

# Writing Examples

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<sup>1</sup> This document was updated 30 March 2022. For a future impression of my latest works and skills, please refer to the latest version of this document: [www.yourbeststory.net/writing-examples](http://www.yourbeststory.net/writing-examples).

# PART ONE: BUSINESS AND ORGANIZATIONAL WRITING

Some of these examples are taken from life; others are representative of my work in the corporate space. Wherever I used real situations, I changed the names and specifics of people, tools, and processes.

Whenever I omitted a part of the text, I used [. . .].

## 1 BUSINESS WRITING: INSTRUCTION BOOK FOR COMPANY

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**Project:** A 165-page instruction book to help both beginning and advanced editors better understand the craft of editing manuscripts; to guide employees in managing internal workflows and client relationships; and to help employees from other tracks in the publication chain<sup>2</sup> understand the editing process and rules. The book appeared in three languages to serve English, Dutch, and French teams.

**Client:** A large American editing company with offices around the world, including in Israel. This book was for the Israel branch, which also hires freelancers from Europe.

**My role:** Pitching the book idea (as a trainer and coach, I felt the unwieldy manuals of the client needed replacement); having meetings and email exchanges with the client and with my team to clarify client expectations and ways to improve our internal processes; writing large segments of the book (Dutch and English) and editing the rest (conceptualizing and developing content, tone, etc.); creating the structure, layout, and interlinking; guiding another editor in adapting the book to French; training other editors in updating and maintaining the book.

**Result:** I received praise from the teams among which this book was distributed for its clarity and ease of use. The editing process has become more efficient for those involved in the pilot.

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<sup>2</sup> Specifically copy preparation, typesetting, and proofreading.

## 1.1 THE BASICS — FOR NEW EDITORS

### 1.1.1. Introduction

Your fingers are shivering above the keyboard. Only a week ago, you signed your contract with NewLedge Editing Services. You had a few swift training sessions, and now you're live.

You try to implement what you've learned, but it is too much to remember. There is *text cleanup* (TCU) and *spelling and grammar* (S&G). And those—taken together—form the *Standard Package*. And then there is the *Full Package*, which is the Standard Package plus a plethora of additional rules.

And don't forget the different approaches to *running text* and *references*—confusing those will lead directly to a client reject.

How are you ever going to tackle this?

I understand your problem. Once, I filled those shoes. Based on my years of experience as a trainer, I wrote this volume to make our instructions accessible and understandable, so you will have a trusted guide on your desktop.

I've organized the instructions from basic to specific, starting with TCU—which we apply to all tracks—and ending with the most exclusive, project-specific instructions. Moreover, I've created tables of content for each chapter and placed links to the main TOC and the chapter TOC at the end of each section. Finally, I interlinked all keywords for easy navigation.

This allows you to find an answer to any question within three clicks.

The first chapter explains our relationship to our client, our workflows, and our jargon. Then we'll dive into the particulars of what we should and shouldn't do.

And soon, your trembling fingers will be but a memory.

Feel free to reach out to me if anything remains unclear.

Good luck,

Niels Kwakernaak

Senior Editor, NewLedge Editing Services

*Back to TOC e-book*

*Back to TOC chapter*

[ . . . ]

## 2. CLIENT COMMUNICATION

### *2.1. Queries to the managing editor*

Before long, you're going to find yourself doubting whether or not a certain sentence works the way it is written. Or you'll see idiosyncrasies in logic that might just be intended—if you tilt your head left, it doesn't make sense, but if you do the same to the right, you suddenly spot some crooked rudiment of logic.

What do you do?

Stay your fingers from hitting the “Comment” button. True, if we cannot figure out what edits to make, we query the managing editor. But managing editors are extremely busy and tend to dislike the task of answering queries—especially when the answer should be obvious.

So, it is better to first ask a colleague for a second opinion. Or to highlight the paragraph and come back to it later—a bit of distance can make a world of difference. Our client expects professionalism from our editors. And in this regard, that means the confidence to make educated decisions.

But until you feel confident to make your edits without asking the client's confirmation, you have a host of colleagues around you who are more than willing to look over your shoulder. If they are as confused as you are, it's time to post a query.

[. . .]

### 3.1.2 *Body text, running text, and references*

The definitions for *body text* and *running text* differ from company to company. We use the term *running text* for full sentences. Though this typically excludes titles and references, you can find running text anywhere—in normal paragraphs, in footnotes, in tables, between parentheses . . .

*Running text consists of complete sentences*

And this is where *running text* differs from *body text*. Body text is the grey lane of paragraphs you first notice when you open a book or magazine. It excludes things like titles, footnotes, tables of content, covers, and registers, but it includes the text in between.

*Body text is all text excluding titles, footnotes, covers, and tables of content, etc.*

In other words: running text is sentence level; body text is page level.

Why is this important? Because there is a third kind of text: *references*. In running text, references are written in full—without abbreviations—unless the author decides otherwise. Where body text or footnotes do not contain full sentences (running text), we abbreviate the references as much as possible.

For example, [. . .]

## 2 INTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS: EMAILS TO FELLOW EDITORS

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*The following case is representative of email exchanges I've had.*

**Project:** The Dr.Edit Pro tool [name changed], which helps editors improve efficiency and quality.

**Client:** A large American editing company with offices worldwide, including in Israel, Sri Lanka, and India. This email exchange was addressed to editors based in Israel and Sri Lanka, and to freelancers based in Europe.

**Situation:** The first version of the tool didn't work well and became a point of frustration for the editors. Now, an updated version is being introduced.

**My role:** Codeveloping the editing tool by making decisions on which instructions to automate and which not; having meetings with the client to explain my decisions; translating these decisions into a format the programmers could work with; getting the editing teams to give the tool a second chance.

**Result:** All of the team members have the tool installed. The editors use the tool most of the time but avoid its use on complicated documents with tracked changes. Further development is required in this regard.

Dear Editing Teams,

September 17th is the big day: we'll finally launch our new Dr.Edit Pro tool. With our updated technology, we'll be able to better serve our client with the desired quality. But, more importantly, you won't have to be stressed out about deadlines and benchmarks anymore—we have added new features that will increase your editing efficiency and comfort.

I know your concerns. In the past, we had a few challenges with the tool. But the technical team worked around the clock for three months—through many test cycles—and now it runs like a jet.

1. We've fixed the bugs behind the footnote section crashes.
2. We've updated the user interface and enabled key shortcuts, saving you the painful business of mouse-clicking.
3. We've implemented case sensitivity, so you don't have to manually fix the capitalization errors anymore.
4. We've automated the footnote abbreviations.

The client's demands are high, and you've often communicated that the workload was higher than manageable. Without a doubt, the changes in the tool will increase your editing tempo.

Trust me, you're going to love this new version of Dr.Edit Pro.

But if you would encounter any issues with the tool, our technical support team will always be there to help you out.

Kind regards,

Niels Kwakernaak

Senior Editor — Team Books and Magazines

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Here follows a separate email to Gili, the lead associate of another team that is likely to show resistance. She is closely involved with her team, and the team members trust her. I deem it crucial in cases like this to employ the right channels.

Dear Gili,

How are you? I hope you're storming through this peak period.

