

SYLVAN SCOTT WORLDS



"PASSERSBY"

A SHORT STORY BY SYLVAN SCOTT

L.Frank 10/2019

The “α to ζ” world-setting (containing Otawatapolis, Hammerson’s Jewelers, Settlesburg, Copperstone Hill, the Copperstone Hotel, Silver Heights Memorial Cemetery, All-Night Charlie’s, and other landmarks within this story’s context) as well as characters of Angel Souza, Veda, the Weather Warrior, the Cloud Crew, the Protectorate, Vengeance, the Stalwart, chessmen, Cobalt: the Blue Defender, and others in this story are owned by Sylvan Scott. This story may not be shared or edited without the express written permission of the author.

α to ζ:

PASSERSBY

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Night shifts exhaust me, but I need the income. At least I have an advantage. Whitetails have great vision in the shadows which helps in a city overflowing with contrasting, artificial lights. But though I’ve got the nose and ears that can keep a security guard employed, it’s early spring: my lack of antlers has my bosses re-thinking the whole “hire the big cervine to deter crooks” approach. I’ve lost six shifts in the last month to Keller. They say it’s not because he’s a panther but I recognize the racial bias.

My phone vibrates. I check and take a moment to process the reminder. Three-fifty-two in the morning. One year since a red-eye bus dropped me off at Otawatapolis Station.

Where does the time go?

I hand over the keys leaving Angel to guard Hammerson’s for the remainder of her shift. She re-engages the alarm after I leave. I head towards home, four hours late. Angel should do something about being on-time. I don’t know if her punctuality has to do with her rhinoceros heritage or not.

Diurnal? Crepuscular? I don’t think rhinos are nocturnal, at any rate.

Regardless, I bet she hates overnight shifts, too.

I get my second wind; bored mind, clearing. I cut through the alley to Vineyard Avenue.

I hear the engines’ roars before I smell them.

Street racers, howling like the wolves they are, squeal into view. My ears go back and they see me start; shout a couple slurs my way.

I’m bigger than them; could take ‘em, one-on-one. But that’s the thing about canines: they don’t do one-on-one.

They roar into the distance, leaving me in their fumes.

It takes a moment for my heart rate to slow.

I tell myself I’m not really scared; it’s just biology.

After I catch my breath I continue walking. Punk wolves notwithstanding, it's a quiet, pre-dawn morning and I'm not in a hurry.

A few blocks more, however, and I stop again.

There's a human passed-out on the stoop of the Metro Free Clinic. He has black hair and a nasty criss-cross scar on his forehead. I gently move him so he's not blocking the sidewalk and roll-up the newspaper he's covered with and tuck it under his head. Even unconscious, he suffers from tremors. He smells like he hasn't bathed in a lifetime. I try not to inhale too deeply and leave a twenty in his pocket before ringing the night bell at the clinic door. Hopefully the staff will be able to give him the help that I can't.

The responding nurse doesn't ask my name but calls for help to get the man inside.

Barehoof in the city, I resume my homeward trek.

Diurnal and nocturnal in the same city makes for interesting living. Back home in Settlesburg, we were mostly twilight-dwellers: morning and evening like our ancient forebears. Rural folk: big and rustic. Mostly vegetarians, too. Surprisingly few mice or rabbits, despite their traditional stereotypes. A few carnivores lived there but not enough to ensure anything but token representation on the downtown diner menu. Still, everyone in Settlesburg gets along fine. It was a good place to grow up.

But I had to leave. I couldn't stay on Granddad's farm forever. I had to step up; had to go to the big city to make a difference.

Three-hundred sixty-five days later and what do I have to show for my efforts?

A crappy badge and little else that I didn't already bring with me.

Happy anniversary, Herman.

A few more blocks pass while I ruminate on how smart my decision to relocate was. Second-guessing myself is practically a hobby.

No. Strike that.

It's a vocation.

I can be pretty dense at times.

So dense, in fact, that I almost don't hear the alarms.

They're high-pitched but faint: as fast as a hummingbird's heart. I glance around for several seconds before spying the source. At waist-height, down an alley, there's a raised platform. From it, a door serves as the "fragiles" entrance to the adjacent building. Tiny stairs lead up to the balconied side-entry from the protected, under-sidewalk tunnels. Most of the really small folk use them to avoid being stepped on by equines, bovines, and others in my weight-class.

There's a commotion; robbery in progress.

I freeze.

