

The Writer

by Kevin Kelleher

Ralon Melgazi ducked behind the corner of an alcove and ejected the battery pack from his blaster pistol. Panting and sweating, he fumbled to reload.

“You *me* owe!” howled a deep, rattling voice from across the square. “You me owe credits, Mallgatsee!” The voice clearly belonged to a non-human throat. Three more bursts discharged from the alien’s gun and blew apart the wall protecting Ralon. He realized that this alcove was his Alamo, and it wasn’t going to last long.

“As I recall,” replied Melgazi, “I won. I think you owe *me*.” This elicited a monstrous groan from the unseen alien, who then fired four more shots – further dismantling the wall. The external plates of the wall were blown apart, revealing the tight-knit infrastructure beneath: a miniature maze of coils, cables and tubes. Sparks and fire erupted from them now.

Ralon locked in another batter pack, reviving his weapon. He checked the charge. “Shit...” he said beneath his breath. It read that his present and last battery only held a six percent charge.

“You me pay,” continued the alien, “or die *you*....”

Ralon stopped to think for a moment.

“I’ll tell you what,” he shouted to the alien, “how about we just talk this out? There’s no reason we can’t settle this like gentlemen.”

There was a pause.

Then there was strange, unearthly choking sound; like a deep, rattling smoker's cough. Ralon was confused before realizing his attacker must be laughing at him.

"Funny is you," croaked the being, "funny you much."

Ralon had to think fast; he was cornered and running out of time. He peered through a newly-singed hole in the wall toward his assailant. Through the peephole he could just see one side of his alien enemy; a tall, bulbous creature, brown and slimy. Further to one side, though, he spied a bar. It's keeper and customers were all gone, having fled once the firefight began, and their beverages were left behind.

"Look," he said, "how about I buy you a drink and we work this out?"

The monster laughed again. "Know you well I am Kostanchan... know you well we no poison drink. You with me play games. *Me* pay now your *die* you!"

Ralon guessed the distance to the bar and made note of the obstacles in the way.

"I really think you ought to reconsider, Plonch...."

"Reconsider no, me pay."

"Have it your way." With that, Ralon burst from his sanctuary at a full sprint toward the bar. Immediately Plonch opened fire. The two-and-a-half meter tall slug-like gambler was a pretty bad shot, which Ralon had been counting on. His Macron IX percussive energy rifle was not designed for use with tentacle digits, which threw his aim off. With deadly streaks of electricity whizzing all around, Ralon leapt over a couch, somersaulted across the floor and ran up a table, jumping from it at last onto the bar. In one fluid motion he grasped a half-full bottle of Jazeran astro-whiskey, spun, and beamed it at Plonch. The alien tried to shoot it out of the air, but missed. The bottle collided with his gun, simultaneously knocking the rifle from his grip and shattering the bottle. Greasy

astro-whiskey splashed all over the Kostanchan. He stood still, stunned. Ralon wiped the sweat from his forehead and picked up someone else's martini from the bar.

"I asked you to reconsider," said Ralon coolly, taking a sip of the martini.

Plonch then burst into flames.

His alien throat screamed in foreign tongues. Wobbling around the square in frantic desperation, the beast knocked over a table and fell into a plant. He burned there, the reaction of the caustic liquid on his flesh, until he died.

"Joshua Bennett," harped Mrs. Anderson, "Joshua, are you paying attention?"

Josh was not at all paying attention. He was in fact the only student in Mrs. Anderson's first grade class not learning about the twelve months of the year.

"Oh, um, yeah," lied Josh, taken off guard. The late morning sunlight cut through the classroom from one side, giving everything in it a slight glow.

"So what did I just say, Mr. Bennett?" Mrs. Anderson had a way of being horribly vindictive, as well as imposing. She was gargantuan to a first grader – quite obese – and her mottled brown dress did little to disguise her gelatinous form. She stood with arms akimbo, awaiting his reply. So too were the other first graders. Their young shiny faces blinked at him.

"Um... you said...." Josh scanned the dry erase board for any clue. May, June, July... nothing. As his face grew red and hot, he carefully tried to hide the sketches he had been working on with his arms; one of a rifle and one of a slug creature who bore a striking resemblance to –

Mrs. Anderson blurted at last: "You have no idea what I was talking about, do you?"