As you know, our updated Dr.Edit tool is likely to meet resistance in your team. After all, your team hasn't been much involved in the developmental process.

Will you let me know if you encounter any such antagonism?

I suggest you organize a separate demo for your team. Your team members might be more enthusiastic hearing the instructions from you. Show them how well it works and how efficient navigation is now. If it helps, I've attached the efficiency statistics.

I trust in your abilities.

You rock, and so does your team!

Warm regards,

Niels Kwakernaak  
Senior Editor — Team Books and Magazines

Attachment: Efficiency Statistics Dr.Edit Pro.

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*The following email is a **writing assignment** for honing my business writing skills.*

**Project:** Writing assignment internal communications.

**Client:** One who hires me to help communicate with employees in clear, tactful, and effective language.

**Situation:** Jake Epping asked for a raise, but the CEO isn't willing to pay him more than he does already. Using the sandwich technique, I'm trying to keep Jake inspired and satisfied.

**My role:** Helping the CEO inform the employee of his decision in transparent but discreet language.

Dear Jake,

Thank you for your request for a raise. The board has considered it and has come to a conclusion.

First of all, we note that you are an extremely valuable asset to our organization. We appreciate your precision, your willingness to go the extra mile, and your boundless creativity that is an ornament to your team. And your openness and sense of humor are well spoken of among your peers.

But unfortunately, we cannot honor your request for a raise at this moment. You are already earning a top salary for someone in your position and with your experience level.

Continue to showcase your outstanding quality and ambition, and we are sure you will reach your earning goals in due time.

Thank you very much for your marvelous work, and don't forget how much we appreciate you.

You're one of a kind.

Warm regards,

Niels Kwakernaak

Internal Communications

## What others say about my email writing

Through the years, my managers and peers have complimented me on my “**fresh, lively, and clear**” emails that “break the boring working hours.” My latest manager recently said, “Your emails make my day!”

Most of my colleagues work from home, and the days can be lonely and depressing—but my emails are said to **help people stay positive**.

My previous manager praised my ability to convey **tough messages in a thoughtful way**. My emails confronted employees with their flaws, but simultaneously awoke **new inspiration and motivation**.

I’ve been complimented on the **structure** of my emails, on their **effectiveness, persuasion, and ease of understanding**.

References upon request.

### 3 INTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS: NEWSLETTER FOR MULTIPLE TEAMS

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*Here follows a random example of a newsletter I wrote.*

- Project:** A seasonal newsletter aimed at improving the quality of our editing work. It contained clarifying instructions on the editing process and an editing assignment to assess the quality of each editor—a text with errors in every sentence. The errors ranged from minor to critical.
- Client:** A large American editing company with offices worldwide, including in Israel. These newsletters were addressed to the Israel branch and freelancers based in Europe.
- My role:** Writing the newsletters and editing assignments (and afterward grading them); collecting points of improvement based on the client's audits and Pareto analyses; communicating with the client on how to improve our workflows; coaching the editing team and being the link between our editors and the client.
- Result:** It became clear which editors had a good understanding of spelling, grammar, and client-specific instructions. With this information, our manager made decisions such as initiating personal improvement plans.

## **Spring Edition 2021**

Dear copyeditors and proofreaders,

We're back with a sparkling new spring edition of your favorite newsletter! (Just throw me a bone here.)

The client was satisfied with our performance in 2020. And they listed a few special pointers, so we will do even better this year.

The text to edit for this edition is about our job description. We are an outsourced service, so where exactly are we in the production line?

Please return the edited text to me by April 12th.

I hope you'll have fun reading this edition. If you have any suggestions for the next one, please reach out to me.

Warm regards,

Niels Kwakernaak

Senior Editor — Team Books and Magazines

### ***Focal Points Client***

This section is going to be a bit different this time. We didn't include the usual selection of instructions. Instead, we'll look at an overview of the recent Pareto analysis by the client.

Here are the main pointers:

1. Be sure your spelling check is running.
2. [. . .]

*Please edit the following text*

## **WHAT ARE YOU?**

*By Niels C. Kwakernaak*

A while ago, a friend asked me, “What kind of editor are you?” I had to think for a moment. We just call ourselves editors, but what does that mean? Is our workflow similar to that of other publishers? And what other kinds of editing are there?

### **Acquisitions editor and managing editor**

Larger publishing houses usually know a hierarchy. At the top, you’ll find editors who spend their days estimating which book manuscripts could be successful. They read book proposals and drafts until they find one that sets them ablaze. They are called acquisition editors.

Then there are editors who oversee the entire book creation process, from concept to marketing strategy. These people are known as managing editors.<sup>3</sup>

### **Developmental editor**

When the chiefs upstairs green-light a title, they bring in a developmental editor. This editor nurtures the book as a whole—its structure, tone, and content. The developmental editor works with the author to transform a broad idea into a focused thesis. If a book reads like one solid unit, you can likely thank the developmental editor for this.

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<sup>3</sup> The names of the editor roles may differ per publisher.

## **Line Editor**

When the book has its final structure and form, it is time for the line editor's magic. The line editor checks if paragraphs and sentences are well constructed and if the author's writing style is consistent—assuring the register doesn't ping-pong from colloquial to formal, slang to jargon. Sometimes this demands a full rewrite.

## **Copyeditor**

And there it is: our job! Copyeditors have a wide range of tasks, from checking spelling and grammar to fact-checking and copy prep; from checking consistency to spotting unintentional discrimination or sexism. After the first copyediting pass, the author gets a chance to review his edited work. The copyeditor then closes with a cleanup pass to implement the author's revisions.

## **Proofreader**

At the end of the production line, there is one last safety net: the trusted proofreader. The proofreader reads the manuscript—either in hard copy or PDF—word for word, letter for letter. Proofreaders don't touch syntaxes and only mark places where the copyeditor really blundered. And when the proofreader is done, the book is ready for publication.

## **Conclusion**

We are but one link in the editing chain. Before we make our first edit, the acquisitions and managing editors have made the tough decisions, a developmental editor has structured and focused the whole thing, and a line editor has perfected the language. We are copyeditors. We are the last to make significant changes before the typesetter chisels the work in stone.

## 4 COPYWRITING: BROCHURE FOR PASHUT YALDUT

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- Project:** Copy for a toy shop brochure.
- Client:** Pashut Yaldut, a small shop based in Sapir (Aravah, Israel), handcrafting and selling anthroposophical toys.
- My role:** Interviewing the owners for a creative brief; clarifying their vision, motivations, and unique selling points; comparing their brief with their competitors' story (online); conceptualizing, writing, and editing the copy.
- Results:** The client was satisfied; the brochure has yet to be printed.

# Pashut Yaldut

## *Sparking your child's inner world*

Are your children being played by their toys?

The fire truck wails. The doll cries. The guitar blares hard rock solos.

There's little left to imagination.

Wouldn't you rather give your child a toy that sparks its inner world?

Driven by their love for children, Chaim and Rina Grunow handcraft imaginative toys to guide your little ones into their world of fantasy—where animals talk and leprechauns dance.

“We try to think and feel the world like children,” Rina says.

“What kind of toys answer to their emotional and cognitive needs? How can we create toys that will provide pure happiness for your child?”