The front of the business faces the street. There's a door big enough for guys like me, too. It's one of those all-night liquor stores.

I watch as mice spill out, carrying credit cards and bags with cash. One drops a whiskey bottle. Most run down the stairs while some vault the railing. They're small and land safely, three feet below.

Thick-accented and wearing pop-bottle glasses, the liquor store owner emerges onto the platform and shouts insults after the gang.

I want to help but pause: hesitant to pursue.

Turns out, I don't need to.

Before I can raise a finger, Veda swoops out of the sky on her fire chariot.

She lands and the flames of her vehicle roil and bubble before evaporating in puffs of smoke. An athletic vole, the tiny hero continues with her momentum: leaps, ducks, rolls, and sprints after the robbers. Simultaneously, she splits into her

four selves. The punks notice and separate, trying to increase their odds of getting away.

I'm amazed they don't have any powers. You'd think that unpowered people in Otawatapolis would catch on that there are simply too many supers to make crime worth the effort.

Then again, if crooks thought that way, us security guards would be unemployed.

Veda's about mid-range on the power scale. With admiration and a bit of envy, I watch her work.

Watch *them* work.

I don't know the pronouns for a superhero who can insta-clone herself.

One of her tackles the first thug. He's big for a mouse. She flips him over and decks him square in the jaw. The combatants might be small but I wince at the sight of the impact.

Looks painful.

Another clone launches skyward on a momentary jet of flame. Cape billowing in her wake, she bounds in front of two fleeing mice and spins to face them. Idiots that they are, they don't stop. When they try to bowl her over, she momentarily evaporates into a cloud of gaseous flame. They pass right through her and set their fur on fire. As I said: idiots. Anyone who's ever watched the news knows that's Veda's signature move.

Veda Number Three dives through a grate into a city sewer after the gang leader. He's a rat and three times her size, but I doubt he'll get away.

The final Veda, Veda Number Four, blocks off the ends of the alley with walls of glowing, orange flames. The last three crooks stop at her barricade. One of them turns, pulling a gun.

I almost get involved. Veda Four will have to choose between using her fire to corral them and protecting herself. Turns out, I can stay put.

Veda One catches up. She melts the barrel of the gun just before the thug can fire. It blows up, sounding like a firecracker.

The commotion is over as quickly as it began.

Veda Three returns dragging the gang leader—fur singed and face, bruised—and helps her clones bind the would-be robbers for the police. The liquor store owner rains praise down from his balcony. I can tell I'm not needed. Veda has it covered and, besides, I'm not a cop.

Things like this never happened back home.

The closest we ever got to super-powered excitement was some two decades ago when the Sable River and its tributaries overflowed their banks thanks to the Weather Warrior and his Cloud Crew. They got taken in by The Protectorate who, afterwards, stuck around to help with disaster relief. The flooding covered ten counties.

Good people; inspiring.

For city-folk, that is.

Most superheroes live in cities. I guess you go where the crime is. They're positive people—they honestly are—but they don't seem to have much in common with the rest of us. And a lot of them are ... odd. It's as if having powers makes them strange in the head. Maybe they didn't grow up with enough of a slow-paced, normal life; no Sunday dinners with storytelling on the front-porch during the summer. Those things lend grounding and perspective.

It's part of why I came here: to share my viewpoint. When I made the decision, though, it was more out of a kid's selfishness than an adult's calling. Really, until someone has been on their own for a while, they tend to show disdain for everyone's plans but their own. I know I did. My time in Otawatapolis helped me see that.

Yet I still wonder if coming here was the right choice.

Doesn't this city have enough defenders?

Would one, single deer really make a difference?

It's my one-year anniversary and, frankly, I don't know if I've really lived the life I should have. I miss my family but wouldn't have stood-out back home. And despite how selfish it sounds, I do want to stand out.

It's the least whitetail thing about me.

But is that wrong?

Are my hopes and dreams still the same as they were a year ago? They seem to be but I'm still hesitant.

My route takes me and my thoughts up Copperstone Hill. The Copperstone Hotel stands in the middle of the block. It's flanked by the First Otawatapolis Fire Department and an All-Night Charlie's. Sometimes I stop there for a doughnut or three. Opposite it are the rolling, green swaths of Silver Heights Memorial Cemetery.

All-in-all, Copperstone's a peaceful, upper-class neighborhood.

I'm still wondering about my decision to come to this oversized, bustling city when I see him.

A literal chill goes through me.

