

Remnant

Roland Allnach



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To my family and friends,
for their patience and support

All the Fallen Angels

I

...there she stands, among the whispers of ruin, caught between so much anger and hurt and betrayal. So dark, that night: the whisper of the wind, the patter of the rain, the steam of humid air; it had the feel of dissolution, of tears and loss and futility. And there she stands among it all, among the whispers, dehumanized, for what is her life—any life—but the lost murmur of whispers in the dark?

She was only nine. I shot her anyway.

The nightmare snapped away as it always did, stunning the mind of the man that had been held in its sway. He rose up in bed—not bolting, but more a slow, steady bend at the waist to sit upright, like some undead creature of old. The comparison, he thought distantly, was not all that off the mark.

He turned in the darkness to let his feet slide out from under the sheets of his bed. There was no curious glance over his shoulder to look upon his wife; he knew by now that she was a heavy enough sleeper, and that she had grown accustomed to his often troubled sleep. Yet it bothered him nonetheless, waking a petty notion in the lonely recesses of his heart, a petty notion of jealousy to sleep in apparent peace.

With a sigh, he departed the bed and staggered with the stiffness of his bad leg towards the little kitchen of their captain's cabin. He moved with familiarity, not turning on any lights, yet still able to silently gather his customary mug and the hot water to make his tea. Then he settled himself at the small table beside the portal of their cabin, one hand on his mug, the other on his com. He looked out to the cold points of starlight in the black void. He blinked. The sound of water, the soft tinkle of running water, came to him. He looked to the sink, but he had turned off the faucet.

He closed his eyes.

The com vibrated under his hand, startling him. His arm folded like an old mechanism to bring the little black communicator to his ear. He could hear the breathing on the other end of the call. He knew who it was, but not how she knew to call, and she always knew; she always

called when he woke, but she never spoke. Too many bad things dwelled between them, he knew. *Where does one start? When all that's left is broken, which piece do you pick up first, and more important, why that particular piece?*

But then something changed: she spoke his name, her voice a thin rasp in his ear.

"Stohko?"

He blinked. His lips parted. He put the com down and keyed it off, but stared at it for several seconds, his face settling to stone. His eyelids slid shut, and when he opened them, he was looking to his side to see his wife standing by the teapot, arms crossed on her chest, her long blue nightshirt hanging to her knees. "Nightmare?" she said through a long yawn.

He stared at her.

She rubbed her face before walking around the table to hug him from behind, her arms wrapping around his shoulders. Her dark hair slid forward to brush against his cheek. He barely breathed. His eyes had not moved, holding where he had seen her, as if she still stood there.

He laid his hand over the com.

"Stohko—"

"It's my burden, Pallia, not yours."

"But it's here, with both of us." She let her breath go. "You took your pill?"

He shifted in his seat, uncomfortable at once, but nevertheless confessed to her. "Last two days. Something's changed. I don't know. I've been sleeping well for the last few weeks. No headaches, no nightmares, no calls—"

She straightened, her dark hair trailing across his neck as she receded from him, but her hands remained on his shoulders. "Those pills are old, you know. Expired, I would think. Maybe you should see Piccolo tomorrow. At least you could sleep then."

He frowned.

She said nothing. After several moments she went back to bed, the only remaining imprint of her presence the sudden chill of his skin where she had touched him. He crossed his arms over his chest to lay his fingers on his shoulders, sensing the dissipating warmth of her hands. He looked over his shoulder, but as he expected, she was gone. With a frown, he let

his hands slide down to lay on his thighs as he looked back to the mug of tea.

He sat for some time, alone, in the dark, his eyes burning. He pushed the com away, his arm holding a moment before he settled his hand in his lap. He rested back in his chair, gazed out the portal to the emptiness of space, and took a sip of tea.

A shrug, slight and almost involuntary, pulled at his shoulders.

He blinked, coming to his senses at the sound of snapping fingers. His eyes darted about to place him in his usual pub within the engineering section of the inter-system shipping nexus where his freighter was docked. He looked across the regular customers until his eyes fell on the man sitting across from him.

“Hey, Jansing, you still with me?”

Stohko looked at the man for a moment. He glanced down at the beer mug he realized he held in his hand. He looked back at the man across from him. “My credit’s good, Piccolo.”