One key is allowing the kids to fill in the blanks. “Do toys need speakers to make kids happy?” Rina asks. “Do dolls need eyelashes with mascara?”

If her three decades of experience with kids taught her one thing, it is this: kids imagine details with enthusiasm.

But also quality matters. “Broken toys often leave children frustrated and sad,” Rina says.

Chaim nods. “We got so tired of always having to throw away broken toys. High quality is very important to us—our toys are made to last.”

[Insert picture of couple]

Rina started her sewing career as a 5-year-old, learning from her talented mother. And all through her life, she has used her craft to provide for those around her—from clothes to dolls and stationery.

Chaim has always been fascinated with wood. He's spent countless hours honing his craft as a carpenter and toy maker—from baby shakers to dollhouses and kitchens.

Chaim and Rina Grunow are driven by their love for children. They boast three decades of experience as parents, kindergarten teachers, and foster caregivers.

“My kids are playing with dolls my mother made for me when I was a child,” says Sarah, Chaim and Rina’s oldest daughter. “And they are still as pretty as they were thirty years ago. Seeing them now brings up so many precious memories.”

And if a toy would break, Pashut Yaldut offers the lifelong Doll Doctor service<sup>4</sup> free of charge, so your child will never forget this imaginary world.

Pashut Yaldut uses the highest-quality materials to ensure the toys can be handed down from older to younger child—even to grandchild and great-grandchild.

Drop by our shop, and see our collection.

Your kids will love our reading corner.

And with the coupon attached to this brochure, you’ll receive 20% off your first toy.

Coffee, tea, and cookies are on us.

We hope to see you soon!

Pashut Yaldut

*A safe island for your child*

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<sup>4</sup> On the condition of normal usage.

## 5 COPYWRITING: UNIVERSITY ASSIGNMENTS

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Below is a series of copywriting assignments I did at the University of Washington. The first two are examples of copy I wrote “for” Honda (based on Honda’s talking points), followed by some random (auction) copy. These pieces of copy demonstrate my ability to adapt my tone to different target audiences.

### 5.1 COPY: FACEBOOK POST FOR HONDA

- Project:** Facebook post based on talking points (university assignment).
- Client:** Honda.
- My role:** Editing a speech transcription into talking points and writing social media posts based on these talking points.

Those who care, drive Honda.

Why? Because we at Honda’s believe our great-great-grandchildren have the right to take vacations in the woods, spot wildlife, and drive their own Hondas back home through natural green tunnels.

To reach this goal, we have reduced our CO<sub>2</sub> footprint by [...] over the last years. And we will continue to save our planet with new energy creation products and new concepts for future low-carbon drivers. For example, we’ll soon start testing our new environmental technologies such as battery-electric and plug-in hybrid vehicles.

And that isn’t all. Our new “Honda 4 the planet” fan page will donate four grands a month to support the American heroes who fight for the environment.

The future is green . . . so is Honda.

*[Suggestion for picture:*

*Take a picture of one of the new environment-friendly Hondas parked in a thick, sunlit tree tunnel with a way-too-happy family picnicking beside the road.]*



## 5.2 COPY: TWEET FOR HONDA

- Project:** Tweet based on talking points (university assignment).
- Client:** Honda.
- Situation:** Honda’s CEO is at the Green Festival. She tweets her followers to showcase Honda’s care for the environment.
- My role:** Editing a speech transcription into talking points and writing social media posts based on these talking points.

“Hi from the Green Festival! It’s awesome to see all these people caring as much for the environment as we do. And I feel privileged to run a company that makes a difference—we have greatly reduced our CO<sub>2</sub> footprint and are developing many new ways to keep the earth green for our great-great-grandkids.”

### 5.3 COPY: PORTLAND BASKETBALL EXCURSION

**Project:** Auction copy for Portland basketball excursion (university assignment).

**Client:** Not specified.

**My role:** Studying the brief; researching and fact-checking the details; conceptualizing, writing, and editing the copy using the appropriate register and tone; keeping the word count below 150.

**Copy:**

Would you dig high-fiving your basketball heroes when they gloriously enter the court? Wait no longer! Take your pal on this Portland Basketball Excursion, and get a chance to meet the Trail Blazers in person. You two will be flying a private jet from Seattle straight to Portland, where you can admire top-notch basketball prowess from the courtside. Feel the tremors under your feet when the ball hits the ground. Sense the wind in your face when the players run by. No home cinema set can compete with the real deal! This package includes two courtside tickets and four tickets close to the floor.

## 5.4 COPY: LE BRISTOL

- Project:** Auction copy for Le Bristol (university assignment).
- Client:** Le Bristol, Paris.
- My role:** Studying the brief; researching and fact-checking the details; conceptualizing, writing, and editing the copy using the appropriate register and tone; keeping the word count below 150.

### **Copy:**

Wave your stressful existence goodbye, and escape with a special person into the riches and wonders of timeless Paris. The golden gates of Le Bristol Hotel await you for this exhilarating experience. The two of you will spend two reviving nights in the 18th-century France–styled junior suite. Before going out to visit the spa, Champs-Élysées, or the Eiffel tower, you will indulge in a tastebud-caressing breakfast with the finest baguettes, croissants, and camembert, succumbing to the pure flavor of France. You will dine in the architectural elegance of Restaurant Apicius and in the graceful coziness of the Maison Rostang Restaurant.

### *This trip includes:*

- Alaska Airlines miles for two business class tickets
- two nights with breakfast in the junior suite in Le Bristol
- gift certificates for two to Restaurant Apicius and Maison Rostang Restaurant

Availability is limited during peak travel season, and the months of June and September are excluded.

## 5.5 COPY: TUGBOAT RIDE TO JUNEAU

- Project:** Auction copy for a tugboat ride to Juneau (university assignment).
- Client:** Not specified.
- My role:** Studying the brief; researching and fact-checking the details; conceptualizing, writing, and editing the copy using the appropriate register and tone; keeping the word count below 150.

### **Copy:**

The most astonishing views are beckoning you on this tugboat ride to Juneau, Alaska. You and your friend will depart from Seattle and cross the waterways to this marvelous city under Mt. Juneau's misty ice caps. On the way, you may spot orcas and see the lush mountains of Ketchikan rise before you—littered with snug and colorful houses. You'll dock for a stroll downtown Ketchikan where you can climb the steep wooden staircase streets. Then you will continue your journey to Juneau—one of the best sites for spotting wildlife. You might encounter a bear showboating its fishing savvy.

### *Specifics:*

- a tugboat ride for two from Seattle to Juneau, Alaska
- depart from Seattle Thursday evening, arrive in Juneau late Monday night
- a 4 to 6-hour stop in Ketchikan on Sunday
- a hotel for two nights and car rental for two days
- airfare back to Seattle

## 5.6 COPY: HIGHTOWER 2008 PEPPER BRIDGE RED WINE

**Project:** Auction copy for Hightower 2008 Pepper Bridge red wine (university assignment).

**Client:** Hightower Cellars.

**My role:** Studying the brief; researching and fact-checking the details; conceptualizing, writing, and editing the copy using the appropriate register and tone; keeping the word count below 60.