In between the mausoleums and towering tombstones, the drifting figure blends in with patches of overnight fog. They say you should never look at Vengeance directly, but how can you not? He resembles a masked cowboy made of mist.

People argue about whether or not Veda's powers are magical or merely advanced tech. Insta-cloning is a near-future science and many say it's how she does her more-than-one-of-me thing. But there are no questions concerning Vengeance. He's pure magic: a spectre or ghost or something.

Allegedly he's what's left of the city's first hero from over two hundred fifty years ago: the Stalwart.

Back then, after settlers and natives made peace and founded the "City of Falling Waters", he preserved the truce. A black bear, he kept the races from killing each other until they could get used to their differences. Then, one day, he up and vanished. A week or three later, this ghost showed up: haunting the shadows of Otawatapolis looking like a creature made of fog.

Like the lariats Stalwart used, Vengeance has ropes, too. Now, they're as spectral as he is and trail the ground from both wrists and ankles. When he gets riled up, his eyes burn with green fire and his "ghost-ropes" writhe like snakes.

The criminals that Vengeance stops never re-offend.

He drifts further away. My heart skips a beat when he pauses and turns to face me. Under his wide-brimmed, ghostly hat, his sunken eyes burn with dull light. I see his muzzle, sunken and deathly, mouthing unheard words.

I break from my reverie, turn, and briskly resume my walk.

I don't hear anything following.

I *hope* no one's following.

The hair on the back of my neck bristles the more I think about it.

I'm at the mid-street entrance to the cemetery: directly across from the hotel. I think I hear something. Dread rising, I spin about.

Vengeance is nowhere to be seen.

I breathe a shuddering sigh of relief. He probably wasn't following me: why would he? I don't know him and he doesn't know me. Vengeance hunts all sorts of nasty critters that most heroes don't have the wherewithal to deal with. Ghosts. Vampires. Chessmen. Ghouls. There was a demon-thing that attacked the city sixteen years ago. It was said that every hero in the whole damn nation, let alone

Otawatapolis, tried to stop it. In the end, only the ghost known as Vengeance could foil its infernal plans.

If there was something like *that* nearby...

I look up and down the streets.

Empty.

Nonetheless, I cross the street to be on the side of the living and quickly finish my climb to the top of the hill. I leave Silver Heights Memorial and Copperstone behind me. I vow to find a better, if longer, route to and from work.

Maybe my destiny is to go back to Settlesburg. I'm not sure.

I don't *think* it is.

Deer aren't known for being brawlers. We're big and strong but I'm something of an outlier. I don't mind a fight. I figure you gotta do what you can to help others. I'm a buck, not a stag, though. Maybe I feel the need to act like one.

But if that's true, why come here? I wanted to shine but that desire no longer seems like enough. I want to help people, still, but why here? With the likes of Veda and Vengeance around, who needs me?

Can I make a difference or am I still seeking glory? How pure *are* my motives? Even without super-powers or spells could I hold my own in the company of gods and monsters?

If so, does that make me the most arrogant hick to ever leave the backwaters for the big city?

What can I do that hundreds of meta-naturals can't?

I used to think I knew the answer to that question. But I'm not the kid who came here, anymore.

Right?

Mostly, though, I want to know if I'll ever be able to make the decision.

Plunging my hands into my pockets, I walk faster. My cloven hooves carry me closer to my high-rise apartment in Centertown.

It's not fancy and I wouldn't want it to be.

For being in the heart of the city, it's humble and low-key. It feels "honest". It's no farm but feels home-like.

Unpretentious. Solid. *Real*.

In the distance, I spy the outline of its bulky, brownstone exterior rising ten stories into the night.

I'm almost there.

I make my way towards the looming shadow wondering, for a second, why no lights are on.

Then, the silhouette moves.

It turns, no longer looking like a towering rectangle but, rather, something more ... organic.

My eyes see clearly but my comprehension lags. The wind shifts and I get a whiff of canine. It's strong; overwhelming. Ancient instincts scream at me to run. Lights wink on to one side: revealed in the wake of the massive creature moving in front of them. The shadow isn't my building.

The coyote is twelve stories tall, naked, and surprisingly quiet. I don't recognize him. I've never heard about a 'yote with such powers. Could be a hero, could be a villain. I honestly don't know. His giant, golden eyes look down through the dark. They fix me to the spot, outlined in the wan light of a street lamp. In that moment, I know how truly heroic Veda and all fragiles must be. So many mediums and larges live in Otawatapolis that the smaller folk must experience life-threatening danger every day. Fragiles are accidentally killed every week just due to their size. And this coyote? His bare paws are the size of busses.

