieutenant-Secundus of the victorious Union occupation force, requisitions division, was always open for business.

It was amazing the obscure things that would open a girl's legs. Angel wanted a set of teeth for her father. Her father lived in a lovely little town house towards the lower end of Broadbow Patters with a big bedroom and a big bed and a pretty daughter to keep it warm. Supply, demand and all the warm softness of the perfect transaction. But they had passion, these Tinween girls. They forgot about the business side of things soon enough when they were with Valentin Kesh. He fancied himself as quite the lover.

The war had been good to Kesh. From a calm, comfortable childhood to a typical adolescence in the Young Brigade, to a clerk for the local recruitment office in Biknuss, at first the future had seemed barren and dreary. But then came whispers of war, rumblings of conflict and, finally, shouts of conquest. Kesh had demonstrated himself an instinctive genius for the science of bureaucracy and an adept oiler of egos. The war had brought him travel, advancement, even a respect of sorts among his fellow desk

warriors. And latterly, it had brought him influence and the trappings of influence: insignia, women and a belly not as flat as it once was.

The wind stirred up vortexes of rubbish in the alley across the street. A few slates fell from a roof and smashed somewhere. Kesh turned away from the open door.

"Just go."

He started. He had not heard her open the bedroom door again over the noise of the storm. She was shrouded in shadow at the top of the stairs.

Kesh felt suddenly angry. He opened his mouth to shout up at her, but she was already gone.

"Tinween whore," he said, but only to himself. He'd be back. She'd *welcome* him back.

Kesh took an umbrella from the stand behind the front door and put up the collar of his dress jacket. He stepped into the street and the down-pour. It was darker than it had seemed from the house until lightning tore across the sky. He struggled with the umbrella, finally succeeded in opening it only to have it torn from his hands. He looked up, rain already plastering hair across his forehead. He screamed but the sound went the same way as the umbrella.

Loriana advanced down Broadbow Patters, glowing with her own soft radiance, the life she had been given again. Her steps reverberated in the earth and her sword swung by her side. Her face, a mask of pale stone, was raised into the wind, on a level with the eaves.

Kesh cowered. He began to thump on the door of the girl's house but the latch had closed behind him. He looked over his shoulder at Loriana with eyes wide with terror. She was close now. One enormous step, another. She was almost on him. He turned to run.

It seemed that Loriana had not seen him, was so single-minded in her purpose that no one man would register with her any more than if he stood before her in the Plaza of the Heroes on another day.

Kesh stumbled on the slippery cobbles.

Loriana did not glance his way, but her arm swung. The flat of her giant blade caught him across the backside and threw him into the air. Kesh crumpled in the gutter, legs kicking feebly.

Loriana continued towards the harbour without breaking stride.

Behind her, an impossible wash of rainwater surged out of the drains as if drawn by some elemental force. The torrent rushed down the street, gurgling gleefully and topped with grey foam. It carried Kesh away towards the sewers.

#

An armada huddled in the harbour, hiding behind the great sea gate that protected the Bay of Tinwa from the open water. The ships were packed tight. There were great ocean dreadnoughts and older, wooden-hulled war yachts with canvas furled against the storm, sharp-prowed frigates and the remnants of the Tinween navy, now painted in new colours and given new names. All tugged at their moorings, unsettled by the wind. Chains rattled. Hulls met with horrific shrieks of inhuman pain. It could have been the sounds of a haunting.

Private Caton Vose shifted the rifle on his shoulder and cupped his hands around a cigarette as if it could keep him warm. The wind reached inside the concrete walls of the pillbox, seemed to assemble there to draw the heat from his body. He stared out along the harbour-front, at the warehouses given over to supplying the last of the war effort inland: grain, fuel, ammunition and explosives, ten thousand boots brought across the ocean. Vose took in the ships crowding the piers, the pyramid of cannonballs left here as a monument to a past war that had gone better for the Tinween. He scanned back again along the quayside. His gaze settled on yellow light shining from the stubby tower that held what had been the harbour master's office, rising above containers stacked like toys. The light leaked from shoddily affixed blackout drapes.

The officers on duty were getting drunk again. Vose imagined them passing round bottles of menteluah, the local spirit, smoking pipes of herb. Probably round a stove. Oh, to sit by a stove! But that was not the lot of a boy of his rank, especially not one drawn from the Annexed Territories. If there was a shitty job to be had, Vose reflected, his name was always high on the list. Sometimes he felt little better off than the conquered Tinween. He pulled his coat tighter round his thin shoulders and wished he was home.

Dellen was back in Andvik. She had owned his heart since they were twelve. On a different quayside an ocean away they had made teenage promises. "You're a soldier now," she had said. "Be brave. Always be brave for me, Caton."

He still received letters from her, waited for them. All but a few of Andvik's men were conscripted when the leaders in the West decided a continent was not enough for them and put their armies to sea. The letters he got were the last real thing joining him to his home. Dellen had mentioned Rennick in the last one. Only a casual mention, but it had thrust a blade into Vose's guts. Rennick has always wanted her, had always been there, waiting. His father was an important man in Andvik and his son had not been sent to the new front. Vose felt sick at the thought of them, back

in Andvik together. He had no proof -- it was nothing she had said. Vose was frantic.

"Don't pin your future to the past," one of the older men in Vose's company had said. Others had been less kind. It had been foolish of him to share his fears. They did not take him seriously.

