

# Hub

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## Slash Fiction

Two issues ago we ran a flash fiction special, and have had some excellent feedback on the stories (so good, in fact, we may even run more of these in the future). This week, the charming Ellen Phillips shows us her dark side in an article about *slash* fiction. Ever wondered what happens after dark in the Gryffindor Common Room when Harry and Ron are alone? Well, me neither, but some do. Personally (and just in case the lawyers are watching), I think Harry and Ron get up to homework, and maybe the odd game of Scrabble. But not... you know... *that* odd...

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# THE SCARLET NUMBER

by Christopher East

Warren Eng reclines on the slick vinyl upholstery of the waiting room couch, anxious for the intelligence analyst to return and change his life. An awkwardly situated television perched in an upper corner of the room broadcasts an instructional video about censorchips, level three access. Warren has seen it before, multiple times, but he stares at it anyway. His eyes are glazed over. The program's bland images are watery and distorted, but even so the screen helps him ignore the other people in the room, who can't seem to prevent themselves from prattling on about mundane \*&^%\$ – typical threebie behavior. This crowd is totally beat. Warren wants something more out of life.

Across the room, there's a poster on the door that leads back to the offices. It shows a family of shiny, happy people with red 3s on their foreheads. The caption reads: *INFORMATION WANTS TO BE REGULATED*. Yeh, Warren thinks, just like people – *not!*

"Here for your annual rating?" asks the woman sitting next to him.

Warren glances at the woman, who looks freakish and phony, some twank-treatment gone awry. She's gearing up to chew my eardrums out, he realizes. Better nip *this* in the bud. "Annual, my \*&^%\$," he says, wincing as his pickups shriek, incapable of translating the profanity. Several people sitting nearby whirl in his direction, eyes zeroing in on him as they tap at their ears. He feels like a pariah, a tag he pretends to hate, but actually kind of enjoys. "Do I look that passive? I'm here twice a week. I'm rated wrong, their scanners are \*&^%\$!"

"Well you're not liable to move up to a four with *that* attitude," the woman says disgustedly, and turns her back.

Warren is pleased; shutting up a threebie is an accomplishment, especially in a waiting room. He stares at the door some more, then pans along, scoping the plastic people in the room. It's not about attitude, he thinks. It's about *capability*. Information wants to be regulated, he thinks disgustedly. Feh!

Just then he notices a strange man across the room, staring directly at him from another couch. The man is gawky, with a jagged, asymmetrical face, and long stringy hair hanging to his shoulders. Ugly by any standard, there is nonetheless some kind of charisma there, a gleam in the eye, a weird confidence radiating from him. The number on his forehead is a 3, just like everybody else in the waiting room, but he sure doesn't look the part. He is staring directly at Warren, grinning in a somewhat sinister way.

Warren is impressed, but feels the need to disrespect this creepy staring dude. Before he gets a chance to do so, however, the man stands up, strolls to the door with the propaganda poster on it, and makes his way through it with the casual air of an authorized employee.

#

The analyst's name, somehow, is Jeennifer. Warren's dealt with her before. She is the quintessential middle-aged threebie, straightforward and uninspired. Her hair is large. Warren hates that she has power over him.

Jeennifer sits facing a flat-panel monitor in her office cubicle, which is spare and meticulous. The screen-glow plays across her face as she scrolls up and down whatever boring pages she is permitted to access. Her usual, practiced expression of pleasant neutrality is missing today. She looks confused.

"Problem?" Warren says, impatient.

"Not..." Jeennifer says, finally removing her hand from the mouse and studying the screen intently. "I don't think so. But the readings are..."

"What?" Warren asks. "Bigger than your hair?"

Jeennifer shakes her head. "They say you've jumped three-tenths of a point since your last visit!"

"Three-tenths...that makes me a four!"

"Four-point-one, to be exact," Jeennifer says. She isn't nearly as excited as Warren is about this. It has disturbed some fundamental truth for her. She reaches for her intercom. "This is a highly unusual increase. I need to contact my supervisor."

"Bring him on," Warren says. He'd always known he was smarter than a three.

#

His chip upgrade is scheduled for one o'clock the next afternoon, a Saturday. He's eager to get going that morning, so cleans out his flop quickly and packs a bag before heading out to roam the streets of Triborough one last time. Glare-goggles lowered, he cases the streets as he strolls along, cheerful and amped despite the paralyzing summer heat. Soon he's pushing his way into the Soda Hole, which is packed. He spots his pals, Rodney Keyer and Brock Smail, at their usual spot at the counter. Two more disgruntled threebies, high for their range. Not as high as me, Warren thinks as he struts over to them. The AC is a relief on his sweat-slickened skin.

"Heya War," they say as he approaches.

"Heya. This is it, fellas. I'm out of here."

Rodney and Brock exchange glances. "Surely you jest," Brock says. "You telling me those extra visits paid off?"

"They're sick of him," Rodney says, stroking his peach-fuzz soul patch. "They *promoted* him out of their hair."

"I don't \*&^%\$ believe it!" Brock says, spinning nearby heads with feedback grimaces. He swats Rodney on the shoulder. "There's hope for us yet!"

"You're a lucky \*&^%\$, War," Rodney says.

"Walk me to the gate?" Warren asks.

So the three of them strut down 3Main, Warren flanked by his buddies, taking one last look around the old neighborhood. It is a companionable, symbolic gesture. There's not much to say, and no one else to say goodbye to; threebies aren't allowed to bring up their own children, so he has no parents, and he feels no allegiance to the fourbie creche-monitors who raised him to his teenage independence. This is the extent of his nostalgia, Brock and Rodney loitering in Triborough, dreaming of escape. It's a fitting tribute to his time here. Maybe someday they'll join him.