Piccolo rubbed his beard, a grin seizing him as he lounged back in his seat. He was a dock foreman, but he was also a marketeer, and despite Stohko’s reliance on him, Stohko held no illusion about Piccolo’s nature. “You know, I like you Stohko,” Piccolo said, but sighed as he opened his hands on the table. “It’s just this stuff you need, you know, it’s not in my regular catalog of goods. That means I have to have it brought in special, and special considerations, well, that means special costs. If it wasn’t some exotic designer thing, it would be different, but being that I have to have it made, well, you understand. There’s only so much consideration I can give a former Navy man.”

Stohko stared at him. “My credit is good,” he said again.

Piccolo’s grin faded to a crooked frown. “Is it? I hear your business is real soft lately.”

Stohko’s eyes narrowed on Piccolo. “I know you have the pills.”

Piccolo’s face settled. “I like you.” His eyes wandered over the black ceiling before settling back on Stohko. “Tell you what: I have a little job for you—do it, and I’ll extend your credit.”

Enemy, I Know You Not

I

The dying fires of Tropico smoldered in the night, peering like little red eyes from the darkened face of the planet.

Sergeant Ellister frowned as he stood in the viewing lounge of his troopship. His gaze lingered on the planet, his mood sinking as the planet's sun began to illuminate an arc of daylight across its rim. He blew out his breath and shook his head before thumping a fist on the bulkhead next to him. "So after everything, you're telling me it's a matter of trust?" He tipped his head. "All right, I trust him," he said, his frown resuming its hold on his face. He looked to his side. "You know, this whole thing with Hovland, I thought it was Security's business. It's not up to me to clear him, so why bring me down here?"

Training Officer Sheffield, slouched against a bulkhead across the lounge from Ellister, shrugged. "This is the only quiet place to talk. Don't forget, it's celebration time." He glanced at the planet beneath them. "The campaign's over. This insurgency—this part of the rebellion—it's over. We won. Time to cut loose."

Ellister's frown did not relent. "Then leave my platoon alone."

Sheffield smiled. "As it happens, I've got replacements for your platoon." He looked to Ellister. "Security says everybody's a green light. You too, by the way—you're officially cleared, even though the papers haven't gone through all their channels just yet. I wanted to let you know. That was some little show you pulled down there," he reminded the sergeant as he nodded his head to the planet.

Ellister looked away. "I was justified."

Sheffield waved a hand. "We can justify anything if we try hard enough, but that's a threat to our standards, and in those messy gray areas, that's where questions and doubt live. Order—to maintain order—things have to be black or white. Clear lines, distinctive boundaries; it's the only way to keep things sane. Remember that." He leaned off the bulkhead. "I'll go talk to Hovland. Now do yourself a favor and get drunk like everybody else."

Lieutenant Hovland stared at the tasteless food on the resin meal tray. About him, the troopship's cafeteria was crowded and loud with shouts of drunken triumph. Food took flight over his head; an occasional body would jar his table. His ribs still ached where he had been clubbed with a crowbar, but he was more upset that his medications barred him from joining the drunken rowdiness. Yet the thought of that sent a sense of relief through him, and it wasn't a bad feeling, for it reminded him that he was still among the living. It was no small claim, considering the campaign had ended with eight men lost from his platoon.

A pale hand came out of the confusion and swept away his tray. He looked up, only to sigh at the disheveled creature before him. "Sheffield," he called out across the noise.

The TO put his hand on the table and dumped himself on a seat across from Hovland, his typical smile of mischievous glee pulling at his lips. "I got you new meat," Sheffield said with a tip of his head.

Hovland put a hand to his ear, Sheffield's words lost in the noise. "What?"

Sheffield leaned forward. "I said, new meat. They're a bunch of losers off Tropic's spaceport—sentries with nothing to watch over now. They'll fill out your complement; get your squads filled again." He slapped Hovland on the shoulder. "What's the matter?"

"I could use a few days to heal up," Hovland said over a ragged chorus of shouts rising up from the far corner of the cafeteria. "I'm in no condition to start training recruits."

Sheffield waved him off. "You got the new meat, old boy. I already talked to Ellister. It's all set."

Hovland blinked. "Ellister? It's *my* platoon."

Sheffield put a hand to his ear. "What?" He waited, but when Hovland opened his mouth Sheffield stood and patted Hovland's shoulder. "Catch you tomorrow," he said and pushed off into the jostling mob of the cafeteria.

Somebody bumped into Hovland's back, driving his ribs against the table. Pain sparked through his torso. Across the cafeteria a chair was

thrown in the air. Bodies collapsed under its weight when it came down. The crowd started to focus on the area; Hovland focused on the exit.

Fights broke out. It was going to be a long night for Security.