### **Copy:**

Nothing completes your romantic night the way the Hightower 2008 Pepper Bridge red wine does. This 100% merlot from the Pepper Bridge Vineyard has a full and enriching taste that shows hints of spices, pepper, sandalwood, and berries. Close your eyes and let the fruity flavor nurture your senses.

## 5.7 COPY: WATERPIK ULTRA WATER FLOSSER WP 100

**Project:** Auction copy for Waterpik Ultra Water Flosser WP 100 (university assignment).

**Client:** Waterpik.

**My role:** Studying the brief; researching and fact-checking the details; conceptualizing, writing, and editing the copy using the appropriate register and tone; keeping the word count below 60.

### **Copy:**

Always wanted a pearly white smile? Try the Waterpik Ultra Water Flosser. This water flosser is easier to use than string floss and assures cleaner teeth and healthier gums. Its six specialized tips remove plaque and debris from the most difficult places—even below the gumline. With such a clean and healthy mouth, you'll never be afraid to grin.

## 5.8 COPY: BLACK DINAH CHOCOLATIERS PACKAGE

- Project:** Auction copy for Black Dinah Chocolatiers package (university assignment).
- Client:** Black Dinah Chocolatiers.
- My role:** Studying the brief; researching and fact-checking the details; conceptualizing, writing, and editing the copy using the appropriate register and tone; keeping the word count below 80.

### **Copy:**

Open this treasure box by Black Dinah Chocolatiers, and bite. Feel the silky smoothness of the tastiest direct-trade chocolate melting on your tongue. Your desires are about to be fulfilled with the most mouthwatering chocolate package of the year.

### *Including:*

- a signed copy of *Desserted: Recipes and Tales from an Island Chocolatier*, by Kate Shaffer
- two boxes of truffles (28-pieces, 8-pieces)
- dark chocolate barks and Frogletiers
- a \$100 gift certificate for Black Dinah Chocolatiers

PART TWO  
PERSONAL WRITING

Fiction and nonfiction



### **THE MODERN ANCIENT CITY**

*The desire of many*

I write in the shade of a palm tree, sitting in the grass and resting against ancient stones. I look at a Victorian residence—wide as the horizon and garnished with arched windows. In the background, I hear pop music and the horrific rumbling of a Ferrari race echoing between the city walls of old. Now I wonder: is there a place on earth that fuses past and present with brighter alchemy than Jerusalem?

I've been sitting here for an hour and saw thousands of men and women pass by, of many ethnicities and cultures. Some look happy, others sad. Some wear a machine gun; others push a buggy. One moment, you pass back in time when you see a procession of Brother Tucks—cloaked and with heavy sashes—the next, you can be struck by the

scarcity of women's clothing of our days. It's a cultural smoochy of yarmulkes, Yankee caps, black hats and coats, women wearing wigs, burqas, and the occasional bald spot.

When I got out of the train this morning, the first miracles I saw were the rudiments of the Ottoman empire—city walls built from stones of biblical times. To my left, I passed a part of the former city hall, sprinkled with bullet holes recalling the War of Independence.

I took stairs of modern architecture—inspired by the ancient amphitheater—as I moved down the hill to the Jaffa Gate. Underneath the plaza that fronts the titanic gate was a two-way road from where a continual stream of honks and sirens rendered me nearly delusional.

The Ferrari race wasn't the only attraction. A light festival in the Old City drew people from many nationalities to project their light art against the walls and ruins. Giant balls of light hovered above the plaza, and flying saucers blazed in the sky.

Having lived here for months, I hardly outgrew my tourist rookiness. No matter what direction I took, I saw something inspiring—whether it was the Arabic markets or the Cardo, the main street in Roman cities. Some places are even older. The city of David shows remains from before the First Temple Period, three millennia removed. Later this morning, a little walk from there through the Dung Gate led me to HaKotel, or the Wailing Wall—a place of prayer that fell back in Jewish hands during the Six Day War of 1967. Now, you can send your favors by fax or email, to have them stuffed between the massive stones of the Second Temple Court.

I put my little letter to God into an erosion hole in this enormous wall. To my right, I saw men and women climb a ramp to the Temple Court above. The place where

the Jewish Temple once stood now houses two Muslim holy sites: the Al-Aqsa Mosque and the Dome of the Rock—sights of historical and political significance—dating back to the earliest centuries of Islamic history.

Putting my yarmulke in my backpack, I climbed the stairs opposite HaKotel and gazed over the Jerusalem skyline. I saw Church towers emerge everywhere, all belonging to their own Christian denomination. Their flags waved proudly in the wind. Far below, Bunyanesque processions moved through the ancient streets. People besmeared with red carried big crosses on their backs to identify with Christ's suffering.

I heard merry music and Hebrew singing nearby. A group of dancing and clapping Jews made their way from the domed synagogues to HaKotel to celebrate a Bar-Mitzva. The thirteen-year-old birthday boy would soon read a portion of scripture and dance with the Torah scroll along the Western-Wall Plaza.

The stairs led me back to lovely lanes with arched ceilings and little shops. There, limestone streets shone like polished gold—sights that warm your heart.

But reality can rob you of the enchantment in a blink of an eye. Especially in East Jerusalem neighborhoods, and especially on Friday afternoons—after the religious services on the Temple Mount—you can find yourself caught in riots and violence.

A few weeks ago, my mother and I were having dinner somewhere at Via Dolorosa when suddenly a few Orthodox Jews passed our table in the small lane. They were running for their lives. A mob of Arabs followed them, shouting and screaming with raised fists. They passed Mom by a few inches, and she clenched onto me with a fearful look in her eyes.

Fortunately, soldiers were on the spot to secure the safety of everyone present. You never know what the reason is, but I heard that the Jews were celebrating a wedding party and were disturbed by Arabs who were protesting the State of Israel—a conflict as old as religion itself.

In the old days, women stayed at home when men went to war. Now, Jerusalem is the city of the female soldier—attractive but dangerously armed. Some young women wear the marks of the veteran: yesterday, I saw a good-looking girl who had lost an arm; today, I saw one even better-looking, but with burns covering her chest and shoulder. That's the reality here—a girl you meet in the street might as well be a war hero.

I see them walking while dreaming under the palm tree. They're smiling, making the best of their lives—even in war. The Jews find reasons to celebrate life, with Ferrari and light festivals. Their culture stands for living, and their religious law commands them to feast.

But there's this grave truth. Since the first day this city was called *Yerushalayim*, there's been a battle over her. She's desired by many and loved by most.

Today, after thousands of years, not much has changed.

This is a modern city, but ancient.

## 7 ESSAY: PERSONAL ESSAY

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### **EIDTOR, EDITRO, EDITIOR . . . AAARGH**

As a kid, I thought spelling and grammar were for boys and girls who didn't have anything better to do—like my sisters. When given a book, those little Brontës got so absorbed into words and syntaxes they could be left unattended for hours.

Not me.

Instead of reading about the masked Man in Black, I became him, dueling my way through the garden to save Buttercup—and sometimes, coming home bleeding real blood. Books were beautiful to look at, to leaf through, to sniff. But never, ever, did I read any.