At the gate, he shakes their hands ritualistically. "Keep thinking," he says. "I'll see you later."

"Yeh, right," Rodney says.

"Heya, it can happen!" Brock enthuses.

Warren grins and makes his way through the gate to Quadropolis.

#

Directions to the facility have been uploaded to his chip. His retinal readout projects a green arrow into his view, which hovers a few feet above and ahead of him to keep him oriented on his way to the upgrade clinic. As he strolls into Quadropolis, though, his focus is only minimally engaged by his destination. He's too distracted by the evidence of what he's been missing all these years. Tantalizing glimpses of female flesh, pixellated out by his censorchips, nonetheless fire up his sex instincts. He had known about the relaxed level four clothing regulations, of course, but seeing it live is a whole new ball of cheese. Overheard conversations from nearby fourbies set his pickups to shrieking so often that he realizes there is a whole new world of profanity awaiting his mastery.

As he hangs a right off 4Main onto a side street, a quartet of froo-froo chicks in sparkly halter tops catches sight of him. "Heya, look!" one of them says to her pals. She's bone-thin and paper-pale, open midriff revealing pronounced ribs and flapping neon bird tattoos. "There's a threebie dweebie! Heya!"

The girls are zooming in for the kill. "I have a pass," Warren says lamely, self-consciously flopping his hair down over his forehead.

"Holy \*&^%\$!" another of the girls says. "Let's malf him!"

As one the four of them lift their shirts, flashing what he assumes are their bare breasts. His level three chips overload on this glut of flesh, vision blurring out, the world morphing into a muddy palette of melting colors. Evidently they are also reciting a mantra of forbidden language, as his ears are ringing with bat-like shrieks and censoring beeps. His light-hearted mood quickly turns to panic as his senses desert him, and he stumbles away from the cruel fourbies, trying to clear his head. By the time he's able to reboot, they're on their way, laughing at his discomfort. The green arrow bobs back into view, realigning him toward the clinic.

Hanging his head to obscure his forehead number, Warren sets off at a quicker pace, determined now to get his upgrade over and done with. Part of him is thinking about another official government

slogan he remembers from visits to the Triborough Intelligence Analysis Center: *Knowledge = Responsibility*. But another part of him is anxious to see exactly what he just missed out on.

#

The upgrade clinic is off the beaten path. When Warren reaches the address, he runs a query to make sure he's in the right place. Despite the affirmative he receives, he's still a bit suspicious as he makes his way toward the obscure, deserted-looking building on Quatro Court.

The waiting area is empty but for one lone soul, moping away with his feet up on the reception desk: a young man emblazoned with all the markings of with-it fourness. He has a mohawk hair-do, edgy roaming anime tats on his thick, muscly biceps, and transparent skin flaps on his cheeks revealing the gross, ropey musculature beneath. His clothes are black and red, and his upper lip sports a bristly blond flavor-saver. He has the kind of look that would get him thrown out of Triborough High. "Warren Eng?" he says, looking up from a three-dimensional hockey virch playing out on his desk.

"Yeh," Warren says.

"Heya, Dirk Manwaring. Follow me."

Dirk leads him through a door, then down a short, dark corridor. It smells musty, and the carpeting seems too residential or something. Warren can't help but notice the lack of surveillance, the missing accoutrements of the government facilities with which he's familiar. "Slow day?" he asks, to probe for data.

"Every day's a slow day," Dirk says, bringing them up short next to a simple door. "There aren't many cross-promotions from three to four, you know. You're a \*&^#% rare case indeed." He pushes open the door, revealing a computer lab. There's a dentist's chair in the center of the room with a hole in the headrest for the programming jack. "Have a seat," Dirk says, gesturing at it.

"How long will this take?" Warren asks.

"Maybe five minutes," Dirk says, heading toward a workstation in the corner. "Not much to it, really. We just change your access level, reprogram your censorship and your number tat, and off with you. Oh, and part of the upload will give you access codes to your new apartment. Now: bend over."

"What?"

"Heh, just kidding," Dirk says. "Lean back in the chair, let's see if I can remember how to do this."

#

The apartment building is located on 4Main, an impressive twenty-story complex stretching skyward. It's on a major, central intersection surrounded by various gathering spots: restaurants, theaters, virch parlors, and scads of unfamiliar shops and stores. Thanks to the upgrade his eyesight is unblunted, which is fine except that now all the glimpses of bellies and cleavage are making him spooey.

The security arch is already set for his biometrics, so he passes through into the lobby and heads for the elevator, which identifies him and takes him to his floor. When the doors part, he makes his way down a short corridor to his new apartment and palms the door aside.

Behind it is a small space, a foyer betraying wealthy ownership. The space is spruced up in old-school classy mansion décor, not really his style. He steps through to the living room on the other side, which is more of the same: ornate woodwork, swank, frilly-edged carpeting, intricate and glittering chandeliers, antique furniture. He triggers his ID sensors, zooming in on objects and pulling their histories onto his retina screen. One of the couches is called a "chaise longue." He is just about to request an audio clip for the pronunciation of this foreign phrase when he notices that he is not alone in the room.

The ugly man from the Triborough IAC is standing there, wearing that knowing, sinister smirk. "Mr. Eng, glad you could join us," he says, and Warren notices the others, sitting at a kitchen table near a sliding glass balcony door. "Us" consists of: an incredibly hot little socket with red-brown flapper hair, exploding out of her tank-top and short-shorts; an intimidating behemoth of a guy wearing a brown jumpsuit; a smiling brunette buffoon with an emptiness behind her eyes; and some poindexter with vanity glasses and a smarmy grin.

