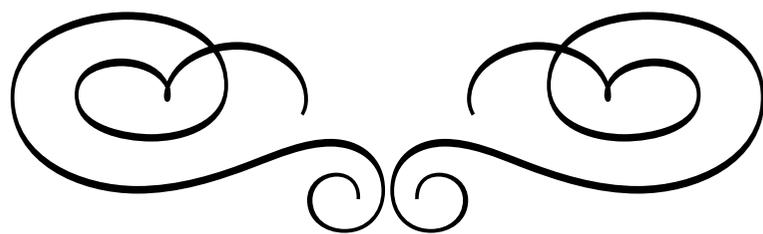


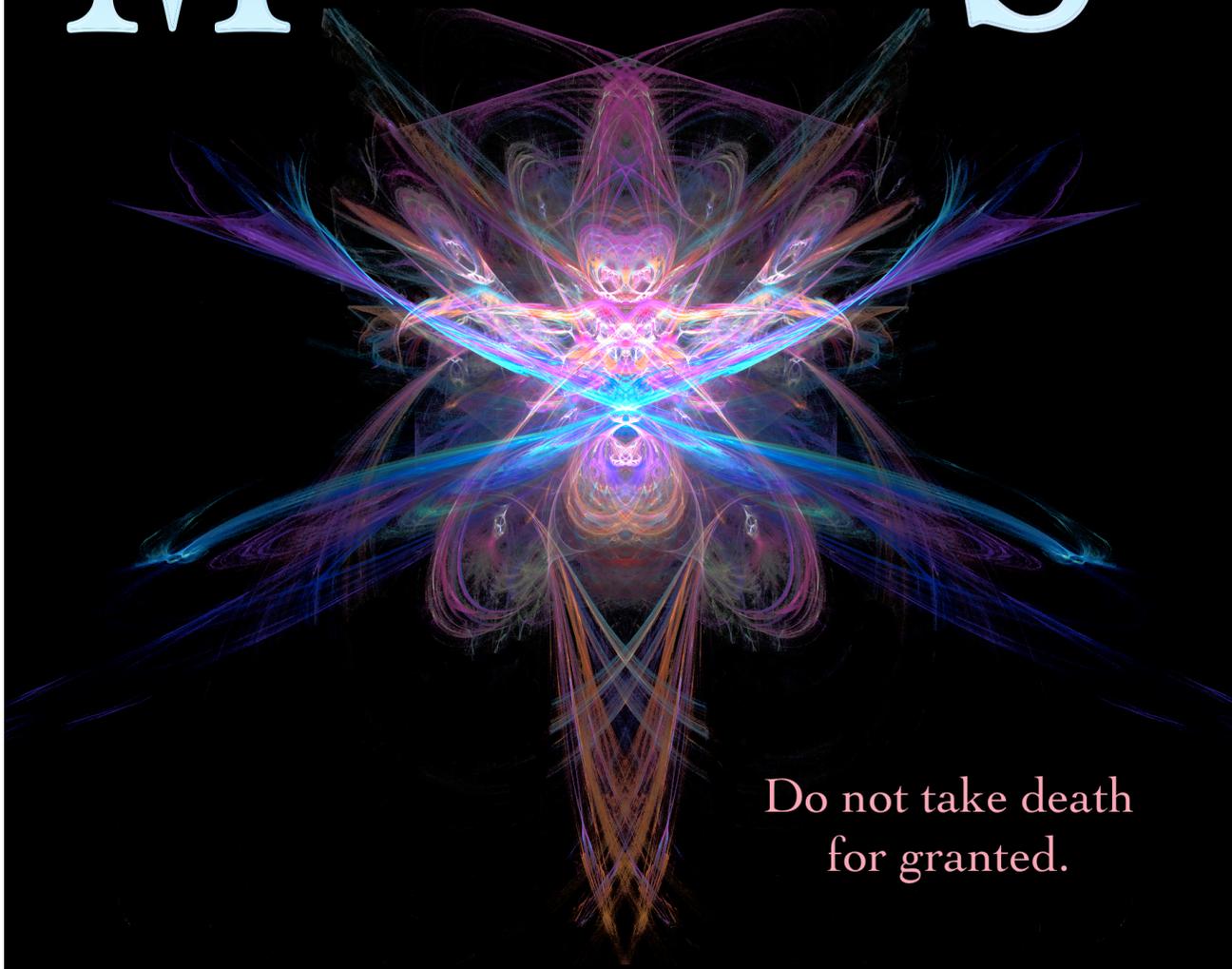
Suicide is for Mortals



by Alyson Miers

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SUICIDE IS FOR MORTALS



Do not take death
for granted.