When my mom—propelled by my desperate school teachers—pointed out the errors in one of my notes, I looked at her defiantly and asked, “Did you understand what I wrote? —Yes? —Good.”

Despite my animosity toward rules, I was a little storyteller. In the evenings, I animated the dining table with my fables, and at the age of twelve, I authored short

stories about a gunslinger searching for his long-lost father. Grownups would look up from the typed pages and say, “cute” or “sweet.” And the greatest compliment they would whisper among themselves: “dyslexic?”

Such a magical word couldn’t mean anything short of brilliance—I was set for success.

But when I was fifteen years old, many things began to change. That Christmas, *The Lord of the Rings* hit the theaters, and my friend Joel dragged me along to see it. No movie had ever affected me so profoundly as this one—not even *The Princess Bride*.

Thrilled by the elves, dwarfs, and sons of Gondor, I set out to write my own plots and twists. I saw myself as the next J.R.R. Tolkien or C.S. Lewis—the authors who had turned me into a bookworm overnight. I labored for countless hours in the light of the tube monitor, hammering my words violently onto the noisy old keyboard.

But when the time came to show my work to others, I discovered what fundamentals I had been missing.

Tailor-sitting on my bed, Joel flipped greedily through the manuscript with his thin, white fingers and mumbled things like “oh, yeah” and “awesome, dude.” But suddenly, he thrust his head back in laughter. “What the hell is ‘vamily’? ‘Family’ is with an F! And ‘happening’ is with double P!”

Was it? My shoulders sagged.

Discouragement burdened me like The One Ring on Frodo’s neck. Was everything I wrote reeking of bad grammar and spelling? After hundreds of pages, I flung my dream of becoming a writer into the trash.

I guessed I was dyslexic.

But the desire to write kept simmering. There were stories I wanted to tell; they were tugging on my consciousness. Sometimes, the books on my shelf seemed to gloat over me, and then I'd wonder: had I spent my childhood reading as my sisters had, would I have been a better writer?

One evening, in my late adolescence, I decided I'd had enough. I was going to break with what people had been telling me—and what I had been telling myself. I had come to believe I was too stupid to be a writer. Now, with anxious, sweaty hands, I took my dusty grammar book from the shelf and started cramming.

Sometime after, I had to write a social studies paper—an essay about the revolutions of the sixties, based on an interview with a baby boomer. Straining for the right words, I crawled through the fire swamps of despair—chased by the bloodhounds of failure. *How do you write this? Where does that comma go? This is a disaster!*

And then the waiting started.

I played my guitar, read another book, and tried to forget.

For a full hour, the stack of papers loomed on the teacher's desk, distracting me from an otherwise interesting lesson. My heart was pounding. Was it gonna be any good?

An epoch of the world passed before my teacher took the stack on her arm and began throwing the essays onto our tables. Then, finally, she held out mine. I took it and tugged, but she wouldn't let it go.

My gaze met her friendly, baggy eyes.

She said, "You want to become a writer, don't you?"

I nodded slightly, blood rushing to my cheeks. How did she know?

She let go. “It shows.”

Goosebumps are still marching along my spine when I think of this moment. I needed this boost to regain confidence. I was going to be a writer; hell, I *was* a writer—and the world was going to know it.

Today, years down the road and after many such encouragements, I’m a senior editor for a text-editing company and starting off as a freelance writer and editor. My old teachers wouldn’t believe what their hopeless student has accomplished.

And I will keep on pursuing my dreams.

## 8 VIGNETTE: HISTORICAL FICTION

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### THIS SHINING BLADE

WIPING THE SWEAT off my forehead, I looked down from the hilltop, in dire need of a rest. The sun was setting and the last rays of light shone brightly against the roof tiles of the Holy Virgins inn. As I prompted my horse, I saw the golden glow illuminating the heavens. This scene was in bitter contrast to what I would find inside—darkness, the remorse of a life spent in shame; a sentiment that was well known in this day and age. It was the Twelfth Century, and if you ask me, the darkest of them all.

I dismounted and allowed a last fill of clean air into my lungs, then entered into dead silence marred by the smell of labor. There was no laughter, no slanderous talk. Old men hung with their noses above their pints. Lighted by the candles in front of them, they stared into nothingness. Slow and tired, the bearded clerk gestured me a seat in the corner. As I watched the man preparing my order, I heard the door opening. My eyes—just adapted to the dark—prickled when I looked into a black figure against the afternoon sun.

The young monk was clothed in an extravagant long robe with sashes. The bald-shaven saint lowered his pointy hood, looked around, and sat down at the bar. Most of the guests seemed in awe of his presence, but I saw one man whose seasoned eyes were fiery with anger. A gloominess hovered about this old man, one that frightened as well as made curious.

He turned toward the monk. “You’re the kind of person who’d give his intestines to see it, right?” His voice was slow and raspy.

“Excuse me?” the monk said.

“The Holy City. Have you ever seen it? Walked its streets, touched the ancient stones?”

“No,” the monk said, “though ever since childhood, I’ve been desirous to. To see its gates and to worship in its churches.”

“What’s your name, my lad?”

“Joseph, sir.”

“Well, Joseph, I have been there,” the old man said. “It’s magnificent. After dozens of battles against the heathen and a three-year journey, I could finally lay my eyes on it. We redeemed it, you know? An order from his majesty the Pope himself. We redeemed Jerusalem from the hands of the Muslims.”

Joseph smiled. “Then you, my Lord, are a brave warrior,” he said. “You gained the victory over our hated enemies, and you survived in honor.”

“Hardly,” the old man grumbled, gazing in the dark, “there’s more, you know. God knows there’s more . . .”

Silence.

“May I ask you your name?” Joseph looked into the burdened old eyes.

“Geron,” he said, tapping with his fist on his heart. “Search for it in the book of life. You will not find it. You know, lad, I’ve been told it means something like guardian.” He laughed, mocking the statement. “Some people live up to their names; others find themselves among the exceptions that confirm the rule.” He filled his lungs with air and held it in. “You know what else they’ve been telling me? They’ve been telling me the Christ himself is a Jew. A Jew . . . A son of the devil, an enemy of God. Can you imagine?”

“Well, the Lord works in mysterious——”

“I’m so tired of these falsehoods.” Geron stood up and banged with his fist on the bar. “If there is a God, then he wasn’t there. We redeemed Jerusalem but brought upon our souls an unforgivable depth. When our Lord, the Pope, decreed that Jerusalem be taken, our mission was to kill all the enemies of God. But who are they, monk? Who are they?”

The silence was nerve-wracking. Among some others, I took my pint and moved a little closer to the drama.

“Answer me. Who are they, the enemies of God?”

“The Muslims,” Joseph said.

“And? Who else?”

“You said it yourself—the Muslims and the Jews.”

Geron raised his arms, and his voice echoed violently through the inn. “Kill a Jew and save your soul. That was the credo! And we believed it.” He looked us in the eyes, one by one. “So, why—we reasoned—why wait? Why should we wait to kill the enemies of God when we have them right here, living among us? Jews everywhere.”

The inn was taken by breathlessness more sickening than before.

“Why?” Geron continued. “Why would they have the right to live among us in our great Christian society but not in Jerusalem?”