"Dude, I know you," Warren says, trying to play it cool. "What's up with this krunt? Four roommates?"

"Hey!" says the big brown-suited mingo. "He just said 'krunt' and I heard it!"

Warren has heard it, too. No *wonder* that word is profane, he thinks.

He studies the group dynamic for a sec, trying to get a handle on the situation. He realizes that the ugly man and the sexy flapper and the smarmy poindexter all seem pretty with-it, while the huge oaf and the vacant girl seem out of sorts. Warren feels more in synch with the latter two.

"Listen, I understand your confusion," the ugly man says. Clearly he is the ringleader. "Why don't we all take a seat and I'll explain."

Warren selects the "chaise longue" and perches on it next to the hot flapper-girl, feeling himself flush at his mere proximity to a socket of this wattage. Yowza!

"My name is Null," the ugly man continues. The calm authority of his voice grabs everyone's attention. "And I'm a six." It's like he's confessing to a bad habit.

"Your forehead number is a four!" the oaf says.

"But I'm a six, Bob, just like you're a two," Null says. "Everyone, this is Bob Hobbs, born and raised in Deuce Valley."

"How'd you get him into Quadropolis?" Warren asks.

"Dash, guile and cunning, same way we got you here," Null says. "Which is the same way we got *her* here." He points to the slack-jawed girl who sits splayed awkwardly in an armchair. "Introduce yourself, honey."

"My name's Maizy," the girl draws.

"Maizy is from Uno Point. This here is my right-hand man, Herman Weller – straight out of Fünfburg!"

"Yo," says Herman.

"And sitting next to you there is the only local of Quadropolis, Dayle Pomerville. Everybody, our new arrival is Warren Eng, a denizen of neighboring Triborough. He's a threebie."

"But I just got promoted," Warren protests.

"Well, really you're still a threebie." Null says. "Take my word for it. Not that that means anything here."

"I don't get it," Bob Hobbs says dully.

"Isn't it obvious?" Null asks. He glances at Maizy. "No, I suppose not. Tell them, Herman."

"You are now all living in the first rating-free zone in the city," Herman says. "Onesie, Twosie, Threebie, Fourbie, Fiver, and Sixer all living under the same roof. Each of us with the same access, the same opportunity to ingest information. We're going to prove the system wrong!"

"My name's Maizy," says Maizy.

#

Null, it turns out, is making a documentary series. As an upper six, he has used his considerable brain-power to malf the system and arrange this highly illegal, cross-number co-mingle joint. His first two recruits were Herman and Dayle, who later helped him to get Bob and Maizy. Null saved recruiting a threebie until last because he figured promoting a threebie would be the easiest to accomplish. It had only taken him one day to tweak Warren's future, proving his theory correct. Liberating Maizy and Bob Hobbs, and smuggling them across multiple borders, had been a "motherfucker" by comparison. (How nice, finally, to actually hear these words instead of just imagining them!)

Evidently, as one of Hexagon City's best and brightest growing up, Null had been recruited into the Regulatory Council at a young age. The Council's many duties included rating material, censorship maintenance, border patrol, and branding, among other things. Null ended up programming tattoos in Branding Section, which explained how he had managed to morph everyone's forehead numbers into 4s.

"What about implant security?" Warren asks, as the group gathers about a computer terminal in Null's room. Everyone is looking at the screen except Maizy, who is concentrating on chewing off a fingernail.

"My talents were wasted in Branding," Null explains. "It was an easy hack. Now, the first rule of the rating-free zone is that we express ourselves. So everyone plug in and let's get rid of these stupid numbers."

A moldware humanoid climbs onto Warren's shoulder, filming away with a handheld pincam.

"Gah, does this thing have to climb on me?"

"It's for the documentary," Null says. "Now, let's start with you, Herman."

In the end, Warren opts for a skull-and-crossbones tat. When he looks at himself in the mirror later, he grins at this foreign impossibility on his forehead. He's free!

#

"Repeat after me," Dayle says from the podium. "Fuck."

"Fuck," Warren and Bob say in unison.

"Maizy?"

Maizy is not paying attention. "What?"

"Repeat the word, please."

"Fuck."

"Good. Do please pay attention."

"Could you use that word in a sentence, please?" Bob asks.

"Fuck off, Bob, I'm trying to teach a class here."

"But I'm –! Oh." Bob studies his notescreen. "That doesn't really match the definition."

"It's a versatile word," Warren adds helpfully.

"Class, let's get used to the words first, we'll work them into conversation later," Dayle says.

"Now, repeat after me: merkin."

#

Better even than bad language class is watching level six television, in all its transgressive glory. Granted, a great deal of the content is utterly beyond Warren's comprehension: complicated documentaries that bore him to tears, science programs that fly right over his head. But there are also whole worlds of skanky, icky, dangerous things to observe, and Warren does so with abandon – grizzly murder stories, smutty sexploitation movies, inane and disgusting game shows. Some of these programs claim to be "intended for mature audiences," but it all seems pretty immature to Warren. He loves it, of course.

The impact of all this racy business on his libido is profound, of course. He finds himself sequestered in his room frequently, pleasuring himself under the sheets while watching his wallscreen. He has to keep his eyes open for Null's miniature moldware cameramen, of course, which are constantly trying to infiltrate his inner sanctum. He doesn't want to add a humiliating scene to the documentary, and part of him wishes he could just stop doing it, but another part of him enjoys the guilty rush it gives him.