ALYSON MIERS



If life is a funny thing, death has a wicked sense of humor.

President Miranda Hutchinson orchestrated the dissolution of the magical colony of Rezarta following its attempted secession, and three years after her death, no one has any idea that a ghost remains.

Journalist Scanlon Ness exposed the relationship between vampires and organized crime, but he can't protect himself from joining the ranks of the thirsty dead.

The most perceptive eyes and ears of her generation belong to artist Meliana Lucas, but it is to her surprise when she sees the spirit of a woman who died but did not depart.

Humanity's answer to the incompletely dead has long been to shun vampires and ignore ghosts. Miranda needs to be heard, and Meliana won't let the barrier between living and haunting stand in her way. There are some who don't want Miranda to regain her voice, and for someone like Meliana, the friendship of a ghost is no protection. The paths of artist, ghost and newborn vampire will come crashing together, and they are not prepared for how the dust will clear.



Setting

(As told by Meliana Lucas)

When I was a little girl, the city of Athanoria was not far away, but it wasn't for us. It was near the eastern edge of what was then Rezarta, where my family could only be tourists. It was the stronghold of American magic-handlers since just after World War II, and while non-magical people couldn't be kept out, even those who'd been there since before Arturo Reza took the place over were never really welcome. Athanoria was Rezarta's cultural center. My mother recorded her music at a studio in Athanoria, and they liked her there, but it never could have been our home as long as Rezarta was what it was. As brilliant a musician as my mother was, and as skilled a writer as my father was, we were still mundane.

All that changed with the Magical Resettlement Act of 2002.

Our dear friend Scanlon Ness---he's more like an uncle to me and my brother and sister---has insisted for years that Rezarta was an inherently unstable community. "An untenable situation" was how he described it, due to the Rezarta leaders' unwillingness to engage with the vampire situation in the rest of the country and the mundane government's lack of interest in the activities of the country's magic-handlers. One way or another, he told us, Rezarta would have eventually fallen apart, and its process of falling apart would have created a good deal of ugliness for the rest of the country.

The way the colony, a decentralized, amorphously governed area spanning much of southwestern New Mexico and part of southeastern Arizona, ended up falling apart was by declaring its secession from the United States on Christmas Day of 2001. Not only did President Miranda Hutchinson send in the military and successfully break the secession, she signed the Resettlement into law and it is widely understood that she basically wrote the act from scratch. With the Magical Resettlement Act, the Hutchinson administration forced over 90% of Rezarta's magic-handlers to pack up and spread out to the rest of the lower 48. They didn't like that, there was some fighting before the situation was resolved, but they did eventually move out, and nowadays the country's magic-handlers get along very nicely with their mundane neighbors and there are far fewer people dying in vampire attacks.

Scanlon says maybe the Resettlement could've been managed better, but it had to be done, and it could've gone a lot worse. Since the magic-handlers had to leave, Rezarta is now called the Area Formerly Known as Rezarta when we're feeling witty, or post-Rezarta when we want to be brief. Athanoria is still a city, but it's become much poorer and less organized since Rezarta was taken apart.

It's also become my new home. Most of the former population was forced out after the failed secession, and lots of musicians, filmmakers, writers and artists have moved in. The city was full of art galleries, theaters, studios and other creative space to begin with, and now the rents are much lower, so it's an ideal place for young artists to build their careers. I'm not sure I'd recommend it as a place for families with young children, but for those of us with lots of energy and little money, it's amazing. When my partner Clarice and I finished high school and agreed that we had no use for the college experience, we moved out here, and now we have a lovely apartment and a studio space where I make all sorts of art. My family is still nearby, and Scanlon sometimes visits us when he comes to Athanoria for research.