Josh hated those kinds of questions. And he really hated it when adults would ask them like that, as if they wanted an answer when they clearly didn't. What did they expect him to say?

"No, I thought not," said Mrs. Anderson eventually, apparently at a loss to humiliate Josh any further. "Please pay attention in my class, Mr. Bennett, or you'll be spending recess with me." She returned to the board. "Now class, not every month has the same amount of days..." and that's when Josh checked out again.

He regressed into the folds of his mind where he was free to feel absolutely horrible. He always did when people were upset with him – especially teachers and adults. Amidst his reverie he caught the backward glance of one Miss Lizzy Ratskeller. She was a cute brunette two rows ahead, looking back at him with a keen smile. It was only a second, then she looked forward again, but it awoke a little spark deep within Josh's heart somewhere. It made him feel good, and a little anxious.

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D'lorio came to a wide doorway, but it was sealed with massive black stones, mortared into place long ago. He ran his hand across the brick blockade. In the darkness of the cavern, his light elven skin seemed to glow of its own accord, barely illuminating his surroundings.

He winced. His other hand was clutching his side, where silvery-blue blood oozed perniciously from a spear wound. He didn't have much time.

D'lorio backed away from the walled doorway and unlatched a leather bag from his belt. From it he poured a fistful of sand onto the floor.

He paused – thinking he heard something. His sharp, blue eyes scanned the darkness behind him... there was nothing. He was alone. For now.

Quickly the elf set to work, kneeling at the mound of sand. Putting a hand to his forehead, he muttered a quiet incantation. After a moment, the sand began to swirl as if disturbed by a stray wind. It spun and whirled and then began to rise into the air of its own power. Before the kneeling, muttering elf a tiny, man-sized tornado formed in mid air. It spun and spun and then began to change form; the sand ignited magically, as if on fire, and radiated brilliant colors. The tornado seemed to be gaseous temporarily before expanding in size. The rushing air gave birth to a different sound: like rolling thunder in the distance. In a flash the sand and tornado vanished, and where it had whirled now stood a squat ogre.

D'lorio stood. The ogre stared at him.

“Destroy that wall,” ordered D'lorio, directing the ogre toward the bricked doorway. Without a word the fat creature turned to the wall and began punching it with massive blows. Each punch knocked loose dust and mortar between the bricks. After only a moment or two a few stones seemed to be sliding under the ogre's strength....

Then an unfriendly noise: the sound of coming enemies in the distance. D'lorio wheeled around instinctively, listening over the pounding of his monster. With his acute senses he could hear jingling armor and clanking weapons.

“Faster, damn you, faster!” He demanded of the ogre, who ignored him. One brick in the center of the doorway was sliding generously now, and in a moment the ogre would have it knocked through. But would it be soon enough? The hunters were coming, and they were numerous....

D'lorio winced again, only a little more painfully this time. He was loosing blood fast beginning to feel lightheaded.

Think... crash! The ogre had free the central stone, leaving a small hole in the wall about the size of a porthole.

“Stop anyone who comes this way,” D'lorio ordered his ogre, and then struggled to fit his body through the meager opening. He was lithe enough to make it, and with some effort managed his way through. When he regained himself, D'lorio was standing in a single room. His natural light was not quite able to illuminate it, yet something dim glowed on the opposite wall....

“D'lorio...” whispered a faint female voice.

“Lysiah!” he cried, running toward the sound. There he found his love, broken and dying, chained to the wall. The elvish princess was marvelously beautiful, even as her life eked away.

“You came for me,” she breathed.

“Just as I said I would.” D'lorio held her head as he kissed her. The room was lit in full, as if the afternoon sun were beaming in through a window. But their reunion was cut short by the sound of impending danger.

“Faster men, faster!” called a voice from the echoey deep. The clunking of boots was frighteningly near.

“Come, let us escape,” said D'lorio, going to work on Lysiah's shackles.

“There is nowhere to run,” she said.

“We'll find a way.” D'lorio struggled with the chains; there appeared to be no lock.