"Don't be soft, kid. She's gone. Dry your cock on some Tinween bird's sheets. That'll make you forget soon enough."

But it had not. And on nights like this, when all he could do was stamp his feet against the cold and listen to his thoughts go round and round, all he wanted was to be back home. See her again. This wasn't his war. He had no interest in this country. He had no comprehension of why it was even necessary to be here. It had been made to seem so glamorous when he was conscripted. Money and travel and you got to hold a rifle. Vose did his duty, but he did it out of personal pride, not for any ideology behind it.

He watched the lights in the harbour master's tower again and spat. He flicked his cigarette out through the open observation slit and watched as it was whipped away, trailing sparks. A sheet of lightning lit up the harbour and the waterfront in a pale dreamscape. The ships creaked and protested, butting each other under the lashing rain. Far too many crammed in the harbour to be safe. The lightning passed. Almost immediately thunder rumbled again.

Vose blinked away the flash, blinked again. What was that, over by the grain warehouses? A different light, coming from one of the streets that led up into the city.

"Baleful gods," Vose whispered.

Loriana paused at the harbour's edge, her sword held high. Tall and impossibly beautiful, lit from within like a torch shone through pearl. Her stone gown was unruffled by the wind, her marble skin untouched by the cold. Her face held determination and compassion and something else: an ancient and cold fury. The rain would not fall where she stood.

Her head turned one way, then the other. Her blank white eyes saw the harbour and the enemy fleet within. History had come full circle and Loriana had returned. Invaders were in her city.

She began to move along the waterfront where the ships were tethered to the docks, her animated limbs moving with not-quite-human grace. Her sword swung down. It swung again, a pale arc against the gloom. With each strike, her stone blade sliced through the thick links of the ships' chains as if they were of no more substance than air. The wind moaned and with each step she cut more vessels loose. The storm battered the harbour and the ships were suddenly free to rut against one another. The awful howling of metal on metal rose above the noise of the wind. Loriana saw

the pyramid monument and moved towards it, each enormous step carrying her half the length of a fishing boat towards the lookout station.

Caton Vose knew what was to come, he knew himself too well. He couldn't turn away. He was not that kind.

Always be brave for me, Caton.

He burst from the pillbox, running bent into the wind. He fumbled the rifle from his shoulder and held it before him. The wind sucked the breath from him, but he pushed through it. His coat clung wet to his body. He ran with the kind of bravery that comes without thought, a bravery that comes not from drilling and barked orders, but from something inside. He shouted and ran towards where Loriana was leaning over the cannonball pyramid. He saw her heft a metal sphere the size of a buoy in one glowing hand, heft its weight.

She flung it across the harbour as she had flung ordinance at her enemies so long ago. The iron ball thrummed in the air and was lost from sight. Somewhere it punctured an enemy hull.

Vose halted yards from where the giant stood. He looked up into her face and saw only a baleful light. There was no blood in the stone. This was not a living thing, but a projection of will, maybe of an entire city's will.

He fired as she reached down for another missile. A chip of marble came from her shoulder and there was the tiniest of pauses. As she straightened, was there the smallest of glances? Vose fired again, squinting into Loriana's light. He did not see if the bullet struck. Loriana cast another cannonball into the harbour and a dull impact sounded under the rain.

She turned and looked down at Vose with a blank stone stare. Vose stood frozen for a moment and then something in that stare broke his will. He turned and ran.

#

The guardroom in the old harbour master's tower was hazy with pungent smoke, stirred by drafts that leaked from the mother-wind outside. Rain beat on the glass behind the blackout curtains with an insistence that wholly failed to rouse the two men who sat facing each other across an old packing crate. They turned cards in sequence, an activity that seemed to require no positive mental action. Bloodshot eyes regarded the dance of suits on the makeshift table.

"D'you think Kesh'll come through on the paperwork for that tobacco?" Sergeant Ockt turned over a three of cups and winced.

"Yeah, it's a sweet deal. At a five per cent skim? Say what you like about the prick, but his money-love is as sure as bad Tinween weather.

We'll all make a packet." Clayder took a few deep puffs of the pipe and passed it back to his companion. Ockt's laugh turned into a cough as he drew on the pipe. Smoke billowed out of his mouth.

"This stuff's strong," he said in a strangled croak. " Maybe we should ease up a bit."

Clayder stood unsteadily and headed towards the window. "What do you think's going to happen in this storm, like? Any resistance will be in bed, same as everyone else." He pulled back the curtain's edge and cleared a patch on the glass with his sleeve so he could peer into the night. He stared for a long moment.

"Bloody hell," he said.

They both yelped as the office door suddenly flew open and crashed against the wall. Private Vose stood in the doorway with his chest heaving and rainwater forming a pool at his feet.

"Didn't you hear me shooting?" he gasped. "Don't you know what's going on out there? Sound the fucking sirens!"

"Who the hell do you think you're talking to, private? This is --"

"Shut up, Ockt," Clayder shouted, panic edging his voice. "Do as he says. Sound an emergency!" He swore and scurried across the room, stumbling against the sparse furniture.

Vose had already activated the alarm while Ockt sat drugged and sluggish in his chair. A siren's wail began to build outside.

Clayder was bellowing into the radio, trying to raise the ships in the harbour.