Private Lippett sat on his bunk, still wet from his shower, his white trunks clinging to his skin. He looked around the cramped squad room—more a hallway than a room; it was one of three adjoining rooms to form the platoon’s home aboard the troopship. As his bunk creaked under his weight, a handgun slid out from under his pillow. Across from him Lieutenant Hovland’s sleeping form shifted a bit, the man’s hands in a constrictive grip on his little pillow.

Lippett leaned forward to peer down the length of the squad rooms, drawn by a sudden swell of voices. Some of the new soldiers had filed in, sheepishly protesting the insults thrown at them from established members of the platoon. Lippett glanced at Hovland before waving the recruits to silence, the gun in his relaxed hand forcing the issue. He stared at them before looking down at the weapon to dismantle it for a meticulous cleaning. No sooner had he started than Ellister loomed over him and shoved his shoulder. Lippett looked up, and even he could see the annoyance in Ellister’s gaze before Ellister let it vent. “What are you doing?”

Hovland groaned as he realized sleep had become a lost cause. He loosened his grip on his pillow and rolled flat on his back. He grumbled, sniffed, and coughed. The pain in his side forced his eyes open, just in time to see Ellister shove the side of Lippett’s head with a heavy hand. “Sergeant Ellister,” Hovland said through a dry throat.

“Lieutenant,” Ellister gave as a crisp reply, but the formality ended there. He grabbed Hovland’s shoulders and pulled him to a stance. “New meat,” he said and turned to their recruits, steadying Hovland with a hand on his chest. “Lieutenant Hovland,” Ellister said to the recruits.

The recruits stared at Hovland. “He doesn’t look so good,” one of them said.

Ellister bared his teeth. “Hey! You’re not sentries anymore! You earn your right to talk! You don’t even have a name around here yet, meat!”

"The Lieutenant was captured," Lippett said, his plodding monotone almost lost beneath Ellister's shouting.

Ellister's eyes darted down to Lippett. "You can shut up too," he ordered.

Lippett nodded to himself. "They caught him, smashed him with a crowbar, and plugged him with them neural darts—"

"I said, shut up," Ellister repeated and shoved Lippett to silence him.

"Yeah, but you took care of it Ellis," a voice said from behind the recruits.

Ellister nodded. "That's right Miller, and don't forget it." He looked past the recruits, down the length of the squad room. "Army already paid for the bullet, right Messina?"

Hovland looked to the recruits. They shifted until they looked to the stolid gaze of Sergeant Messina to realize the truth of Ellister's implication. Hovland wondered what the recruits were thinking, but came to the conclusion that he really didn't care. Disgusted with them, he pushed Ellister's hand away and barked for everyone to separate. More than once he and his men had run into problems with civilian disapproval while planetside on Tropico. The military had kept residents insulated from the ferocity of the rebellion, but in their pampered existence the people had grown critical of a campaign of which they knew nothing.

Did they think it was some game?

He vented his frustration by snatching his handgun from Lippett's grasp and stuffing it under his little pillow. He turned to the recruits. "Stow your gear," he said and shoved past them. As far as he was concerned Ellister could have them.

He didn't have to wait. Before he left the room, Ellister was already shouting.

An hour later Hovland found himself sitting in the cafeteria, staring at something the food packers called 'mid-meal'. He'd have given a week's worth of his military stipend for a genuine, home cooked dinner.

He frowned, wondering if they could have forced the rebellion into submission had they bombed the planet with the troopship's food.

He shook his head. Sarcasm and cynicism go nowhere, he thought with a sigh.

About him, in the quiet emptiness of the cafeteria, hung-over deckhands were busy cleaning the mess from the previous night's celebration. The white walls of the room were splattered with crusted food; several tables had been torn free of their mounts and left in a haphazard pile. Food waste crunched and squished under his feet whenever he moved them. To him it was a disgrace, fostering the hostility within him. He had the urge to push, an aimless *push* against a reality to which he no longer felt fully connected.

Sheffield's short, pale, disheveled figure approached him. Of all the people on the troopship, the TO was the last person he wanted to see at the moment. The training officer sat across from him. "So what do you think of your new meat?"

Hovland shrugged. "Ask Ellister," he said and put a forkful of food in his mouth.

Sheffield nodded and started to poke his finger through Hovland's meal, but then grinned and leaned on his elbows. "I know they're a sorry lot. Won't stand a chance when we hit dirt again." He scratched the stubble on his chin, scrutinizing Hovland. "You know how it is, this thing with the rebellion, these insurgents, these so-called 'Military Pacifists', 'mips' as they call themselves, they just seem to be dug in deeper and tighter with each planet we hit."