I stepped forward. “What did you do?” I heard myself ask. He looked at me, and I felt his eyes piercing right through me—oh, the agony I sensed in him.

“We slaughtered every Jew we could find. We started in Worms and Mainz. Like cancer, our atrocities spread out through the Rhineland—and lots of other places, so I’ve heard. Tens of thousands . . . all killed in the name of the Holy Pope.” He waved his fists in the air and shouted, “Slaughtered in the name of that Godforsaken church. Yes—in the name of the Christ himself.”

Slowly, Geron drew his sword from his sheathe as the sound of cutting metal resonated in the minds of the beholders. He laid the blade carefully in my hands. It was heavy and cold.

“You feel that?” he said. “You know how many? I stopped counting after eight hundred and twenty-two. Eight hundred and twenty-two innocent Jews murdered by this very blade.” He sighed. “You should have seen them. They were holding each other:

mothers their children, husbands their wives, comforting each other until this blade fell on them. Cutting them. Killing them . . . This sword. In my hands.”

He sat down and waved his hand through his greasy hair. His shoulders lowered. “There was never a place I felt safer than in my mother’s arms.” He looked up at me with watery eyes. “Not a night passes by without seeing the looks on their faces—oh, it haunts me day and night. The core of my being is wretched.”

I tried to give the heavy steel back to him, but he refused to take it.

“That cursed thing is my testimony against me.” He clenched his mud-stained hands into fists. “You know, it gets even better. For two months, we besieged it—Jerusalem. In the end, a battering ram cut through the Northern Wall. What happened within those walls is too monstrous to utter in words. We killed them all. We left none alive, Muslim nor Jew. They could cry and beg for mercy all they wanted, but the holy goal justified all means. A mission worth more than hundreds of thousands of human lives. In the name of Christ, Church, and Cross . . .” His voice lowered. “For God’s sake. What faith or idea can be worth more than human lives? Yet we slew them all—men, women, and children. Armed or unarmed. Fighting or surrendering.”

Crippled by war, Geron limped to the back of the inn. He stood facing the wall and turned his head toward us. “Blood splattered up to our thighs when we ran through the narrow streets, battering to death every Jew in our way. I saw my fellow soldiers covered in blood from toe to skull, as if they were bloodthirsty demons. All these bloody cries for mercy keep resounding in my mind—*don’t you believe in our God? Are we not the apple of his eye?*—oh, they cried and screamed. At night, I lie crying in my bed and the voices never stop.”

Joseph walked to him and laid his hand on his shoulder, “They wasted that status when they killed out Lor——”

“Silence!” He shouted, loosening himself from Joseph’s embrace. “We gathered them on a plaza in front of a wooden synagogue. Hundreds, maybe even a thousand of them.” The slow and tormented tone crept back into his voice. “We forced them all in—into the synagogue, all of them—and closed the heavy doors. No one could get out. And

we set fire to the damned building—burning all these men, women, and children alive. Holy business in the name of God, they call it. Well, I heard the screams. Oh, they screamed. It was godless, heartbreaking.” He sighed as if carrying an unbearable burden. “We couldn’t stand it: the screaming and crying, begging and pleading drove us mad. At the top of our lungs, we tried to sing against it—*Oh, great Lord, we adore thee*—but the wretched wailing was too loud; too nerve-racking; too accusing—oh, it accused my inner being. The screams faded into silence when the roof collapsed, and nothing but a smoldering mass remained . . .” He sighed and raised his hands to heaven. “What have we done? Why was no one asking it—what have we done? Why was there no one who questioned our right? No one who dared open his mouth? We were all dead silent, gazing into the glistening ashes, and heard nothing but the singing of birds. The little things never stopped chirping. They didn’t care.

“After some time, we heard coughing and moaning from beneath the ashes. A fellow crusader drew his sword and began battering the piles of charred carcasses until everything was dead, and the silence was almost peaceful. That’s our great religion. That’s the story behind the churches in which you wish to worship your God.”

Nobody dared speak a word as a collective realization of guilt came over the listeners, including me. My heart ached, and tears burned in my eyes. I didn’t touch my pint, and Geron’s sword was still clenched forcefully in my hands.

“You hypocrites!” Geron cried from the top of his lungs. “I’ve seen what Christianity does, and it haunts my soul—in the day, in the night, when I sleep, eat, and drink. We killed them, slaughtered them, and burned them. And for what? So that we could worship in some building? Oh yes, you know what we did next? You know? We went to the church of the Holy Sepulcher, and we celebrated Holy Communion. We feasted! We drank the wine of Christ’s blood—Christ’s Jewish blood from his own Jewish veins—blood that he shed for us. I took the cup—but damn it. I had shed the same blood till it reached my knees.”

“I know your sins are forgiven,” Joseph said, “for the blood you shed was the blood of devils—you know that. They killed our God, Jesus Christ, and they deserve no other treatment than you’ve given them. You did well.”

Geron lowered his shoulders and grimaced, “You’re a blind hypocrite, you know that? His blood will never be enough to atone for the killings of thousands of his brethren. No, my bald-headed brother, I will burn. And I deserve it.”

With his shoulders low and his head down, he passed me by on his way to the door. I laid my arm around him and walked him out into the night. Bitter tears covered my tunic while the man cried for forgiveness.

## 9 SHORT STORY: SCIENCE FICTION

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### LOVE SCARS

*October 13, 2061, 5:35 pm CC (Continued Count)*

“You’re one of the many, you know?” I said, dancing my cigarette between my fingers.

She stopped picking up pieces of scrub suit from the ground and looked at me. Her silky skin shaped the light that pierced through the Venetian blinds. Oh yes, she looked good—in fact, better than I’d ever seen. But marriage?

“Melissah, come on,” I said, “don’t tell me this is new to you—you’re not even the only one on this ship.”

She didn’t blink. She just eyed me with those big dark orbs. “So . . .” she said softly, “this is *you and me forever?*”

“Did I say that? I don’t believe I said that.”

“Yes you did, just now, before we—” a sudden gleam went through her gaze, and in awe, she covered her flesh. “You are such a selfish rat, you know that?”

Putting my bare feet on the control board, I watched her leave. I couldn’t suppress a smile when I heard the panicky stilettos clicking anxiously in the corridor. Few things were as sexy as an angry brunette on high heels.

The door opened.

“What was that about?” Dr. Peters said, looking behind him into the corridor. His eyes turned to me. “And you shouldn’t be smoking in your OR, let alone sit in your underwear—what’s your problem, man?”

“My problem?” I said, scratching behind my ear. “Harold, I’ll tell you. Respectively: one, Melissah popped the question; two, the epidemic gains ground—and we still didn’t figure out how these bastards infected us—so I needed a good drag of nicotine to pit myself against stress . . . and three,” I tapped the white around my femur, “I fancy my legs.”

“You have no idea what you’re doing to these women, do you? You know, I have a sister back on earth who—”

“Ah, she’ll get over it; they always do.”

Harold sighed. “That’s what you think, David.”

“And by the way,” I said, smiled, “your sister’s probably dead for years already.”

“We won’t know that until the connection is reestablished.