"Wake up, you useless bastards. This is Lieutenant Clayder in the guard tower. There's something on the quayside. You're under fire. Respond! Respond! Repeat, you're under fire from the quayside."

For the second time that night, with his previous blind bravery rapidly evolving into an uncanny prescience, Private Vose turned and ran.

#

Vice-Admiral Runkel was still drunk when he stepped on to the bridge of the *Burning Spear*. His greying hair stood up from one side of his head where he had slept on it and the buttons of his dress shirt were fastened into the wrong holes. He smelled of stale smoke and cheap perfume from the cheap ladies who he (and a number of the other executive officers) had entertained in the Captain's rooms until only a few blurry hours before. The spoiled of war. His head felt like he'd been drinking the perfume as well.

Runkel steadied himself in the doorway and tried to straighten his jacket. The deck rocked as the great storm tugged at the battleship's

moorings. The familiar efficiency and the comforting smells of polished oak and brass had been replaced with chaos. Runkel's red-rimmed eyes could make little sense of the confusion in the room. Emergency sirens shrieked. A radioman yelled questions into his bulky headset and listened to the frantic insectile buzzings coming from his earpiece. Junior officers pressed their noses against the windows and gaped like schoolboys. The wind threw sheets of water against the glass.

"Someone turn that damn siren off!" Runkel bellowed.

Captain Sendrik turned towards him from where he stood by the radio. There were dark shadows beneath his eyes, deep lines etched between his nose and the corners of his mouth. He was unshaven and his thin lips were pursed with worry.

"Captain, would you like to explain to me why I am awake?" Runkel demanded. The siren continued to torment him.

"The fleet, sir. It's under fire."

"Are you joking, man? We're in Tinwa Harbour, for gods' sake. The battle's won."

A rating appeared and handed a mug of coffee to Sendrik. He pointedly thrust it into Runkel's hand and grabbed his superior by the elbow. Steering him to a window, he barked at the junior officers. Space materialized by the guardrail.

"The *Ritual Ark* is listing badly, sir. You can see it." Sendrik pointed.

Runkel could just make out the dark forms of the sleeping fleet in the harbour through the rain-streaked glass. He frowned.

"There!"

A war yacht leaned at an indecent angle, like a man walking into the wind. Somewhere in the darkness of the storm Runkel saw the orange flicker of flames.

"Something's on fire."

"We've reports of two frigates and the *Ark* struck, several others unconfirmed. Moorings have been cut. There are vessels adrift."

"Well what are you doing about it, man?" Runkel shouted. His face was flushed. "This is the fleet that took Tinwa in a day, with all hands. Fight! We have to fight! These are the most indomitable warships in the world. Get me the gunners!"

Captain Sendrik grimaced at the patriotic fervor of his superior. "The attack is coming from the shore itself, sir. They're our own positions, although admittedly we're hearing some very bizarre things from our men in the guard tower. We can't just fire blind."

The Vice-Admiral rounded on the Captain, swaying slightly but with eyes ablaze. At last, a taste of action. The invasion of Tinwa City had

been an enormous disappointment to him, largely because he had held his command vessel several miles behind the advance fleet. He pointed a finger at his insubordinate. "We know where the enemy is and we have the means to defend ourselves, Captain Sendrik. I said get me the gunners."

"Sir, there are valuable caches in the harbour. We should be careful of -- "

"Shut up!" Runkel slapped the communications officer out of his chair and began screaming instructions into the microphone.

#

Loriana stood aglow at the center of the maelstrom, casting destruction at the massed hulls of her city's enemies, these new barbarians. With limbs ignorant of fatigue or impossibility, she worked at the cannonball pyramid. Wooden hulls splintered and took on water. Masts fell. There were fires on the bay.

The gateway, the umbilical that linked this manifestation with the Afterworld pulsed with urgency, with outrage, with grim fulfillment as her enemies suffered. Such was the power of her need to defend her city. It had breached the borders between worlds. That power infused Loriana as she battered the Union fleet. The living statue possessed no thought, only desire and the fearsome urgency of a long-dead hero. For Tinwa!

Sword held out for balance, throwing arm arcing with unworldly strength. The next cannonball fizzed as it flew, clanged like a hammer on a god's forge against the hull of the *Burning Spear*. The wind howled in apparent delight, drowning out the emergency sirens.

The first reply announced itself with a flash in the darkness, a rumble and a shriek of escaping violence. The shell went high, over the roofs of the warehouses on the quayside and into the shops and houses of the harbour district. A family's life collapsed along with the walls of their home.

Loriana threw again, blind. The massed hulls waited for her strike. Seawater fountained somewhere.

Suddenly there was light. Yellow disks lit up the underside of the clouds, flicking open like eyes. They swung drunkenly, searching for the source of the attack. Three of the searchlights simultaneously pinned Loriana where she stood. Three vast, distorted shadows formed on the walls behind her. She stared into the light with blank stone eyes.

Another shell tore into a grain warehouse fifty yards to Loriana's left, exploding in a gout of flame. Loriana turned her head minutely in its direction and the rain seemed to lessen, the wind seemed to fan the growing

flames. Another impact destroyed a townhouse given over to Union supplies. A series of secondary detonations split the night as the fire found a cache of oil drums.

Loriana took up another cannonball. She raised her sword at the invaders in the bay and drew her throwing arm back. Her mouth opened slightly. Her pale lip seemed to curl.