It would have been nice to be an Athanorian while the magic-handlers were still here, but I was only in middle school when the secession and Resettlement happened, the magical city was a much more expensive place to live than what we have now, and while I might have been able to live in the magical city, it would never have let me feel at home. Since we've moved on from the upheaval of the Resettlement, maybe some of the country's magic-handlers will move back here and make themselves at home with us mundane Athanorians. I hope they do, because the departure of the magical population from Rezarta created a sort of vacuum, and a lot of unpleasant elements rushed in. I don't feel unsafe as long as I can come home to Clarice, but there were hardly any vampires present in the magical city, and there are a lot more of them now. When magic-handlers are present, they do certain things that make the area an inhospitable environment for vampires, but the most we mundanes can do is be careful of how we answer a knock on the door at night. Some crime organizations have gotten comfortable here since the magical population departed the area, but even without the organized crime we'd still have vampires among us.



Dramatis Personae

Meliana Lucas

by Scanlon Ness

After all the shit they'd endured in their young lives, a healthy baby was the least my good friends Daniel and Amanda Lucas could ask of the cosmos, and there came Meliana in April of 1989.

Her mother found her drawing on the walls of their home, far more advanced than what one expects of a toddler, when Meli was two and a half years old. Although she's always been a sweet and lovable girl, since then she's been seen first and foremost as an artist. She had the hardest time making friends as a kid, partly because her nose was always buried in some drawing or painting and partly because other children didn't know what to do with her, but Clarice became her friend, and later her partner.

Clarice Adrianson

by Miranda Hutchinson

Clarice was born in San Diego and stayed there until her family moved to Las Cruces, New Mexico to escape the skyrocketing rents of California. When she arrived at her new school in 6th grade, she noticed a classmate, Meliana Lucas, had plenty of brains and talent to go around, but no friends to speak of. She made it her business to make friends with Meliana and they've been inseparable ever since.

I think that if Clarice had been more academically inclined, she would have made an excellent teacher. Perhaps I merely see her as a kindred spirit. Now they live in Athanoria, where Meliana is building a career as a multidisciplinary artist and Clarice manages her sales and waits tables to supplement her income.

Scanlon Ness

by Julian Teng

I've long enjoyed Scanlon's writing because it is so clever and well-informed for the work of a writer whose knowledge of the subject is so incredibly limited. He's extremely good at what he does, which is to tell mundane people what they need to know about certain magical issues. He has done a better job than nearly any other mundane journalist of learning about where vampires fit themselves into the crevices of society, and for that he deserves credit. He has a lot to offer in terms of telling non-magical humans how to protect themselves from predation. Let it never be said that Ness is any kind of authority on vampirism itself; he is not. It isn't really the lack of knowledge of vampires' actual abilities and inclinations that worries me so much as the lack of curiosity.

That said, I do not accuse him of not taking proper precautions for his own safety in his investigations. He is a very organized, deliberate journalist, but his enemies know more about him than he knows about them. There is a vampire pack in Athanoria, New Mexico, that has targeted Ness for conversion. He knows where they are, but he doesn't know who they are or what they're planning for him. He takes his precautions, but they are too determined and he won't be able to protect himself forever.

Miranda Hutchinson

by Meliana Lucas

The 42nd President of the United States first swore in as Vice President when I was three years old. Most political candidates don't make much of an impression on the nation's toddlers, but Miranda was different. We children loved her, and she loved us. She was in the White House all through my childhood, and when I met Clarice in 6th grade, we agreed that President Hutchinson was amazing and the world needed more leaders like her. In 2002, she did the Magical Resettlement Act, and we trusted her judgment, but after that, she started getting sick more and more often. Her VP kept having to make excuses for her not being able to work. She finished her last term in office in 2004, and by then it was obvious that her health problems were the result of heavy drinking. In 2007, she died from complications of alcoholism.

In 2010, I was doing pastel portraits on the sidewalk outside of Clarice's restaurant when I drew Miranda's face as a shadow on a portrait for a woman who looked nothing like Miranda. Shortly after that, Miranda appeared in my dreams and introduced her-

self. She's the first ghost I've ever known personally. I'm the first mortal who's been able to see her since she died, and I made sure Clarice became the second.