“What’s this, an *ogre*?”

The Ithadian guards were here. The ogre growled and attacked – the sound of slashing swords – then the collapse of a body on the hard floor.

“He must be in here.” A torch was tossed into the dungeon through the hole. A face appeared after it. “There he is! Paumus, give me your bow.”

“Quickly, D’lorio, quickly!” urged the elf maiden. Frantic now, D’lorio tore at the chains with all his might, but to no avail. An arrow appeared at the end of bow through the porthole, the shooter drawing back and taking aim....

Lizzy Ratskeller furrowed her brow, turning through the pages.

“Is that it? Is that how it ends or something?”

Josh was washing his hands in the sink, preparing to chop the peppers for dinner.

“What? Ends? Oh, no, I told you, I haven’t finished it yet.”

“Oh,” she replied, flipping through the manuscript one last time, as if just to make sure for herself.

“Well, do you like it?” asked Josh, getting started with the peppers.

“It’s pretty good, yeah.” Lizzy sipped on her wine.

“Pretty good?! Just *pretty* good?! That’s all I get?”

“Well, Josh, you know I don’t really get into all that fantasy stuff.”

“I was thinking of including this one in my application for graduate school. Oh well, at least I still have three months until the January deadline.”

“January? That’s next month, Shakespeare.”

“Oh crap, you’re right, aren’t you.... Check on the rice, would you?”

“You’ll be fine,” said Lizzy, getting up to stir the boiling water on the stove, “you’re really good at this kind of stuff.”

“Yeah, I hope so...” There’s a pause. “So speaking of school, have you thought any more about transferring?”

Lizzy sighed audibly. “Josh... I just don’t think it’s a good idea.”

Josh worked on the peppers in silence. After a moment he murmured, “Yeah... I guess.” Lizzy came over to him.

“I mean, I’d be giving up all my scholarship – and I’d probably have to start all over again if my credits didn’t transfer.”

“Yeah, I know,” he replied, a little put-down. “I just wanted to see you more often.”

Lizzy lifted his face from the peppers to meet her gaze. “Hey,” she said simply, “I love you.”

“I love you too.”

They kissed, and, for that moment, the room was illuminated.

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Tracey nervously surveyed the ship’s controls. Only two days had passed since she’d been just a regular seventh-grader at Westerby Middle School, and Jance hadn’t had time to teach her how to fly his spaceship yet. She heard him yelling from the hallway.

“Tracey! Get us out of here! We’ve got to make it to that nebula before they get within tractor-beam range!”

The message was all too simple, but executing it would be a little trickier. She saw four big blips on the radar screen: those were the Taellor'on battleships, and they were closing in on a central blip. *That must be us*, Tracey thought correctly.

“What do I do?!” she called back to Jance fervently. He was down the hall, desperately trying to repair their recently sabotaged teleportation device.

“Punch the big red button and push forward on the throttle!” came the reply.

The ship shuddered just then. The Taellor'ons were beginning their bombardment. As Tracey settled herself in the pilot's chair she saw three space fighters zoom past their stagnant ship, turning around in the distance to return on another attack run.

She knew there was no time. Tracey jammed all the reds buttons she could see (and there were several), heard some vague rumbling noises from the engines behind her, and threw the throttle all the way forward.

Instantly she was crushed backward into her chair from the inertia. The force was unbelievable. She was certain she'd just killed Jance in the hallway, who had no warning or seatbelt. Through the viewscreen she saw the green nebula rapidly growing in size ahead. She thought about reaching for the throttle to reduce speed, but quickly realized that this was impossible, as the gravitational force pinning her down prevented her from moving a muscle.

A great feeling of disaster consumed her. How were they ever going to stop? Would they run out of fuel? Or would they run into something first? While the nebula grew larger and larger ahead, Tracey noticed the blips on the radar of the Taellor'on battleships were keeping apace with their own vaulting ship. *How could they be doing*

that? she thought. Then she noticed something even more unsettling: they were still closing on them!

Now the nebula was everywhere, green was all she could see. *If we're not already inside the nebula*, Tracey thought, *then we must be close*. Just then a sensor started beeping madly, and an artificial voice announced: “tractor beam detected.” Tracey felt the ship begin to slow down, and the immobilizing inertia evaporate with it.