Hovland looked up to Sheffield's dark, puffy eyes. The training officer needed a shave. Hovland sucked in a breath, the darker side of his mood emerging. "No, no they won't stand a chance," he said. "They'll get wiped out. Maybe I should just do it myself, and save them some suffering. What do you say?"

Sheffield laughed. "I'd say you're right."

"I am right," Hovland said, but bit his tongue.

Sheffield grinned. "You guessed it Hov. I've scheduled you to take them on a run in the simulator. Harden them up a bit; give them a little real life experience."

Hovland dumped his fork in his food. "No."

Sheffield opened his hands. "The decision's been made."

Hovland shook his head. "What about Security? Far as I know, those greeners haven't been cleared. Hell, as far as I know, *I* haven't been cleared since being captured."

"Your clearance came through last night, and Ellister was cleared from that bogus murder charge for murdering the bastard that was holding you. Security doesn't party, you should know that," Sheffield said, gazing about the cafeteria.

Hovland shifted in his seat. "My ribs are aching. How can I manage a training sim if I can't carry myself?"

"Double up on your meds," came Sheffield's careless response, signaling the end of the discussion. The TO stood, but then turned back. "You can make something of these recruits, Hovland. You've done it before. Besides, you've got one of the best in Ellister. Hell, you two took that idiot Lippett and managed to keep him alive all this time."

Hovland stared at Sheffield, trying to dismiss the authority the man held by defining him as nothing more than a little slob. In the end he shrugged, worn down by another exercise in what he saw as the mounting futility of his life. "It's not Lippett's fault the way he was born."

"Brain-less," Sheffield said, enunciating to drive his point home.

"He's made it this far. Some of the new meat won't be as lucky."

Sheffield looked at Hovland, a humorous glint in the TO's eyes. "All the more reason for the sim run, old boy. Make them something more than Lippett, okay?" he said over his shoulder as he left.

Hovland opened his hands. He sighed and looked at his medications. He debated a moment before heeding the better wisdom of Sheffield's advice and doubling up on the pills. He groaned. "On three," he said, and closing his eyes, swallowed the pills.

He wandered about the corridors of the troopship's lower levels, feeling dazed and weak as the drugs went to work. The corridors were busy, but no one paid much attention to him. It was easy to get lost in the mass crowd of the troopship's human complement.

Remnant

Once upon a dream I had a life, and even though that dream came to an end, my life did not. My life simply changed, began anew, and as what, I have yet to decide, for in the absence of all that was, in the absence of all restraint, I may be something that was only a whisper in me before the change. And the change was the passing of the world, the passing of the world under the shadow of a nameless thief in the night, and it cared not for what waste it sowed in the lives of those it left.

Anyone reading this will know of what I speak: 'it' is the plague, the nameless plague, and nobody knows what it is, or where it came from, but in the end, these things matter little. Whatever it is, it came upon us as swiftly and with all the vacant pity of the harvester's scythe.

One in fifty thousand: that was the last approximate incidence of natural immunity in the human population. For the rest there was only death, regardless of age, gender, race, or prosperity. After all the generations of human strife, we had finally met our equality.

*This is the only logic that remains in this empty world.
And for some reason, I remain as well.*

A branch snapped in the night.

Peter slumped down behind the tree where he had been sitting, cursing his carelessness. The notebook that held his writing must have stood out like a beacon under the stark moonlight. Clenching his jaw he pulled down his black ski mask and rolled onto his belly, taking care to be quiet. His eyes darted about the shadows of the forest as he tucked his little notebook into a thigh pocket.

Nothing moved.

After a brief mental debate, his eyes shifted from his rifle to his slingshot. He snatched it at once, grabbed a rock, and taking aim at a tree some distance away, let the rock fly. It hit the tree with a pop. To his dismay the rustle of leaves broke the following silence. Something was out there, something big—

"Hello!" a voice called. Male. "Anyone there?"

Peter frowned and kept his silence. A handful of people left in the entirety of New England, and someone has to bother him?

"Hello!" the voice called again. "My name's Jim MacPherson! I'm from Boston!"

Peter took his rifle in hand, flipped off the safety, and peered through the night scope. He wasn't sure why, perhaps it was the societal nature of the human mind, perhaps it was the looming fear of insanity through loneliness, but he found his voice and spoke. "Don't move! I have a sight on you!" He scanned the woods with the scope, searching the darkness. "Are you alone?"