He could step on me and I'd be a smear on the pavement.

To him, I'm fragile.

My heart races and my tail flicks, white, in the darkness. I want to run.
He turns his head up-town and his ears swivel as he sniffs the predawn air.
It's a moonless night; only a few stars glitter overhead.

For a moment, I think I should run. But, seriously: how far could I get? His stride would take him a city block in a step or two. And then—smush!—I'm a corpse.

Like Vengeance, I'd be the ghost.

But if malice is on his mind, he doesn't show it. After his moment of reverie, he looks down at me, raises a single finger in front of his brown muzzle, and winks. Then, covering himself as if in modesty, he quickly runs down Benhurst Lane. In moments—more silently than any creature that size should be able to—he vanishes in the sprawl of more buildings.

I stand in the light of the street lamp for a long while.

Gradually, the sky lightens. The sounds of morning traffic begin.

I'm walking, again, without remembering resuming; I make it to my building.

Muscle memory retrieves the morning newspaper and I walk up six flights of stairs. Key in the lock, turn the bolt, open the door, enter the foyer, toss my keys in Aunt Emily's candy dish, walk into the kitchen, sit down, stare at the refrigerator.

I don't want to eat.

I don't feel hungry.

I don't feel much of anything.

I think I'm in shock.

A lot has happened in a few dozen blocks. I've seen more of the city in one night than I have the rest of the year. And it all happened on my anniversary.

I feel a smile cross my face before the emotions behind it.

I laugh once ... twice...

It's an odd feeling but not bad.

I don't believe in signs. I'm not the religious type. Sure, there's magic and superheroes and a vole named after ancient divinities, but I've never seen or smelled or heard any proof of there being anything other than mortals in charge of the world. Still, these encounters *must* mean something. Maybe I can make them mean something.

I stand and walk to my bedroom.

There, in the back of my closet, sits my steamer trunk. I pull it out; spin the combination dials and release the catch. When I do, the small, hidden panel I installed slides open. I bend down and look directly into it, letting my homemade retinal scanner do its job. The lid pops open with a hiss.

Inside, the preservational spray is quickly sucked into concealed storage canisters.

Before me are my inventions.

From the net-gun I used to help granddad with baling hay to my first—and only—attempt at creating jet boots: everything is here.

Reverently, I remove item after item until I get to the false bottom. Opening it, I pull out the thinnest, lightest-weight components of all. My *pièce de résistance*: the twelve panels that make up the electric blue armor I built over the three years before coming here.

Worn, they augment my strength to terrifying levels; speed, too. The helmet allows for my antlers, when in season, and filters the air: allowing me to breathe under all sorts of conditions. I even installed stun-guns into the wrists; each has a twenty-meter range.

Assembled, it can fly.

I look to the window: out at the rising sun over the city.

In the distance, a silhouette soars past. I hear police sirens: about ten blocks away. I pick up my helmet and turn on its police scanner.

Dockside district.

Warehouse fire.

Workers trapped inside.

Time to grab the gold or time to be “just folk”?

Maybe...

Maybe, both.

Many things about Otawatapolis are strange. I’m one of ‘em. No one has exactly my life ... my particular perspective. Few in this sprawling city have the common sense of a country boy determined to make the world a better place. None of them possess the most powerful inventive intellect our modern world has ever seen.

Brains and perspective: *that’s* my destiny.

I just have to embrace it.

I don my armor. Each cobalt-tungsten plate fastens perfectly to its neighbor despite the time spent in storage. Tiredness forgotten, I’m soon dressed for business. I look out at the city.

It’s a place of ghosts ... of gods and monsters and giants, but it’s also a city of people and everyday folk.

I’m one of ‘em.

I’m Cobalt: the Blue Defender.

Year one is over.

Today is the first day of the rest of my life.



Appendix: People, Organizations, and Places

Places (Nations, Regions, Cities, Districts/Neighborhoods^[D], and Prominent Landmarks)

Centertown, Otawatapolis^[D]: The largest of the three hearts of **Otawatapolis**. Hub of travel, tourism, and trade/commerce. Older buildings; poorer residents; a large “heart” district containing several smaller districts/neighborhoods. *First Mention:* “*Passersby*”.