The shell hit her square in the stomach. She bent forward at the hips a little with the impact and the cannonball rolled from immobile fingers. It disappeared into the water that snarled at the quayside beneath Loriana's feet.

Red flame turned in her belly like a Catherine wheel. Her sword scraped on the cobbles and her neck arched back. She glared in defiance at the barbarians on the bay. The glow that lit her from within began to fade. Whatever magic she possessed could no longer contain the shell's explosive charge. It detonated, separating her torso at the waist. Her huge head and chest fell forward into the water, her lips still curled in a smile. The after image of the last of her internal fire followed her down into darkness. A moment later, the rest of her toppled forward to join her at the bottom of the bay.

The storm reached a final crescendo, tearing at the moorings of the union fleet and grinding their hulls dangerously against each other. Lightning stabbed down. Sinking ships surrendered to the waves, others listed drunkenly. Oil burned on the surface of the water.

The fires were spreading on the shore as well. The flames reached an ammunition dump in a former fish processing plant on Trade Street. It burst apart in an explosion that woke the city.

But it was Loriana who truly woke the city. These modern barbarians with their iron ships and new weapons were harder to remove than those of Loriana's true time, but when the stories spread, when new tales of Loriana ran through the Tinween populace in the days that followed, there grew a restlessness that would not lie beneath any blanket of occupation.

Tinwa City began to stir.



Final Voicemail

By Michael E. Picray

Michael E. Picray lives in splendid isolation at the bottom of a hill on top of another hill, where he writes both fiction and non-fiction. He has published fiction in Space, Inc. and in the Writer's Post Journal, among others. This is his first publication with us.

Final Voicemail

Ring - Ring

Click*

"You've reached the voicemail of Hell.

For free transportation to the receiving station
-press 1.

To become one of our recruiting agents - press 2.

To contact customer service - press 3, and wait
forever.

If you reached this line by mistake, one of our
agents will be with you shortly.



The Tower of Excellence

By Jakob Drud

Jakob Drud lives and works in Aarhus, Denmark, where he claims short science fiction is all but non-existent in his native tongue. He is a historian by education, but prefers to write about the future. His stories have appeared in Alienskin and The Fifth Di.

The book had survived a world war, democracy, and the Tower's revolution in a binding of delectable black leather. Over the years the golden swastika had faded, but the title, *Mein Kampf*, was engraved as sharply as ever. It was a rarity, a trophy among historical sources, and the only historical document Patrick Irony Smythe had been able to find outside the Tower of Excellence. Parting with it hurt, but he needed it to bait a liar, who styled himself a historian.

Meticulously he rubbed the binding with finely ground nuts. Hazels and walnuts, even imported almonds went into the leather. The oils from the nuts gave the cover a new gleam of life after two centuries. He leafed through the pages one by one, sprinkling nut dust across the German words, and slipped the book into a brown paper envelope he had bought from a paper shop in the Northwest outskirts of Einstein. With a common-type pen he wrote the name on the envelope: James Bering Iceberg Anderson, Department of History, The Tower of Excellence.

The nuts, nutritious to millions, would make James Anderson go into anaphylactic shock. Irony had seen one such attack when he lectured at the university; another student had been munching nuts and coughed in James' face. Students had rushed to his help, then, administering the adrenaline injection that saved him. But in the Tower, James would be working alone.

A voice of guilt inside clamored that James Anderson was only sixteen, that he might yet redeem himself, but Irony pushed the thought aside. Never mind that the boy had gotten the seat in the Tower that he had always thought was set aside for him. No, this was about saving history from James and the Tower's manipulations: if he did not kill, the truth about the past would die at the hands of a false historian.

#

Irony didn't dare mail the book from his own neighborhood, where the Tower's informers or Grade Four slaves might recognize him and report him to their counter-intelligence squads.

The search for a remote mailbox took him through the western suburbs of Einstein, across abandoned construction sites and past the closed factories where the economy had once flourished. Now the buildings were either abandoned ruins or straining under the weight of squatters. Recent repairs were visible only where the Tower had set up workshops to keep the Grade One incompetents occupied. Even the graffiti was poverty-stricken, the curses against the Tower written in cheap black paint.

He found a mailbox in an alley. The name 'James' had been scribbled on the wall with a date and the word 'Screen'. Such uncensored messages abounded in the suburbs, free and unchecked by the Tower's censors. It was the media of the poor, whose access to electronic mail messages had long since been wrenched away by the Tower, and the message on the wall told of a venue for information that might release anti-Tower information three days from now.

But 'James' could not mean 'James Anderson'. Irony had seen the boy in action, defending the Tower as heavy-handedly as the soldiers deployed against rioters, and for that they had rewarded the boy with Skilled status and a home in the Tower. If suburban rioters hoped to get anti-Tower information from James, they must be desperate.

Irony dropped the envelope in the mailbox and heard the lid clank shut with all the force of a guillotine. Once again, the book would kill.

#

He knew exactly when the Tower had set its eyes on James.

The auditorium had room for thirty, but on that day only four students had taken the day off from the Tower workshops or babysitting to hear his lecture. James Bering Anderson was among them.