The stranger let out a low laugh. "Aren't we all?"

Peter froze. He had the stranger in sight. The man was standing by a tree, his hands open at his sides.

"Hey! I told you my name. What's yours?"

"Are you alone?"

The man looked about. "Yes, I'm alone. Look, I don't want any trouble. Just passing through; heading south as fast as I can. Nights are getting real cold. Am I still in Connecticut?"

"Keep on walking."

"I'd appreciate it if you could point me some place where I can get canned foods. They last the best, you know. I finished my last can for dinner. Tuna." The stranger waved. "My name is Jim MacPherson," he said again. "Come on, man! I haven't talked to somebody in weeks. I'm tired of talking to myself. You know it's real bad when you can't even have a decent conversation with yourself," he added with a laugh.

"Peter Lowry."

"What?"

Peter stood and lowered his rifle. "Over here," he said and raised his arm. He pulled up his ski mask. "My name is Peter Lowry."

Jim looked to him and smiled, but he kept his hands in the open. "Nice to meet you, Peter Lowry," he said with good nature. When he made out the rifle he lowered his hands. "Hey, uh, you're not gonna shoot me, are you?"

Peter stared at him. "Only if you need to be shot."

The humor fled Jim's face. "Look, sorry to bother you. If it's fine by you, I'll be on my way. No trouble. You can keep all of Connecticut for yourself. No problem." He backed off several paces before lowering his head and turning away.

Peter frowned, his gaze roaming the dark woods as he debated with himself. Before he lost sight of Jim he stifled his reservations and opened his mouth. "Wait. I'll show you in the morning. But tonight we stay out here."

Jim sighed with relief. "Works for me," he said with a clap of his hands. He hurried over to Peter and sat on the ground. He wore a large hiker's pack, which he promptly shrugged off, only to dig out a water bottle. "Nice rifle," he noted as Peter sat down across from him. "Have you had to use it?"

Peter ignored the question. "You're from Boston?" he asked and waited until Jim nodded. "Then you should know not everyone is so pleasant. Some of those who are left, they're not all there. Scavengers. Wild. You understand?"

Jim frowned before tipping his head. "Oh yeah, I hear you on that one. I saw some of the riots on the news. That's when I left the city. My uncle had this cabin, so I took a load of food and batteries and water and headed out there." He stopped short, pressing his lips together as he stared at Peter. "Hey, do you mind if I talk? I haven't talked to anyone in a while. I know some people don't like to talk, but I like to talk. Chatty, my uncle said. My girlfriend, too. Boy, I miss her, you know?"

Peter blinked.

Jim clenched his fists. "Sorry. Too much, right?"

Peter couldn't suppress the grin that tugged at his lips. Despite his suspicious nature, his instincts told him he had nothing to fear from this stranger.

Jim looked down, seeming to assume the worst from Peter's silence. "Okay, I know, talking too much." He drank some water. "It's just, I forget, you know? I've always been what you'd call a people person. Could sell snowballs to an Eskimo," he added with a laugh, but then caught himself. "Strangers, first meeting and all, too much to say. Have to learn, I guess. The way things are, people who like to talk, I guess we're kind of the odd lot out. That's all right. I'll be quiet now."

Peter shook his head. "No, no, go ahead," he said, trusting his appraisal of Jim. He wasn't sure how long he would entertain Jim's intrusion on his solitude, but for the moment, he figured it was harmless enough to listen to someone babble after hearing nothing but birds for more days than he cared to count.

Jim tipped his head. "Great! Well, as I was saying, I was up at my uncle's cabin. I didn't know I was immune. One night some people broke in, beat me up, took the food, everything. A couple of them were coughing. When I came to, I found them all dead. After I buried them, a few days passed, and then the power went out. That's when I started to hear explosions from the direction of the city."

"Untended industrial facilities," Peter guessed.

Jim opened his hands. "I guess so. That's when I took off. I tried to drive, but the roads were all blocked. Piles of cars and trucks smashed into each other; you know, people, they just dropped dead while they were driving. So I walked from then on." He drank some water before rubbing his hands together. "Getting cold early this year," he said before tipping his chin to Peter. "Mind if I start a fire?"

Peter looked about the woods before his eyes settled on Jim. "You are alone, aren't you?"

Jim held up his hand, two fingers extended. "On my honor."

Peter rested his hands on his rifle, making it clear that if the fire was some kind of signal, there was no doubt where the first shot would go. "A fire would be fine."