Andra Brown

by Scanlon Ness

This asshole became a vampire in the 1890s, and she was one of the most notoriously vicious predators in the west until Julian Teng's slayers got their hands on her and took her captive for experimentation. Since Teng did his work on her and a dozen other vampires with the support of Arturo Reza, she hasn't been a vicious predator so much as a prickly, bad-tempered piece of work.

Now that I've been turned, and Professor Teng's proteges have taken charge of me, this asshole is my pack leader. She has designated herself as my new big sister. There are times when I can't wait to be strong enough to smash her face in, but I don't know what I'd do without her.

(Professor) Julian Teng

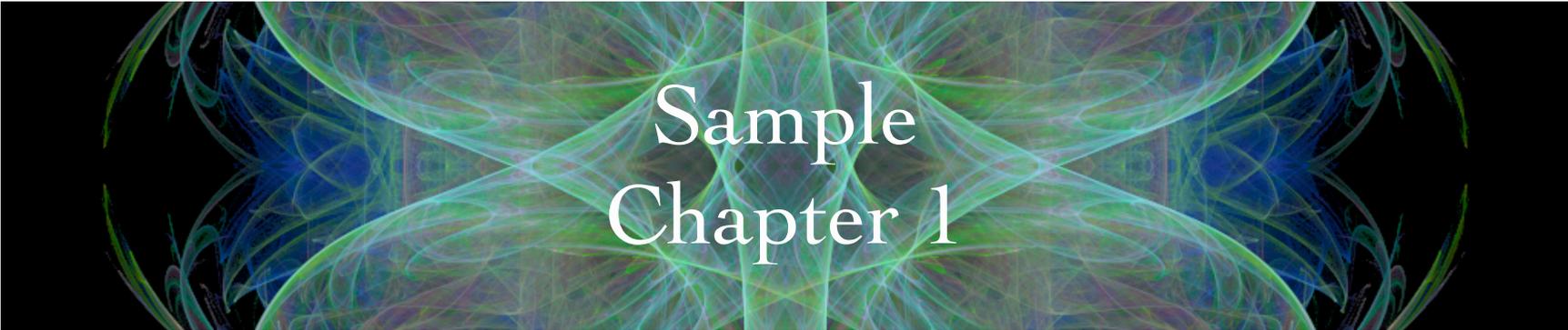
by Andra Brown

Let me introduce you to the head of the Blood Rescuers, a secret society devoted to neutralizing the threat of vampirism. During the Rezarta period, Teng was a close friend and colleague to Arturo Reza, who gave him the means to capture and experiment on vampires. His experiments yielded the discovery that if vampires are fed on donated blood, they shed their predatory tendencies. There were a dozen of us taken captive and placed under his control, and we all went back to our selves in his care. The Magical Resettlement Act destroyed his research facilities, but even when all the magic-handlers were forced to spread out, he still had us. We no longer had to be confined, and now we have our communities, which we protect from other, less scrupulous vampires. Teng is the one who made this possible for us, and we call him Professor. He formed a network of strategically placed magic-handlers, mundane volunteers, and observant fairies around us rehabilitated vampires. Professor Teng arranged the surveillance that revealed the Athanoria plot to turn Scanlon Ness, and he assigned my pack to reclaim Ness before he went bad.

Borealis

by Miranda Hutchinson

This idiot fairy has decided that she is Meliana's biggest fan. That wouldn't bother me, except that she's also decided she's my competition as Meliana's best friend. She's just as annoying as most fairies, and a lot more attached to her mortals, which only makes it worse.



Sample Chapter 1

Miranda Hutchinson

A reasonable person with my history would not be so perverse as to haunt the former Rezarta after her death. Such reasonable people tend not to become ghosts precisely because they make better choices than I did.

The city of Athanoria was founded as the cultural center of Rezarta; it was the New York City of the magical Southwest. When Rezarta ceased to exist, Athanoria became more like a smaller Berlin with a better tan. Since late 2002, it was increasingly a place where mundane struggling artists went for cheap real estate and streets unburdened with the conventions of a privileged old guard.