One night, a knock on the door interrupts him. "Just a second!" he calls, embarrassed, attempting to vanquish his stiffness by mental command.

But then the door flies open, and Dayle stands there – completely naked. "One second?" she asks before strolling into the room and shutting the door behind her.

It's more like eight.

#

The apartment has a balcony, and Warren sits out on it from time to time, drinking heavily sweetened coffee and staring out across the length of Main Street, stretching through all the zones. It's one of the tallest buildings in Quadropolis. Glancing off to his right, he sees the busy suburban sprawl of Triborough, the cheaper run-down neighborhoods of Deuce Valley, and all the way out to the downright primitive hovels of Uno Point, sticking out into the bay. In the other direction, Fünfburg is a fascinating tableau of beautiful, exotic architecture, while Hexagon City looms perched on the edge of the mountains, gleaming and opulent in the small distance. Being here, he feels both above it all and a *part* of it all. Even though Null says he's technically still a threebie, he feels somehow connected to all six ratings. His number no longer defines him; rather, he defines himself, through what he absorbs and ingests and encounters in his new life.

One night he is joined by Herman Weller, who has been trying to convert him to Irish coffees and cigarettes. Warren finds these things totally bleh, but of course he's not about to show that. He bums a butt this time, but sticks to his usual caffeination.

"How goes the editing?" Warren asks.

"We're getting there," Herman replies. "I must say, you're making for some good reality drama, guy. You're a picture of sensible compassion, sprinkled with edgy liberal behavior – proof positive that even the sickest of level six material won't turn a generally good person into a monster."

"Thanks, man!" Warren says. "What do you think it all means? I mean, the documentary, the experiment...do you think we'll change the world, somehow?"

Herman shrugs, shakes his head. "The world may not be ready for us, War. We're a step in the right direction, but we can't change the system overnight."

Warren is still considering this as he and Herman step back into the kitchen for coffee refills. He finds Maizy and Dayle having dinner together at the table. Warren watches them eat, feeling like he has a new family. It's weird and different and volatile. Everyone is changing.

Then Null appears from the hall leading back to his bedroom. He looks pasty and sleep-deprived. His eyes seem even more vibrant than ever. Warren realizes that even with his maxed-out gray matter, Null seems to be learning new things about the world, just like everyone else here.

"Good news," he announces. "Episode one is ready for broadcast!"

#

The group gathers around the triv diorama expectantly. Everyone is surprised that Null has been able to put together an episode so quickly, but even more surprised that he has found a way to get it broadcast. They question him mercilessly while they are waiting for the show to come on, but all he will say is that he has "connections."

Warren is squished onto the couch next to Dayle. They are companionably fondling each other's inner thighs. He is excited. He's about to be on the triv!

The triv is tuned to a fashion strut montage, level four access. Right in the middle of some plucky model's affected canter up the runway, the three-dimensional images vanish and are replaced with graphics Warren remembers from watching Null work at his computers.

#

## CROSS SECTION: AN EXPERIMENT

By Null Z. Nada

(not my real name)

#

A credit sequence rolls, featuring all six "stars of the show," each with their own mock-cheesy sequence of vidcaps and action clips. First Bob, then Null, then Dayle, then Warren, then Maizy, then Herman. He put us out of number order, Warren muses, but also notices that each of their ratings flashes in the background as their images appear, only to explode violently during the transitions.

"We're on every channel, by the way," Herman says, and Warren sees him stabbing at the air, probably a remote control visible only on his retina readout. The diorama flickers as he switches from channel to channel, but all are broadcasting the same show. "Across all borders, too. They're even watching this out on Uno Point."

"Shh, this is important krunt here," Null says.

The opening, fade-in shot is an impressive panorama of the megalopolis as seen from the roof of the building. Then the narration kicks in, a synthesized voice stolen from some old war documentary series and reprogrammed with Null's dialogue. "This...is our city. A magnificent testament to progress in our time." Then, a cut to a handheld shot of some impoverished ghetto alley out on Uno Point, as if the cameraman is walking along, gathering scenery. "But what happens when we take a closer look? Do those of us living farther upslope truly understand the ramifications of an intelligence meritocracy on its lower classes?" Uno Point fades into Deuce Valley, into Triborough and so on, climbing up the slope and the social ladder. "We've been told that information wants to be regulated, that it is dangerous in the wrong hands...that the bright and the dim should not intermingle, that ideas should be compartmentalized. But...what if things were different?" Flash-cut to Null, staring directly at the camera. "We decided to find out!"

The show continues, launching into backstory on Null and his idea for the experiment.

"Hey, what happened to Bob?" Dayle asks.

"He's probably pooping," Maizy says, and giggles. Scuzzy language, by her standards.

Suddenly the power cuts off, extinguishing the triv and casting the room into pitch darkness. Maizy lets out a shout of surprise. Outside the traffic noise dies, replaced by an eerie, unreal silence.

The group, minus the allegedly defecating twosie, make their way to the balcony and look out over the de-powered city. The brilliant electric skyline has gone completely dark. Only faint moonglow and vague shadows help to delineate the familiar landscape.

"What happened?" Dayle asks.

"Looks like the whole city's down," Warren says.

"Ladies and gentleman," Null says. He looks unsurprised, but disappointed. "We've been censored."

#

As it turns out, Bob Hobbs is not in the biffy. He's just plain missing.

This disconcerts Null. To him it is more alarming than the power outage. "I figured they'd jam our signal or something, eventually," he explains, as they return to the kitchen in search of light sources. "I didn't think they'd go so far as to shut down the *whole grid* to stop us."

"It sucks we couldn't get more episodes out to the people," Warren says.