“Don’t you get it?” I mumbled, scratching my shoulder blades. “It’s probably not 2061 on earth anymore. The connection is lost because our generation has passed on earth, and our great-grandkids have forgotten us! That’s speed-of-light traveling, baby.”

He was about to lecture me when, suddenly, he frowned. “What are you doing?”

“Harold, I want you to stop drooling on about—”

“You’re scratching.”

I looked at my fingertips and saw blood under my nails. My stomach turned; in fact, the whole room turned.

“I’ll call for an immediate briefing,” Harold said.

In the corridor, our soles joined an echoing crescendo of footsteps speeding to the briefing. Soon the medical staff of the *ReConceptor* was gathered around the rectangle table under the starry window, where they loved to sit and look out into space. I was a bit late because I wouldn't talk with my colleagues without the protection of a hazmat suit. As I came in, all eyes were on me.

"We have to know what causes it," my assistant said.

"Oh Claire, honey," I said, "I've always admired your clearness of mind."

Claire glared at the carpet. "We can't all be geniuses."

"Indeed . . ." I brooded, observing the worried faces around the briefing table. "It is clear who caused it. Ever since we set foot on that Godforsaken planet, we've been seeing cases like this. The Zanzarans have been set in quarantine weeks ago, and still, we're at a loss."

Six weeks before, with three thousand souls on the ship, we'd landed on Zanzara—the only green planet in this planetary system. The settling possibilities, the natural resources—all looked promising until we discovered the planet was inhabited. The geniuses back on earth who had scrutinized the planet with their telezoomscope ships had missed this unfortunate little detail.

The creatures—monsters would be a better word—soon broke into our ship to check us out. We caught some of them, and when they proved peaceful, the ignorant among us had not been able to help themselves. One slimy embrace was the beginning of hell. Soon people with severe rashes flooded the hospice wing, and we ordered everyone to wear their hazmat suits whenever leaving their cabins, but it was too late. Now all the beds were taken by red, skinless men, women, and children, blemished by rotting

muscles, coughing, and vomiting. And despite the brilliant brains collected in the briefing room, there was no lead to an answer—great minds that shat in the same pot.

“We’ve got to get out of here,” Harold said pensively.

“Whereto?” I said. “Back home? Forget it!”

Claire, hoping to redeem herself, said, “What do you suppose we’d find? As time moves slower here, both Mars and Earth will be overpopulated by super sapiens by the time we’d be ready to go. They’d turn us into lab rats like we would’ve done had we found a *Homo erectus* wandering in the woods.”

“Or worse,” Dr. Sarah Verreth of the oncology department (better known as “Dr. Sarah”) said. “Have you read Wells’s *Time Machine*?”

“Point is,” I said, “by the time we’ve gathered enough raw oil to head home, there will be no home to return to.”

Claire had her eyes fixed on the carpet again. “Exactly my point.”

“Damn it,” Harold said. “Couldn’t they spot any potential elsewhere—not neighboring a black hole?”

“Guess not,” Claire said.

“So, we’re stuck here,” I said. “And I’m facing my death. I want you guys to accelerate the research—cut the bastards open for all I care!—and figure out the pathogen, isolate it and find me the damned cure.”

\* \* \*

*October 15, 2061, 10:22 pm CC*

I’ve always loved the long corridors of the hospice wing, where many seemed to admire me. *Look, the professor of the surgery department, I heard them think, such an*

*important man—and brilliant, too.* But now, walking this hall of fame, deadness was eating me up inside. Every room was filled with people suffering to death, and within weeks I would be one of them.

A few days before, we'd decided to allow visitors under strict regulation. Peeking into one of the rooms, I saw a solicitous graybeard behind the screen of his hood talking to a young man in a bed. I thought of Dad. I wished I had written one paper, article, or book to please him—or made one discovery worthy of his attention. I made it through med school, no approval—promotion after promotion, no proud looks. And when I was selected to be the chief surgeon of the first human settlement on Zanjara, he'd done no more than nod. If it were me in that bed, would he have cared?

I must have stood there for minutes, gazing at this bond of love, before I went in. I grabbed the file from the cabinet and leafed through it.

“Since when does he talk again?” I asked.

He mumbled through his beard, “Yesterday, he couldn't utter even one word, but he looks lots better now.”

A shiver crawled over my back.

I hastened to the next room and looked inside. A man was struggling for breath, his decomposing hands clawing the air. He was alone.

I ran to the next room. A scarred man sat upright in his bed, smiling. His wife was by his side, holding his hand in her oversized gloved hands as children were jumping about like little astronauts.

I ran to the next room, and the next—the same, again and again. Lonely people with swollen eyes and unable to utter a word were decaying to death. On other beds, I

saw patients with clear lights in their eyes surrounded by concerned relatives and spouses—some were even talking.

Oxytocin? Could that be the answer?

This had to be the answer.

\* \* \*

*October 19, 2061, 11:15 am CC*

“How are things going?” Harold asked me when I entered the briefing room. It was the fourth day since my discovery.

“Not good,” I said, turning to the gathered doctors, whose faces were oozing with fear. I knew they expected me to die. “The oxytocin injections didn’t do shit. Further research didn’t lead to the isolation of one single molecule.”

“What do you propose we do now?” Claire said.

“We’re not giving up,” Harold said. “I think, for now, our best chance is to hand it over to the psychology department.”

I sniffed. “The ugly little brother of the real sciences.”

“You can’t just prescribe love to patients,” Dr. Sarah said. “For your information, they don’t sell potions anymore since the middle ages.”

Harold strolled around the briefing table. “No,” he crossed his arms, “but what we can do, is promote social activity in this wing. Allow visitors at all times.”

“No way that will work,” I said, inspecting the deep crevices in my hands. “Most of the settlers left behind families—they went on this venture because they wanted to get away—to be alone.”

Dr. Sarah had been staring out the window into space. “Amazing . . .” she said. “It’s like this planet assures its own spiritual equilibrium. The Zanjarians are peaceful, but we aren’t.”

“Just great.” Claire sighed. “So we are the pathogens plaguing Zanjara’s spotless body. The virus is like her immunoglobulin.”

“Exactly,” Dr. Sarah said. “It’s like her immune system attacks the loveless, so only the ones worthy of living on her will survive to settle Zanjara.”

Silence fell. All of us were thinking the same thing. This ingredient of life was more foreign to me than the planes of the planet below.

My wounds were getting worse, and the pruritus became unbearable. On my way to the OR, nausea churned my stomach. I made a run for the men’s room and filled the toilet with retched blood. I washed my face and looked into the mirror. My irises were blue, but what used to be white was stained with red. Soon all would be bloody and blistered, and after that——

Suddenly it dawned on me. I had no one; no mother, no father, no siblings—only women, and one of them wished to devote herself to me.

I needed Melissah.

I knew where to find her—she worked as a nurse at the pediatrics department. She was a loving and caring person—adored by many, and although she didn’t have the best papers, she had made it through the screening. This one I would have dared to introduce to Mom and Dad . . . well, to Mom.

I passed a small wardrobe containing one grownup suit and a dozen small suits. Thanks to the shower in the entrance to the games room, the kids and their nurses were exempt from the suit rule, provided they were not contagious.