Oh no! she thought, *they've got us!*

The doorbell rang.

Josh bolted down the stairs. He knew exactly what was at the door. It was the UPS man, and he had a box for a Mr. Bennett.

“Lizzy! Lizzy,” he screamed along the way, “come here, I’ve got something to show you!”

Lizzy appeared from the kitchen with the baby in her arms while Josh signed for the box. It was heavy, and he set it on the living room coffee table.

“Whose this from?” asked Lizzy, wiping some lunch from her son’s face with his bib. She read from the box as her husband tore it open: ““Random House Publishing...’ did you order some books?”

“Almost...” Josh wrenched a book from the hole he had torn in the packaging and handed it to Lizzy. She read its cover eight times before she could believe it.

The Somewhat-Ironical Adventures Tracey R. Millington, by Joshua Bennett.

She nearly dropped the baby.

*

Merolus was a Timewalker. His race was similar in stature and composition to the race of humans, yet with one added ability. Merolus and his people wandered from time to time as we do from place to place. He could experience his own birth, breathe his very last breath, and then go out on his high school prom, in precisely that order.

In a sense, the race of Timewalkers was actually timeless. They existed in a sort of quasi-reality that humans have trouble understanding. The restrictions of mortality are what shape human self-understanding; that we live and we die gives meaning to our lives. But Timewalkers have no experience of death, or at least of the afterlife, because they merely continue to exist through their entire collection of life experiences before, during and after they've actually died. They exist outside of the boundary of time.

To humans, this is both marvelous and terrible. For Timewalkers, it simply is.

Merolus, however, has a problem. It's called Recursive Occlusion, an Infinite Time Loop, a Loop Hole, or any of several other names. It'd be the equivalent of a human sinking waist-deep into a pile of cement, unable to move any physical distance once it dries. Merolus is stuck in a single moment in time.

In this sliver of time, Merolus is an old man, white hair and all. He's in a hospital bed, having suffered a serious stroke almost a week ago. He turned eighty-nine while at the hospital, and presently he's re-reading his birthday cards.

He is able to remember other times in his life, just as any human can do, yet for reasons beyond his understanding he can no longer literally re-live them. His whole moment of livable time is just less than three minutes.

In his three-minute-long prison, Merolus yearns to return to his earlier days. He can remember vividly his wife's lovely face – the way it was when they were young and

beautiful – yet he is unable to actually kiss it. He remembers the excitement of his first publishing as a young man, the way his heart overflowed with joy – the way he felt so *invincible* – yet he is powerless to possess that verve again. He even remembers the way his wife once looked at him, when they were in the first grade, which was his first taste of love. But he can no longer re-visit that time, or any other time.

Merolus is the first Timewalker to know what it is to be human. Unfortunately, though, his perceived mortality is, ironically, unending.

“Excuse me, Mr. Bennett?” The doctor was peeking in from the doorway.

“Oh, you,” replied Josh sullenly. The doctor entered, approaching the side of Josh’s bed.

“There’s some people here to see you,” the doctor said. From the hall came Josh’s four children.

“Hi Dad,” “How are you,” “Hey.” They all seemed uniformly depressed.

“Well, hi!” Josh perked up.

“I’m afraid we have some unfortunate news, Mr. Bennett,” the doctor said seriously.

Josh scowled at the doctor. “What do you mean, ‘unfortunate?’”

The children exchanged looks. One started to weep. None would hold their father’s gaze.

“Well,” began the doctor slowly and softly, “it seems that you’ve developed a mild form of dementia.” Josh could only stare at the doctor. His daughter balled full out now.

“Dementia?” said Josh.

“Yes, Mr. Bennett. And I’m afraid there’s –”

“You mean, like what crazy people have?”

“Well,” said the doctor uneasily, “we don’t say, ‘crazy,’ we –”

“So you’re saying I’m crazy.”

“No, Mr. Bennett, not at all. It’s just that in men your age there is often a progressive breakdown of the brain tissue –”

And that’s it.

He’s re-reading his birthday cards again now.