"Oh, we're not done yet. But where the hell is Bob?" Null asks. "We need to check the whole apartment. I don't like the feel of this."

They split up and wander the floor looking for him, in the dim green glow of lightsticks and retina-burning flicker of candles. It's a fruitless search: Bob is gone, his immense bulk unmistakably absent.

Warren returns to the balcony, where they regroup. He finds Dayle and Maizy peering over the edge down at the streets below. The grid going down brought all road traffic to a gentle stop at first, but now he can hear individual cars moving around down there. He joins the two of them and stares down also, just barely making out some headlights and commotion at the base of the building. "Emergency crews," Dayle says. "Running offline. What are they – ?" Her eyes widen in alarm. "I think I know where Bob went."

Soon Null and Herman have joined them. Null puts it together quickly. "Okay, we still have a few minutes before they get up here. I made copies of the first episode, as well as some rough footage from episode two. I'll upload them to our chips, reprogram our numbers, and we can make a break for it. One of us might get past them..."

"What's the point?" Herman asks. "The experiment's dead, Null. We broadcast too early. Now we'll never make our point."

"We never even *proved* our point yet," Dayle says.

"That doesn't mean we should stop trying," Null says. "Are you with me or not?"

Dayle and Herman exchange looks, as if considering the ramifications of being a fugitive.

Warren doesn't hesitate. "Sign me up, hoss."

#

In the end, he makes it to the border of Triborough before he's captured.

The Regulatory Police spot him in an alley near the border checkpoint, trying to reprogram his forehead number with a palm computer Null had given him. He isn't having much luck and focusing on the screen distracts him from the moldware spycams that slither up to him, transmitting his image to a nearby squad of twanked government thugs. They snap him up in short order, tossing him unceremoniously into a security van.

The cop who rides in back with him actually looks kind of apologetic.

"Did they get any of the others?" Warren asks him.

"Can't say," the cop says.

"What happens now?"

"Can't say."

"You look like you *want* to," Warren prods.

"Want isn't can't," the cop says, shrugging.

They dump him in a holding cell at Quadropolis' 444<sup>th</sup> Precinct. There are two people inside already: Dayle and Herman. They're monging listlessly on the lone cot.

"Heya, War!" Dayle says, getting up to embrace him. "We thought you might have made it..."

"No dice," he says. "Did Null get away?"

"We don't know yet." She shakes her head regretfully.

"What's going to happen to us?"

"I don't know," Herman says. "But it can't be good." He goes on to explain that Maizy, who lacked the wherewithal to try an escape, has already been returned to Uno Point. She's being considered a victim, rather than a complicitor. The rest of them are going on trial for information terrorism. They're also being held responsible for several injuries that occurred as a result of the blackout.

The three of them slump onto the cot together to wait it out. Warren falls asleep with his head in Dayle's lap.

A few hours later, the door opens, waking him up. As he squints the sleep-haze away he makes out the huge, brown-jumpsuited shape of Bob Hobbs in the doorway.

"Bob!" Warren says, all bleary. "They got you?"

Dayle swats the back of his head. "Wake up, you plug! He's who turned us in!"

Bob wears a mean-spirited, grim smile. "Pretty skully for a twosie, eh?"

"Yeh, with all those sixers in the Council ordering you around," Dayle dismisses.

"Why?" Warren asks. "Why'd you do it?"

"I considered it my duty as a concerned citizen! You're trying to upset the balance of things."

"You dumbfuck!" Dayle shouts. "Out of everyone here, nobody gets fucked more by this system than you do! Why would *you* back this krunt?"

But Bob is grabbing at his ears, evincing feedback grimaces. He's already had his chip reset. "The system works," he says once he can hear again. "All you were doing is making people *aware* it's unfair. They won't *care* if they don't know that. You had to be stopped!"

"People already know it's unfair!" Warren says.

"Don't waste your breath," Herman says, clearly resigned. "The fuckwits have propped up corrupt regimes since time immemorial."

"What are you doing here, anyway?" Dayle asks. "Just rubbing our noses in it?"

"They sent me in to tell you your chips are being reset in ten minutes," Bob says, making for the door. "And you'll be returned to your rightful zones. You might want to say your goodbyes." He leaves, slamming the door behind him.

In the wake of Bob's announcement, threebie, fourbie, and fiver exchange shrug-like expressions. Being returned to their original zones would suck, but it could be worse.

#

Warren is already depressed as he sits down in the Triborough IAC adjustment center to have his chip reset. He's just been separated from his first real girlfriend, and he's about to lose access to the sexy, fascinating, chaotic world of sixer information that Null placed at his fingertips. Going back to level three material will be like feeding processed cheese to a jalapeno junkie.

But once they turn him loose on the streets, he's even more depressed. It seems that they've reset his chip wrong. As he walks down the street, heading for the Soda Hole, he realizes that his vision is fuzzing at the merest glimpse of human skin. Overheard conversations shriek and rattle in his earpiece much too frequently. It takes some testing but soon he's able to determine that he hasn't been reset to level three. He's been set *even lower*. It makes a simple walk from one side of town to the other an ordeal, blinkered vision and distorted pickups causing wacked depth perception and awkward balance. He bumps

into people a lot, and finds them staring at him in what he thinks is some kind of admonishing way; he can't see clearly enough to be sure.

"*This* can't be right," he says, struggling onward. But inwardly he knows that they want him this way. Crippled, hindered, an obvious pariah, serving as an example.

He finds his way to the Soda Hole, and pushes inside, crossing to his usual booth in search of Brock and Rodney.