James was half as old as Irony, but still the censors had advanced them to Grade Three incomp on the same day. While James had chosen 'Bering' as his third name, after the explorer, Patrick Smythe had found the truth of 'Irony' irresistible: in his historical research he followed the Tower's ideal of striving for Excellence, but used his excellence to analyze sources of anti-Tower knowledge sentiment.

A woman in army fatigues and red beret took up a fifth seat. A holstered pistol hung from her belt, but her mightiest weapon was the report she would take back to the Tower. Irony tried not to look her way while he prepared himself mentally for his lecture. She was scribbling away, but so

far she would only have noted that he upheld the proper dress code: Brown velvet jacket, velvet pants, sandals with woolen socks, and the obligate wing collar on his light blue shirt.

"You remember our discussion from last time," Irony began, "how we established the primary reasons behind the fall of democracy: Bottomless debts of state after too many wars, loss of technological leadership due to religious restrictions, and too much show in politics with too little content. And of course the way companies monopolized and copyrighted their ideas and inventions instead of making them public."

"So different from the Tower," James said.

Irony didn't let James interrupt his lecture. "Today we look at the weaknesses in the Tower's system. The continuation of social and economic problems inherited from democratic times. And the distribution of knowledge in society."

The censor put her pen to paper, but Irony knew he had upheld the unwritten laws of not stating directly that the Tower kept people in poverty. That particular truth was always frowned upon.

Already James had raised his hand, like Irony knew he would. "Sir, distribution of knowledge isn't a weakness. All our documents, all our inventions go to the Tower, and they make sure we all get access to it. No exclusive business deals, no difference between corporate chief and the common man. Everybody gets a shot at Excellence."

"Right, James," Irony said. "But you forget the difference between the rich and the poor. Guess who buys the most information back."

The censor's pen made a loud scratching sound on her pad of paper, and Irony's well-prepared lecture froze in his throat. He wanted to tell the students how free access to knowledge had benefited the democratic economy, because ideas could mix and blossom into new inventions and new jobs. Too much knowledge had belonged to big corporations, true, but at least they had used some of it. Nowadays people had to buy the information they needed, and the Tower's price was too steep to pay. But he couldn't say that in front of the censor.

While he paused, James raised his hand again. "But then again, Tower laws generate knowledge in ways that democracy couldn't." He patted his own brown velvet jacket and pointed to Irony's. "Dress codes, for instance. We both wear these old rags so we can recognize each other. Back in democracy, historians didn't recognize each other, so they didn't talk and didn't come up with new ideas. Who knows how many debates never happened in democratic times because people didn't recognize their peers?"

The censor listened and smiled.

The students looked expectantly at Irony for a refusal of James's tirade. James seemed the most eager, as if he was somehow hoping to learn the arguments to negate the Tower's propaganda. As if he was, in fact, interested in the Tower's weaknesses.

Irony moved on to something else. He had seen through James's motives, scoring points with the Tower, and Irony had no wish to voice possibly treasonous sentiments with a censor in the room. It was bad enough that James would take the next vacant seat in the Tower. The only historian's seat available.

#

The funeral procession going through the Northwest suburb of Einstein was subdued, tearful even. The Tower's hired mourners wailed their usual purchased sorrow, but for once they were joined by moans from the crowd. Only the soldiers clutching the sixteen handles of the oversized coffin remained untouched by the gloomy atmosphere.

Four sleepless nights had preceded the funeral. Every second, Irony had expected the Tower's censors to bust down the door to his family's apartment and drag them all away to their extraction cells. Guilt had nagged him constantly, and the somber mood in the streets did nothing to calm him. Showing up at the funeral was pure penance, he kept telling himself, and the longer sleep evaded him, the more he believed it. Never mind that the censors might give him the Handle for being here.

He looked around for distraction, something to quench his guilt. Beside him, packed in between the other mourners, he saw a woman of the indefinite old age that only poverty can fashion.

"Why aren't we cheering?" he asked her. "His seat in the Tower is free now."

"That's what they want us to say," she said. He heard the defiance, dangerous, and looked around. No censors were within view, at least none in uniform.

"But why aren't we cheering that one of the bastards bought it?"

"Don't you know? It's James Anderson."

Her words did not surprise him as much as her voice. It carried deep and heartfelt admiration, reflecting the strange mood in the street.

"James was a Tower man," he said.

"Nonsense." She leaned closer. "He made us some pamphlets about the Tower's way to power. Says nobody remembers how they killed forty thousand big-time stock holders when they took power." She paused,

leaning even closer in. "My grandma told me her Pa was one of those who got a knife in the back."

The kid had never contradicted the Tower, ever, and now he was supposed to release information like that to Einstein's public?

"I don't believe you," he said.

The woman shied away from him as if he had the plague.

#

The procession entered Revolution Square, where the demonstrations had converged on the last day of democracy. The glass office façades and shop fronts had long since smoldered, and propaganda posters had replaced the neon banners that used to make the night shine. Irony had seen the pictures, but everybody else seemed oblivious of those times. The Tower had monopolized history along with all other knowledge, twisting it to its own purposes, and for a moment indignation pushed guilt away. When lies kept the people down, the truth was worth killing for.

The soldiers set the coffin down in front of a wooden stage, from which a bored-looking censor delivered a standardized eulogy over the dead Skilled. Every crumbling plate of concrete in the buildings contradicted the censor's lies that things were better now than before the revolution, and people openly shouted their disgust with the Tower.