There were numerous musicians busking on the sidewalks, painters offering portraits on the spot, and upstart filmmakers milking untested narratives from the vast, blue-skied open space. The city's health department was so under-resourced that restaurants basically worked on the honor system, the healthcare facilities were a kludged-together network of earnest though under-qualified medical professionals and "alternative medicine" practitioners, and the school system was barely existent.

All that said, Athanoria was not a bad place to live if you were a healthy, childless young person with a high tolerance for the eccentric and bizarre. For a bull-headed ghost like me, it was an exercise in masochism until I spotted Meliana Lucas flitting through the paint-smearred hordes.

Many of the recent transplants to Athanoria were clever, expressive aspiring revolutionaries who struggled daily against the threat of invisibility, understanding that anonymity was synonymous with starvation. Meliana was the most talented, least invisible of them all. She had been making gorgeous art since she was less than three years old, and the artistic community tended to agree that there was no such thing as fair competition where she was concerned.

She was the kindest person I'd ever seen whose competitors threatened to break her arms if she didn't price her work far above theirs. Even as she charged fifty dollars for a sidewalk portrait while other painters charged twenty, she had customers lined up

for her chair when she set up her easel every Sunday afternoon. She rendered the most thoughtfully detailed likenesses with preternatural effortlessnes. She understood that her fellow artists did not dislike her so much as that they warded off the threat of invisibility by placing her at a different standard from themselves.

They had no idea what it meant to be invisible.

Meliana neither sought nor shunned her visibility. It clung to her like a beloved infant strapped to her back. She was extremely tall, but missing the self-consciousness that affected most tall women, carrying her sweet face and enviably luxuriant hair imperturbably above the crowd. She was good-natured, but always observant, unburdened by presupposition. She cared more about making art than about getting credit. She was, in short, the very opposite of a politician.

The sun was brilliant on Sunday afternoons when Meliana set up her easel near Juan Carlo's, the restaurant where her roommate waited tables. That was her chosen spot for sidewalk portraits, and that was where I made a habit of watching her do what she loved. On one of those afternoons in early April, she surprised me. I had been convinced that my total allotment of surprises was spent.

She let four people gather around to watch while she served a forty-year-old woman who wanted a portrait to frame for her mother. I positioned myself right in front of Meliana, just slightly to the right of her customer, and watched her face while she put color on paper. She worked quickly, but not with the least hurry. She was ambidextrous, using a different color pastel in each hand to work on a different layer of the painting on different parts of the canvas at the same time. Her facial expression suggested a fugue state, like there could be nothing else on her mind besides the picture taking shape in front of her. The way her hands moved about the canvas reminded me of a cat's kneading paws. She went into a different world while she made the portrait, and that world was the most natural place for her to be.

When she finished a portrait, she would usually rejoin the citizens of Earth with a cheery smile and show the result to her customer. This time, she sat back in her chair, and with a frown, said, "This is odd."

Her customer stood up and joined the handful of bystanders behind her to examine the anomalous artwork. "It's beautiful," she replied.

"There's this shadow here," Meliana said, pointing to an area towards the right edge of the work, where a mostly transparent, unfocused, though still human face could be seen. "If you just give me a few minutes, I'll fix it."

"No, don't do that, it's perfect," her customer said, digging into her purse for the necessary cash. "I love it just as it is."

As Meliana sprayed the board with fixative and covered it in a black trash bag for her satisfied patron, I floated above the crowd, no longer seeing the mortals who negotiated for their turn in the subject's chair. I had underestimated Meliana. Everyone knew she was exceptional, but at that moment I knew she was more than talented. She had the eye to see ghosts. I would have to get to know her better, but first I needed to learn more about her.

I'm the late Miranda Hutchinson, forty-second President of the United States. In 2007, I died from complications of alcoholism.



About the Author

Alyson Miers started as a nerdy kid who always had her nose in a book from the school library and wrote stories in her notebooks. She's grown into a nerdy adult who reads longer books and writes novels on her laptop.

She completed and published her first novel, *Charlinder's Walk*, in 2011. After completing an English degree from Salisbury University, she taught English in Albania with the Peace Corps from 2006 to 2008. If you give her the chance she'll happily talk your ear off about the challenges of the Albanian language. She lives in Maryland near her family.

Suicide is for Mortals is her second published novel.