"Dude," Rodney says, his ridiculous facial hair helping him to stand out. "There's like a *zero* on your forehead!"

#

He sits on street corners asking for handouts. There's a certain amount of celebrity involved in his plight. He's the only zero anyone has ever seen, and people are curious. He's happy to tell his story. Perversely, he spins it with good cheer. "I wouldn't change it for the world," he says. "I lived more in a few days than you \*&^%\$ ever have!" They can't take his dignity.

It's sad to imagine his friends haunting the streets of their zones similarly: Dayle in Quadropolis, Herman in Fünfburg, outcasts amidst their own people. It's probably even *harder* for them: they had more access to lose. At least he can be happy for Maizy, who is back in her element. As for Bob Hobbs, Warren hopes that he'll rot away in his little Deuce Valley ghetto and, moments before an excruciating death, he'll develop enough brain power to realize how badly he's malfed himself and the rest of the *Cross Section* gang. Somehow he suspects that won't happen.

One day as he loafs outside a Stuff Stop convenience store, sweating in the heat of mid-afternoon, he spots someone grinning at him at the edge of the building. With his censorchips pasting a filmy technogauze over his eyes he can barely squint the guy out, but he can see enough to note the plug's peculiar outfit: hooded sweatshirt and long duckbill visor, long sleeves and pants, he's dressed for some other climate. The grinning face disappears around the side of the building, and something about the maneuver is familiar. Warren follows him.

He finds the curious figure crouched behind a dumpster. "Mr. Eng, it's a pleasure."

"Null?"

"Quick, squat down here," Null says.

Warren follows this instruction, feeling around blindly with outstretched hands to make his way to the pavement. "Dude!" Warren says. "Where've you been?"

"In the wind," Null says. "You know me, I'm too skully for those Council \*&^%\$. They can't keep up. How you getting by?"

"Are you kidding? They've branded me! I've been reprogrammed for children's television and supermarket music! It's a living \*&^%\$!"

"I know, kid, I know," Null says. "Dayle says hello."

Warren feels a pang. "How's she doing?"

"She's okay. I've...managed to make her life a little easier. You remember Dirk?"

"The Upgrade Clinic guy."

"He's tweaked her on the sly, she'll be fine. I'm working on the same for you but it's not easy. They're looking for me everywhere."

"I understand," Warren says.

"All I have time for right now is a quick fix on your eyesight," Null says, brandishing a palm computer. "Let me plug in. And whatever you do, don't let on I tweaked you."

"Thanks!" Warren says. He submits to Null's ministrations and shortly finds himself seeing slightly more clearly, even in this dim, stimulus-free alleyway. It's like having his peripheral vision reactivated. "Better!"

"You bet," Null says. "Listen, I gotta bolt, I'll be back. But remember this: they may control what you see and hear, but they can't invade your thinking, comp? Not yet anyway." He hands Warren a canister of spray paint and a bundle of pencils. "You've already got the \*&^%\$ in you. They can't stop what you do with it. So...later!"

Null stands and takes off, vanishing into sunglare.

"Wait – !" Warren calls, but it's too late. He stands up, glances up and down the alley. His eyesight seems to be sort of back to normal. To test it further he unzips his fly, drops his pants, and whips out his tooter, which mercifully is *in focus*. This is definitely a step in the right direction. He suddenly thinks of Null as a guardian angel; Warren hopes he stays free forever.

Oh well, he thinks, moseying deeper into the alley. The reign of attempted ignorance will continue, and I'll still serve as the example to the rest of the level three class. But now he has hope. At least he knows there's someone out there sparring for him.

In the meantime, he decides to do what he can. To spread his own gospel, what there is of it. So he finds a nice, dark, secluded spot, and strides up to the wall, lets the paint fly with the first of his many slogans.

INFORMATION DOESN'T WANT \*^%! he scrawls.

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## REVIEWS

*Doctor Who Who: Beneath The Surface* reviewed by Marie O'Regan

*Daywatch* reviewed by Marie O'Regan

### **Doctor Who: Beneath The Surface Boxed Set (Region 2).**

2 Entertain Video. £39.99.

Release Date: 14<sup>th</sup> January 2008

This boxed set contains three of the Doctor's adventures featuring underwater foes – **Doctor Who and The Silurians** and **The Sea Devils**, starring the third Doctor, Jon Pertwee, and **Warriors of the Deep**, starring Peter Davison as the fifth Doctor.

**Doctor Who and The Silurians** was only Pertwee's second adventure as the Doctor, and is arguably one of his best. The Doctor is called upon to aid Unit – and the Brigadier – in its investigation of attacks by some strange creature in caves around Derbyshire. A few miles away, an experimental nuclear reactor is reporting some unexplained power losses. Could these be linked? The Doctor discovers the Silurians – a race of lizards that have reawakened far underground, having once ruled the Earth. Seeing mankind as usurpers of a planet that was theirs, they resolve to take it back by wiping out humanity – releasing a deadly plague into the atmosphere. The effects are, of course, not the best (this was the Beeb in the seventies, after all), but the script and story are both good, making for an atmospheric piece.



The second story features the Sea Devils, underwater reptiles that are distant cousins of the Silurians from the first adventure. This time around, ships are going missing in the waters surrounding a secret naval base – conveniently near to where the Master (played by Roger Delgado) is being imprisoned. The Master isn't in prison for long, and in an attempt to wreak his revenge on humans for having dared to imprison him, attempts to aid the Sea Devils in yet another attempt to wipe humanity off the face of the Earth, ridding himself of the Doctor in the process. Again, top notch special effects aren't what you watch **Dr Who** for, and this is another enjoyable tale of the Doctor beating off some superhuman foe whilst throwing out the one-liners.