In that moment Irony wished James would wake up. Here in the ruined Revolution Square no illusions survived. If only he woke up, he would see the world the Tower had created.

If only I had shown him.

"And now," the censor said, overriding the crowd through sheer volume control, "a place in the Tower is free again. It is time for those of Excellence to step forward and claim that place."

As always, nobody dared step forward. The censors sent their soldiers to round up a mix of the different grades. Two Grade One incompes in their Tower-issue clothes; six Grade Two incompes, their clothes marked with their craftsmen's insignia; and seven Grade Threes, their clothes in compliance with dress code, marking their professions for all to see. The entourage was in tune with Tower ideologies and only needed one more person: a future Skilled to take the foremost left handle.

He wanted it, the Handle, the Tower's full attention. He deserved it. He was the only half-way decent historian at the university, and he worked harder than everybody else in the department. Hell, he had even worked harder than James Anderson. If that wasn't Excellence, nothing was.

He never saw the censors point him out. A Grade Four slave in her obligate white robes just stepped up to him and took a firm hold of his right arm. He restrained his urge to twist free of her touch, harnessing his fear that her slave status would rub off on him. She gave him a commanding stare.

They couldn't have found me so fast unless they'd been watching, he realized. That means they're watching me now. He straightened his back and concentrated on the protocol whispered in his ear by the Grade Four slave. She instructed him only to shake hands with the Grade Threes before taking his position by the Handle.

"And whatever you do, smile, or you won't pass the test."

He tried his best, but with the weight of James Anderson on his shoulder, it was all he could do not to cry as they hauled the coffin the last mile to the Tower's cemetery. And with every step, every faltered smile, he felt his place in the Tower slip from his fingers despite all evidence to the contrary.

#

They came to pick him up in a minivan with the Tower's logo painted on the sliding doors: battlements and twenty-seven stars, one for each of the Tower cities. Sirens blazing, of course. The Tower always made a show of initiating new members.

He answered the door himself. The guard said nothing, just looked him over like an auctioneer trying to appraise a painting. Whatever price he arrived at, he only said, "The Tower of Excellence." He waited patiently for Irony to kiss his parents and sister goodbye, and then escorted him out of the building block with the chipped concrete walls and piss-stinking staircase.

Four other candidates waited in the minivan. An older woman sported a physicist's round glasses, and two young men wore army fatigues that made Irony guess they'd been promoted to the Tower Guard. They spared him only a cursory glance.

The last man was dressed in a brown velvet jacket like the one Irony wore over his blue and white shirt. Guilt resurfaced to tell him the man was a competitor, but Irony brushed off the warning. The jacket spelled competition, but the man's shirt didn't have the prescribed historian's collar used at Einstein University. And where else would the Tower recruit its historians? No, he was probably a future colleague, filling a secondary position.

"Jensen," the man said and stuck out his hand. Irony shook it distractedly, but said nothing.

The small bus bumped through the streets of Einstein's northwest suburb, going south and east towards the island where the Tower had set up one of its twenty-seven headquarters, displacing the local population and razing all but the most important office skyscrapers. Through the windows, Irony watched the suburb's crumbling buildings, stagnation and disrepair making ghosts of their former beauty. Beyond them rose the skyline that had signaled power, money, and fame. The symbolism survived from democratic times, but it had long since lost its flavor of freedom.

"I will teach you the history of that place."

Jensen shook his head, and the gesture told Irony he'd spoken the last thought out loud. Startled, he snapped his mouth shut, but Jensen's remark did nothing to bend his resolve. The people *would* know the truth.

For the rest of the trip he concentrated on staring at the skyline of the thirty remaining skyscrapers and, as they got closer, the enormous fortifications that the Tower believed could keep out revolutionaries.

#

The driver unloaded them between two skyscrapers where a male and a female Grade Four incomp waited. Irony tried to hide his disgust that the Tower sent slaves to greet new Skilled, but somebody had to take care of everyday routines. And what else were slaves for?

His sister Miriam had wanted to become Grade Four, and he despised her for it. None of her singing lessons or auditions had gained her Skilled status or the chance to appear on Screen, but she had hoped to impress the Skilled in the Tower by volunteering for Grade Four slavery.

Their father had nearly thrown her out. As far as he and most other Grade Ones were concerned, the Tower was held up by two pillars: the military and the Grade Fours. No daughter of his would ever be allowed to help the system survive. After many long rows, Miriam had resigned herself to singing in the suburb clubs, an unapproved Grade One artist forever, blaming their father for obstructing her road to success. Irony knew her father had only protected her. Grade Fours in the streets of Einstein met only turned backs; they were ostracized people living ostracized lives.

The male Grade Four led the others off towards a skyscraper with a limestone staircase, but like a trained sheepdog the woman separated Irony from the flock of arrivals. She didn't actually touch him, only stepped between him and the rest of the newcomers and shooed him off towards a smaller office building on the other side of the street.

The door opened into a grand hallway with a red plush carpet and walls covered with carved wood panels in red and gold. Handmade wooden

chairs stood arranged along the wall. The Grade Four woman guided him through the hall and into an equally colorful corridor.

Irony glanced at her face. Her status did nothing to conceal her strength and the proud way she held her head gave her character. Conceit, he thought. Probably her dreams were buried deep beneath a façade held up for outsiders.

"You came here looking for fame, right? Found it yet?"