I looked through the window, and there I saw her, bowing down to hand one of the children a set of crayons. Typical, I thought. No hologramized toys or robotic tickle arms from miss Melissa. I smiled. Her fascination for antiquities was one of the things I liked about her. She wore most of her hair in a bun; the rest of it waved to her shoulders like strings of brown silk. Graciously, it flowed over her tall and slender body. My body began to ache with desire.

What should I say to her? Would she still be pissed?

Our eyes met and, indeed, she didn't look happy. Trapped in her vision, I was nailed to the ground.

“So, I guess you thought about it?” she said.

“Ah, well, indeed . . .”

“David, you've hurt me. More than you can imagine.”

“I know . . . I know.” My hands were sweating in my pockets. “I'm sorry I've been so mean to you. I guess I just don't know how to deal with situations like this.” I involuntarily inspected the ceiling, awfully aware of myself. “I was afraid to bind myself, you know? I'm so sorry.”

She emptied her lungs, and her shoulders hung low. “I don't know . . .”

“You'll be my everything—my princess, my queen. I will never hurt you again . . . I mean it . . . I just want you.” I made myself believe it, and tears began to burn in my eyes. “I'd do anything to make you happy.”

Her cheeks rounded like grenades below her eyes—oh, she was pretty. And she loved me.

“Does that mean you forgive me?” I said.

She threw her arms around my neck and kissed my lips. Her face turned back to sadness as she studied my countenance. “I was so angry with you . . . when I heard of your infection, I was delighted.” She caressed my cheek. “How are you doing now?”

“My skin hurts and itches, and my muscles ache. If my boys don’t find the cure . . .”

“Oh, honey . . .” she held me tighter than was comfortable.

In the succeeding weeks, I met Melissah daily, but we didn’t get physical; the slightest contact could set me clenching my fists and grunting in agony. The relationship grew wider and deeper, as did my wounds like cracks in an iceberg. The epidemic spread further among the travelers on the ReConceptor, and the fate of the infected was determined by their loved ones.

It didn’t work for me.

\* \* \*

*November 8, 2061, 7:49 pm CC*

My feet couldn’t carry my weight anymore. I was laid on the bed in my OR. Softly, Melissah sang to me.

The virus had eaten its way through everything. Shades of red and brown stained the sheets at my knees and toes, and the horrible smell of decaying flesh made me nauseous. Melissah must have suffered from it, too, but she didn’t show it.

As I reached for Melissah, I was reminded that I wasn't myself anymore. Those hands weren't mine—mine had been delicate and pretty enough for hand cream commercials. These reaching for her were purple, swollen, and—worst of all—the nails were black and pushed out of their bands, like tectonic plates underneath the sea. Looking at them disgusted even me.

"I'm here, sweetheart," Melissah said. I saw a tear dangling under her upper lip. She licked it away, yet more were breaching her lashes. I wanted her to leave, or didn't I? I wasn't sure anymore. She looked stunning against the starry sky behind the window, but as much as I tried, I couldn't squeeze one love particle out of my soul.

I felt my skin burst as she caressed my cheek, and the lid of my eye pulled loose. She pressed a painful kiss on my lips.

"I love you," she said. The salt of her sobbing fell on my wounds like flaming acid.

I began to feel something new—something I had never experienced before . . . Was this guilt? I raised my chest to draw some air.

"Melissah," I said with much effort, "go away. You have to go away."

"Honey, I won't leave you," she said, grabbing hold of my hand, "I'll stay here and take care of you."

"You don't get it," a burning tear rolled down to my ear, "love is the cure."

"Then let me love you."

"No! I found out that people who are loved heal, and people who are lonely don't. I used you to get better. It didn't work. I lied to you, and I misused you. Now, go away!"

I knew that look, and I couldn't take it—those big, dark eyes again. It was like I tumbled off a cliff and screamed, but there was nothing to be done except to surrender

and fall. Why did I allow myself to hurt her again? I deserved every bit of pain I felt in my rotting body.

“Go!” I whispered. And she was gone.

There I was, lonely on the bed, waiting for death.

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*November 10, 2061, 8:30 am CC*

“This is amazing,” Harold said. “Claire, Sarah, come take a look at this.”

The three of them stared down at me as though I was an outstanding lab result.

“Unbelievable,” Claire said. “I was sure he wasn’t gonna make it, but this scarring is miraculous. What happened?”

I succeeded in opening my eyes. “I think I’m in love,” I said, my voice croaking. “I couldn’t force it, but it happened nonetheless.”

They embraced me, and tears flowing, I embraced them back.

\* \* \*

*November 12, 2061, 12:45 pm CC*

Again, I stood peeking through the window of the children’s department, and I felt more nervous than ever. And Melissah looked more beautiful than ever. With small steps, I moved toward the door.

I knocked three times. Melissah opened the door and looked at me, her watery eyes reflecting the fluorescent lights on the ceiling.

“Melissah,” I said in a low, shaky voice, “this time I come to you with real, sincere regret, and . . . I beg you to forgive me.” I sank to my knees. “What you’ve shown me in

the past weeks is something I've never experienced before. And I've never loved before, but I love you with everything I have—and with all that I am. Please, please forgive me.”

She covered her face, and her shoulders began to shake.

“Please marry me,” I said.

“But I don't know who you are,” she said, sobbing. She turned her back to me.

I dropped to the ground, hid my face in my arms. All the tears that had been locked inside since childhood burst out of me.

I heard her voice wailing behind me. “My dad told me forgiveness heals many wounds . . . He might be right . . . but . . . I need to think.” She turned around and rushed away.

“I'll be waiting for you,” I said, unsure if she could hear. “Even if it takes forever.”

I'm no longer the handsome man I was, my beauty decayed—I'm scarred for life. Yet in these blistered hands, I hold the greatest hope I have ever known.

THE END.

## 10 PITCHING A BOOK IDEA

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### **The New Zealand of Tolkien**

#### *Hiking through the Lord of the Rings film locations*

New Zealand contains some of the most breathtaking sites on the planet. That's why this country is a candy shop for filmmakers: movies like *Mauri*, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, *Wolverine*, and many others are set in its amazing panoramas and breathe that unforgettable atmosphere only New Zealand can provide. But the most notable story that has been filmed here is, without a doubt, the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy.

You can find the film locations for Rivendell in Wellington, for Gondor in Twizel, and for Mt Doom in Tongariro National Park. And thousands of movie fans dream of visiting these places.

Most of them, however, aren't hikers and could use some guidance.

Imagine a beginner's guide to hiking in New Zealand aimed at Tolkien fans and presented by an amusing duo of an author and a photographer. They will cross the country together—visiting the exact spots where the famous scenes were shot. The pictures they'll take and stories they'll write will make the reader feel part of the epic in a whole new way—as if they themselves are following in the footsteps of their heroes.

This book will appeal to audiences interested in fantasy as well as those interested in travel, hiking, and mountaineering. It will sell in fantasy and SF bookshops and on fantasy fairs. Fantasy fans typically love nature and will have their fangs dripping with the idea of hiking through Tolkien Land. But also mainstream bookshops will be interested in this book because fans of *The Lord of the Rings* are everywhere.

Piggybacking on the success of the trilogy, this book can't be lacking in the collection of the real Tolkien fan.