The final story is from much later (1983, in fact), starring Peter Davison as the fifth Doctor. In this tale, our hero lands the Tardis on a seabase on Earth, just in time to help them defend themselves from the combined threat of the Sea Devils and the Silurians – not to mention the deadly beast they unleash, the Myrka. It's a shame that the Myrka looks like a futuristic pantomime horse, with the man in the suit clearly visible as its front half. This is the weakest of the three adventures – notable only for a surprising appearance by Ingrid Pitt, of Hammer Horror fame. The Myrka must rank as one of the worst **Who** monsters of all time, and lets an otherwise reasonable story down dreadfully.

**Fans of the Doctor will find a lot to enjoy, from revisiting some classic stories to watching the extras, which include three Commentaries, Music, Photo Galleries, Subtitles, Production Notes and Radio Times billings as well as trailers, Making Of documentaries, special effects and restoration featurettes.**

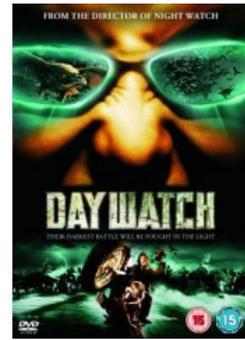
## Daywatch

Written and directed by Timur Bekmambetov.

Starring Konstantin Khabensky, Vladimir Menshov, Valery Zolotukhin, Maria Poroshina, Galina Tunina.

20th Century Fox Home Entertainment. £19.99.

Release Date: 28<sup>th</sup> January 2008



Following on from 2005's innovative **Nightwatch**, the film starts with Anton (Khabensky) training Svetlana, the Other rescued at the end of the first film. When they encounter Yegor, his son, the tale begins. Yegor has chosen the dark, and as such belongs to the Daywatch – and he is a Great Other, as is Svetlana. The Daywatch are searching for the Chalk of Fate in order to overthrow the Balance, and so Nightwatch must stop them once more.

Adapted from the novels by Sergei Lukyanenko, both films are highly original, and inventive in their use of mythology and the eternal battle between Light and Dark. As with **Nightwatch**, the visual effects and set pieces are nothing short of stunning, and a dark humour runs through the plot, keeping the viewer enthralled.

There are, however, a number of plot holes – such as Anton and Svetlana switching bodies in order to hide Anton, yet the Daywatch know where he is, somehow (a blackly funny underscore to this is that Svetlana is in love with Anton, and Anton discovers this whilst in Svetlana's body) – and yet these don't seem to distract too much from the whole. Possibly because the film is crammed full of ideas and has a highly convoluted storyline to start with.

The finale to the film takes place at Yegor's birthday party, with a battle taking place on a plane beneath the normal, everyday, underpinning a peculiarly savage celebration. The ending, when it comes, is a complete change of pace and not entirely believable – but leaves the viewer looking forward to the next film, **Twilight Watch**.



# SLASHFICTION

by Ellen Phillips

Fan fiction has been around probably for as long as we have been telling each other stories. Myth cycles worldwide are collections of stories by many people which have accreted around the characters involved. More recently, the same can be seen in Arthurian legends, and stories about Robin Hood.

It's only natural, when you have one or more characters that you know and love, to want to hear more about them, to fill in the holes in their background and to explore their future. The same applies for the world the characters inhabit: hence the profusion of spin-off shows such as *Star Trek TNG*, *Voyager* and *Enterprise*, *CSI: Miami* and *New York*, and here in the UK, *Torchwood*.

The plethora of authorized novels in the *Star Trek* and *Star Wars* universes illustrate the insatiable appetite fans have for more fiction in their chosen areas of fandom. And where the spin-off shows and the authorized books leave off, fanfiction keeps on going, telling the stories that would otherwise never be told.

Fan fiction, aka fanfic, has a dubious reputation. Its natural home is the World Wide Web, where you can find communities for writing any kind of fanfic you like. The quality varies wildly; from twelve-year-olds writing about *Pokemon*, through to published authors filling in the gaps in their favourite tv shows. Of course there are far more twelve-year-olds out there than there are published authors, and the twelve-year-olds don't also have to hold down a day-job, so finding the better-quality fanfic can prove difficult. Spelling and grammar are optional, far too often.

There's an awful lot of fanfic on the internet, and a fair amount of it is concerned with pairings which exist within canon, such as Han Solo and Princess Leia. A lot of other stories are based around other

non-canon heterosexual pairings, such as the popular 'Jaylee' category, involving Jayne and Kaylee from Joss Whedon's *Firefly*. While these are frequently explicit too, they aren't slashfic, they're 'het fic' (heterosexual) or 'gen fic' (general), which usually has no sexual content. Japanese anime fanfic is also referred to as 'yaoi'. There are even branches of fanfic, both slash and het, which involve real people, usually celebrities.

Fan fiction gets into more dodgy territory with hentai (involving tentacles) and underage or non-consensual sex, all of which can be slash or het fic. Sites such as LiveJournal have introduced reporting systems for concerns about child pornography.

So much for fanfic, but where does slash fiction come in? Well, slash fiction as a distinct genre is widely accepted to have been created by *Star Trek* fans. The 'slash' comes from 'Kirk / Spock', pairing the two in a non-canon homosexual relationship. By extension, slash fiction, or slashfic, now refers to primarily homosexual pairings which are not deliberately or overtly written into the characters. Lesbian slash fiction, to differentiate, is increasingly referred to as 'femslash'.