Her eyes would have made him wither if he hadn't known the look came from a slave. For a moment a muscle in her jaw looked occupied with biting back a stiff answer, and for an instant guilt screamed at him that she knew what he had done. When she spoke, the anger in her voice seemed to confirm his suspicions. "Believe it or not, people come here looking for truth."

"That's comforting," he said, his words far from the feeling.

"Really? Well, we'll see about your truth." She stopped in front of one of the corridor doors and waved him forward with all signs of contempt. "It's in here."

#

Irony knocked thrice like he had learned as an army recruit, one long and two short knocks. *Ex--cel-lence*.

"About bloody time," a voice said. Irony entered quickly.

The office inside was dusty and nothing as plush as the hallway outside. The desk was mass-produced plywood, the curtain was torn, and the once-white wallpaper was flyspecked and peeling. Only the books offered any appeal to the office, and mostly because of their numbers, sufficient to last Irony a lifetime or two.

The lone man sitting at the desk looked old enough to have read them all. His wrinkles were deep and an arm crutch leaned against the desk within easy reach; only his eyes were preserved in the way that only wisdom can immortalize. Irony recognized the face from rare moments on Screen when camera crews had been allowed near the Tower's High Senate.

"High Senator Montague..."

"Spare me the title, boy. In here nobody calls me anything but 'Chief Red'." He waved his hand in direction of a backless stool. It looked uncomfortable, usable only to reach the top-most bookshelves, but Irony sat down obediently.

From a pile of papers on the desk, the High Senator picked up a blue file with twenty-seven faded stars.

"Says here you want to be a historian."

"Yes, High Senator."

The old man hit the file hard against the top of the desk as if to shake off the dust. "And it says that you're not going to be a historian."

The silence that followed eloquently voiced Irony's question.

"You honestly don't expect us to make you our new historian after you killed Doctor Professor James Bering Iceberg Anderson?"

Irony took great care to remain impassive.

"We investigate such unexpected deaths in the Tower, Irony. Fingerprints, DNA, psychological profiles, good old-fashioned motive evaluation. Your name came up an awful lot of times."

Through the haze of confusion, Irony found the strength to speak. "High Senator, if I'm a suspect, why am I not in custody?"

"Didn't you hear me? It's 'Chief Red'. And you're asking the wrong question. 'Why am I not dead?' is more to the point." He threw the file in a metal wastebasket with a loud *clang*, as if to stress his imminent downfall.

"Let's just say it's a matter of gratitude. We had a lurking problem in the Tower, see, after we hired a certain young historian. We'd read his theses and evaluated his position to be in favor of Tower rule."

"Yes, you followed all my classes," Irony interrupted. He regretted it instantly when he saw the scowl on the Chief's face.

"We noted how you rarely dared to contradict him, even in your anti-Tower lectures, and we almost picked you on account of your spineless attitude. Cowards rarely work against us, even from within the Tower. The access to sources makes people lazy, even people with a rebellious streak like myself.

"But we played it safe and picked James. He had talent, a gift of excellence that almost matched yours, and he was our man. Only the little brat cheated us. The loads of books in here didn't mollify him, and he sure stopped acting like a Tower man. I suspect you didn't keep all your historical knowledge hidden from him, because he sure had ideas about pre-Tower society that matched yours to the letter."

Irony had a numbing pain in his chest. He couldn't breathe; his head felt as if guilt was filling it with sand. Only through a supreme effort did he manage stay upright on the stool. "James would never betray the Tower," he managed to say.

"Baloney! He wrote pamphlets the minute we let him in the front gate. He was even preparing shows for Screen, and not just in Einstein. In all Tower cities."

Chief red leaned forward and folded his hands innocently, like an icon saint without his halo.

"The picture he painted was not at all to the pleasure of the High Senate, so when we found James dead in his office, we were quite pleased. You spared us a lot of riots, Irony. Hence my forgiving nature."

"You mean he was really trying to tell the truth?"

"Truth. Hah! My truth is as good as yours, Irony. And my truth is that we have a good system because it tames the driving force in every society: Ambition. The Tower compels people to do their best in every respect, because they all want a place in the Tower. For that they work to hone their skills. They learn more; they work harder; it makes sense."

"But few learn enough to get into the Tower," Irony objected.

"The masses are incompetent, of course. But our exclusiveness sharpens ambition among those with a streak of Excellence. You have to be dedicated to get in. Sometimes you even have to want it bad enough to kill for it."

Irony's face turned red with shame, and Chief Red chuckled. "You showed great Excellence in the way you murdered James Anderson. It took our investigators days to discover the nut dust, and I must admit that we'd have ignored your book altogether if one of our cooks hadn't alerted us to James' allergy."

Chief Red got up from his chair and with great exertion bent over to pick up the file he had discarded. He looked over one of the pages as if suddenly remembering that Irony could do something useful.

"We need people like you to do counterintelligence work. You know, finding rebel leaders and making them shut up, preferably without too much blood and guts. It looks so messy on Screen. If you accept, we raise you to the status of Skilled and give you a home in the Tower."

Irony sat perfectly still. It was a second chance he would not have dared to dream of. A place in the Tower, Skilled status. He could even save a few lives by stopping riots before they arose. It would be a way of penance.