Jim blew out a breath as he dug through his pockets. In short order he had scraped together some small branches, kindling, and with some patience, got a flame going with a match. He opened his hands over the little fire and looked back to Peter. "So where you from, Peter Lowry?"

Peter hesitated before answering. "New York."

Jim let out a low whistle. "The city? No wonder you're out here. Heard some bad things on my radio. Gangs going wild. Bodies all over the place."

"No," Peter corrected. "I'm from Long Island. Things were no different. I managed to get a rowboat and I rowed across the Sound to Connecticut. I thought my arms were going to fall off." He rubbed his forehead. "I left everything behind."

Jim frowned and bobbed his head. "I hear you on that one," he said with a sigh. Then he laughed, sitting up straight as his mood changed. "Hey, you know, I look at it this way. Before, there was more people than stuff. Now there's way more stuff than people. It's all just sitting there. That's always been the problem, right, people wanting stuff they couldn't have? Well Pete, the meek have inherited the earth, and it's an endless clearance sale, you know?" He laughed again, looking off to the depths of the woods before rubbing his chin. "So we wait 'til morning, huh? Problems around here?"

"Rat swarms." Peter looked to the black sky. "They come out at night."

"Yeah, I heard about that, too," Jim replied. "Back before I left Boston, there was this group of holdouts in some radio station that I was listening to. The rats swarmed them while they were on the air calling for help. It was horrible. Kind of sucks, if you think about it. Survive the plague, only to be eaten alive by a swarm of rats." He shrugged and then leaned back against his pack. "Mind if I sleep?" he asked, but began snoring before Peter could answer.

Peter studied his new companion. He sat for several moments before reaching in his pocket for a blister pack of caffeine pills. He swallowed one dry, but then reconsidered as he studied this stranger sleeping in total trust across from him and swallowed a second pill. It was going to be a long night, he knew. Sleep would have to wait.

Restless with caution and caffeine, he couldn't relax until he probed a wide perimeter about their resting spot. Part of him felt he could trust Jim, but the rest of him knew better than to trust anyone left in the world. Rather than disarm people of their hostility and aggression, he felt the vast emptiness and loneliness of the plague had, for some, only amplified those negative aspects of human nature.

It was a thought that nagged him as he sat after walking the perimeter, only somewhat satisfied that nothing had emerged on his night scope. After laying the rifle across his lap he took his little notebook in hand and returned to his writing.

The plague moved with stunning speed. New York was no different than any other place in that the deaths didn't start in a localized trickle, but rather by virtue of the plague's insidious nature, people who were seemingly healthy would start dropping by scores in several places at once. By the time it came to New York we knew well enough what would happen next—quarantine, that is, seal off the area and let it take its course. The first twenty-four hours were the worst. The anarchic spasms of panic, looting, and pillaging ended as abruptly as they began, but when they were over, the finality of silence was beyond imagination.

I remember when it came upon us. It was a sunny, clear day. I hid with my family in our house. People came looting that night, setting fires, and we nearly burned with the house. We hid in the woods in the abandoned state mental hospital grounds by our neighborhood, but it was too late. We huddled down under a picnic table in the rain to sleep together. I was the only one to wake up in the morning.

I had nothing to bury them with. That's when I realized they were the lucky ones, because it was over for them. But for me, things had just started; and leaving them was the hardest thing I ever had to do. I don't consider myself one of the 'blessed few' like the Pope said before he died. A cursed remnant in the wreckage of our world; this is what I am. For what sins I have to answer, I don't know, but in the aftermath, I know that sin has become a meaningless word.

There is only the amoral dictate of pragmatism in a life without any external bounds, any sense of guarantee for a future. Why I answer to that dictate, I do not know, but I know it will eventually decide who—or I should say what—I will be in this new world.

He woke with a start.

Jim clapped his hands and opened them before his chest. "Hey, check it out: coffee."

Peter blinked, but then his hands swarmed about in a quick inventory. He clutched the rifle to his chest and glared with wide eyes at Jim.

Jim rolled his eyes. "Dude, I'm not gonna steal your stuff, and I'm not gonna take your rifle. Hell, if I wanted to, I could be back here in a few days with a friggin' tank. This is the beauty of it now..."

About the Author



Roland Allnach, after working twenty years on the night shift in a hospital, has witnessed life from a slightly different angle. He has been working to develop his writing career, drawing creatively from literary classics, history, and mythology. His short stories, one of which was nominated for the Pushcart Prize, have appeared in several publications. He can be found at his website, rolandallnach.com, along with his published stories. Writing aside, his joy in life is the time he spends with his family.

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