In the decades before the World Wide Web took off, fanfic and slashfic were circulated in fanzines. These were produced in people's bedrooms, on kitchen tables, in the garage, by hand, on typewriters, and were mimeographed and later, photocopied. They were sold at conventions, or by post. The first *Star Trek* fanzine, *Spockanalia*, was published in 1967, but it was in the 1970s that the fanzine phenomenon really took off. With *A Fragment Out Of Time*, (1974 - *Grup* fanzine), Diane Marchant became the first slashfic writer to be published in a fanzine. Over the next few years, a number of Kirk/Spock fanzines sprang up, and in response, other *Star Trek* fanzines became K/S-free. Not everyone wanted slashfic in their 'zines.

*Star Trek* wasn't the only show to have a fanfic-writing fanbase. *The Man From U.N.C.L.E* also had its share of fanzines and continues to inspire slashfic to this day, thanks to the close friendship of the two main characters, Napoleon Solo and Ilya Kuryakin.

The real explosion in fanfic, including slashfic, came with the rise of the internet. Bulletin boards and usenet groups sprang up for a huge range of shows, and with the advent of the World Wide Web in the early 1990s, fanfic became endemic. It is possible to find fanfic and slashfic about pretty much every show on tv, not to mention books, comics and films. And stories aren't limited to the confines of a single show. If you want a *Buffy The Vampire Slayer / Sailor Moon* crossover, all you have to do is search [www.fanfiction.net](http://www.fanfiction.net). A word of warning: J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter-verse has crossovers with just about everything else ever written or filmed, and has an extremely large and dedicated fanbase of writers. There are tens of thousands of stories out there on various sites, with more being posted every day. A significant number of these stories are slashfic.

So who is writing all of these stories, and why are they so popular? As I mentioned earlier, the writers are everyone from twelve-year-olds (or younger) right the way through to published authors such as Elizabeth Bear. What they mostly have in common is being female. I'm female, and I'm a writer and an avid reader and follower of shows such as *Doctor Who*. I read some fanfic and occasionally some slashfic. And yes, I have written a couple of pieces of slashfic. In the absence of any formal research into the area, all I can offer is some generalizations and guess-work as to why fanfic and slashfic stories are so popular.

Going to work, or school, and talking about the programmes watched last night is an integral part of one's social life. If the programme-makers have done their job well, you'll have been pulled into the shows. You'll care about the characters, about what they're going through. It's why soap operas are eternally popular. Scifi differs only slightly in that the technology and the worlds they're set in are matters for as much discussion as the characters. Why did I get indignant when Vogler got Dr Wilson fired in an attempt to get Dr House removed from the hospital (*House*, Season 1)? Because it wasn't fair, and I care about what happens to Dr Wilson.

It's a small step from caring and talking about the characters in a show to wanting to know more about them. And from there, it's a tiny step to playing in the sandbox - writing your own fanfic using the characters you know and love. What if the Doctor and Rose really did have a passionate love-affair? *Doctor Who* certainly makes it clear that the two care for each other very deeply, but the format of the show doesn't allow for anything more explicit. And what if the reason why Captain Reynolds takes it so personally when Jayne Cobb backstabs two members of his crew (*Firefly*, 'Ariel') is because he and Jayne are lovers? And those significant looks between the Doctor and Captain Jack in Utopia (*Doctor Who*)? There must be something going on between them!

I honestly can't tell you why so many women write about male homosexual relationships between characters who are, for the most part, clearly depicted as heterosexual in their 'canon' worlds. It could be something to do with male characters providing the lead roles in many shows, and wanting to subvert that, to see another side of them which is potentially more vulnerable, more feminised. Or it could just be that

it's incredibly hot to imagine two big, strong, handsome guys getting it on with each other. Either way, slashfic is very popular, and serves a number of functions.

In romantic fiction, it provides an outlet for women who want an alternative to *Mills & Boon*. Who doesn't love watching their favourite characters falling in love? In erotic fiction, it provides a more acceptable form of story-pornography for women who wouldn't go looking for pornography online and certainly wouldn't buy any of the pornographic magazines aimed at them. And best of all, it's free.

Slashfic - written primarily by women, for women, about men - is a safe area in which it's possible to break the taboos around talking about and enjoying sex. For the writer, it's a chance to put fantasies out into a sheltered public domain. Feedback is *de rigeur*: on most sites there is some way for readers to comment on the stories they read. Knowing that a story that turns you on, or makes your heart melt, does the same for complete strangers is an addictive form of validation. All writers write for an audience: published writers receive feedback from writing groups, initial readers, their agents, editors, but the process of publication is a long and slow one, and it can take several years for feedback from readers to start coming in. With fanfic and slashfic, feedback can start coming in just minutes after a story is posted.

If you're watching a tv show, or an advert, or a film, and something which is even slightly slashable happens, you know that immediately after it's finished, legions of happy slashers will be at their keyboards, writing the next installment of whatever it is that makes them - and us - happy.

**Fanfiction sites:**

- FanFiction.net ([www.fanfiction.net](http://www.fanfiction.net)) - one of the largest repositories of fanfic.
- A Teaspoon And An Open Mind (<http://www.whofic.com/>) - Doctor Who fanfic.
- LiveJournal ([www.livejournal.com](http://www.livejournal.com)) - has large numbers of fanfic communities.
- HarryPotterFanFiction.com ([www.harrypotterfanfiction.com/](http://www.harrypotterfanfiction.com/)) - Harry Potter fanfic.
- Star Trek: Fan Fiction (<http://trekfanfiction.net/>) - Star Trek (all series) fanfic.
- U.N.C.L.E. File 40 (<http://file40.net/>) - The Man From U.N.C.L.E. fanfic.

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