Penance, but not salvation. "I am not an Excellent killer. I don't want to be an Excellent killer. And I won't kill for the Tower, not if I have to do away with people who tell another truth than yours."

Chief Red leaned back, dispelling his saintly posture.

"I mean it," Irony said defiantly. "I won't kill. But that doesn't mean you should let my Excellence in pre-Tower history go to waste."

Chief Red got a distant look in his eyes; the look of a man reliving a long-lost rebellious youth. "You want a bonus choice? After what you did?" He reopened the blue file and slowly went through the contents, nodding with approval from time to time. It took him almost a minute to go through the papers, and Irony literally held his breath until he saw a smile

begin to form on the old man's face. For the first time since Chief Red confronted him with the murder, Irony felt his hope rise.

"Your record does show a degree of Excellence in history. We hired a new historian today. Jensen. I believe you met on the bus. Brilliant man. We had to steal him from the Tower in Newton after you made yourself ineligible for James' position." He looked up from the file. "Jensen will need an assistant. You'll make a fine Grade Four incomp."

Irony's hope evaporated "You want me to become a Grade Four? But then I'll just be a..." The word *slave* dragged his tongue to a halt. He got up from the stool in pure frustration. "You want me to sacrifice my freedom for you? How can you call that a bonus choice?"

Chief Red grabbed his crutch with swiftness belying his frail constitution. With the stub he prodded Irony in the chest until he sat down.

"You're all alike." The wrinkled skin at his temples was blushing with anger, and at that moment Irony realized why he had been given the name 'Chief Red'. He must have been unstoppable in his youth. "All you Grade Threes think you're made for the Tower. You think you're so much better because the Grade Fours are bound to their masters twenty-four hours a day. But it's not coincidence that we have a Grade above yours.

"It takes extreme skill to be round-the-clock assistant to a Doctor Professor, much more than is needed from a simple teacher working only during the daytime. As Grade Four you must find your master the necessary sources and books. You must bear the weight of planning his life. And while you do so, you can sneak him the books you think he needs to read. You get to choose some of the sources he works on. I know you Grade Threes call it slavery, but the wise Grade Four sees his position as the perfect way to influence the Skilled."

Irony shook his head miserably until Chief Red nimbly hammered the stub of his crutch into the floor.

"You can't fool me, Irony. I know you want to research history, to plow through the sources. And you want to live in the Tower."

Something in the Chief's look reminded Irony of a Screen documentary about his way to the Tower. As a young man he had earned his money as a Grade One taxi driver, but lived to be an art critic. He had disagreed whole-heartedly with the Tower's censors for years before they finally let him into their exclusive circle on account of his obvious talent. Irony had always believed the tale to be Tower humbug, but Chief Red's presence made him reassess the story.

Closing his eyes made Irony feel like a child turning his head away from a spoonful of bitter medicine, and he finally caved in. "I just never thought I'd be unfree."

"You wanted it so badly you committed the most despicable act known to man. Murder! How can you hang onto your freedom after that? If it's what you want, fine, you're free to go back to Einstein as a Grade One. But you won't do it, I know your kind."

In the silence that followed Irony sat erect on the stool, the Chief watching over him like a statue of a long-dead hero waiting to spring to life to defend his nation. In a way, the Chief had seen right through him. He *did* want to live in the Tower, *did* want the prestige badly enough to kill for it and even give up his freedom. But the Chief was wrong as well: He had killed for prestige *and* the truth. And truth was worth giving up his freedom for as well.

He nodded.

Chief Red leaned the crutch against his desk and stuck out his frail hand to seal the deal. "Good. I always liked a coward better than a hero. You'll make a fine Grade Four slave, Irony. Allow me to congratulate you and formally welcome you to the Tower of Excellence."

#

He left the office feeling empty, as if he had left part of his soul behind half a lifetime too early.

The Grade Four woman still waited outside for him. "So, you're ready to go to Spec Ops for more Excellence training?"

He realized she must have seen his display of Excellent killing skills as a way into the security apparatus. The thought didn't anger him, though. He too had suspected her of choosing Grade Four for the sake of fame. Apparently, it didn't always work that way.

"I'm not into dirty work." He pointed at her clothes. "And I'll need a pair of white robes."

She got up from the floor, and something akin to bewilderment crossed her face. "You mean you stood up to Chief Red?" She shook her head as if that kind of behavior was unheard of in the Tower.

It also made her think, he could see. Twice she breathed in as if starting to say something, but first she led him down the corridor. "What did you tell him?" she finally asked.

"That I wanted to be a historian. But it seems I'm not the kind of historian he wanted me to be."

That made her nod, as if she had made up her mind about something, but she didn't speak until they were back on the street between the skyscrapers. Her voice was barely a whisper. "That's what we liked about James."

From her furtive voice he realized they were probably under surveillance. "We?" he asked, voice equally soft.

She stopped and began to point at different buildings, like a guide marking the important sights to a tourist, but her voice hardly reached him. "Some of us."

And from the way she leaned in, he realized that James Anderson could never have distributed pamphlets in Einstein without the help of dedicated assistants: Grade Fours, free to walk among the population.

The woman pulled a smile, probably for the cameras that might be aimed their way. "That's us, down here," she said, her voice reverting from whisper to normal strength. She pointed to a building marked 'servants'. "I'll introduce you to the others. So if you're looking for help with anything while you're here, you'll find plenty of friends."