Copperstone Hill, Otawatapolis^[D]: A small, upscale district/neighborhood on the edge of **Centertown** known for its high hills and old buildings. Home to **the Copperstone Hotel**, **the First Otawatapolis Fire Department**, and **Silver Heights Memorial Cemetery** (shared with the **Silver Heights District**). *First Mention:* “*Passersby*”.

Dockside District, Otawatapolis^[D]: A broad, riverflats and lake-side district/neighborhood for river trade. Plenty of warehouses and rails leading both to the airport as well as out of town. It is adjacent to **The Riceway** and **Centertown**. *First Mention:* “*Passersby*”.

Otawatapolis aka “the Stalwart City”, “the Concrete Crucible”, “the Big Confluence”, “the City of Falling Waters”: An independent city-state located in the northern, midwest region of the continent, **Ternnova**. For many, it is the center of the superhero world. *First Mention:* “*Passersby*”.

Settlesburg, Cheyenne: A small, rural town of mostly crepuscular, large-size herbivores (such as deer) located on the banks of **the Sable river** about 120 miles from **Otawatapolis**. Birthplace of **Herman Cutter (Cobalt: the Blue Defender)**. *First Mention:* “*Passersby*”.

Silver Heights District, Otawatapolis^[D]: An old, formerly high-class district/neighborhood that neighbors **Copperstone Hill** in **Otawatapolis**. Home to **Silver Heights Memorial Cemetery** (shared with the **Copperstone Hill**). *First Mention:* “*Passersby*”.

People (Citizens, Creatures, Heroes, and Villains)

Angel Souza (f., rhinoceros): Security guard, often at **Hammerson’s Jewelers**. Friend and sometimes lover (friends-with-benefits) of **Herman Cutter (Cobalt: the Blue Defender)**. *First Mention:* “*Passersby*”.

Chessmen: Monsters of solid white and black that drink the energy, drive, ambition, and (more or less) the “souls” of the living: gradually turning their victims into inert and solid, ceramic statues. *First Mention:* “*Passersby*”.

Cobalt: the Blue Defender aka “Herman Cutter” (m., whitetail deer)
Height: 8’9”, **Weight:** 328 lbs, **Build:** ectomorph, **Age:** 23, **Hair/Fur:** short tan-brown with cream accents and patches, **Eyes:** green
Inventor of the Cobalt armor, he is a genius-level inventor who has been looking for an opportunity to help people despite suffering from hesitation and lack of confidence that being a superhero is his path. Originally from the small, rural town of **Settlesburg** in **Cheyenne**, he relocated to **Otawatapolis** and got a job as a security guard, often at **Hammerson’s Jewelers**. He lives on the edge of the **Centertown** district in a humble apartment building. *First Mention:* “*Passersby*”.

Shadow Hunter aka “The Empty Shadow” aka “Nix” (m., demon): **Nix** was an ancient, dark

spirit of corruption, once held high by ancient people as **The Great Hunter**, who through his own arrogance fell into darkness and became a demon hunting those who deemed themselves great hunters. It was inadvertently summoned on the anniversary of its banishment some years ago and raised an army of the supernatural creatures to hunt the mortals of **Otawatapolis** and, eventually, all the heroes and villains until being stopped and banished by **Vengeance**. Largely a mystery to even those who fought him, most simply call him “**Shadow Hunter**” or “**The Empty Shadow**”. *First Mention:* “*Passersby*”.

The Stalwart aka “Barrin Ulwake” (m., black bear; deceased): A masked, frontier vigilante who was the first hero of **Otawatapolis** over 180 years ago. He first appeared defending settlers from a band of native retributionists and negotiating a peace known as **The Cloudy Waters Settlement Accord at Fort Otawatapolis**. He was a sharp-shooter and a master of the lariat: frequently using rope-tricks and a whip in his adventures. *First Mention:* “*Passersby*”.

Veda aka “Banhi Dubey” (f., vole)
Height: 6”, **Weight:** 3 oz, **Build:** mesomorph, **Age:** 31, **Hair/Fur:** short yellowish-brown/yellowish-grey, **Eyes:** black
A middle-eastern immigrant Hindu hero who

possesses fire-control and personal body-replication powers. She can produce, control, and “harden” the flames she projects into low-heat objects while also being able to split into four, separate beings. Wears a cape. *First Mention: “Passersby”.*

Vengeance aka “**Barrin Ulwake**”, “**The Stalwart**” (m., black bear [ghost]; deceased): The ghost of a black bear who, in life, was the first hero of **Otawatapolis: The Stalwart**. It carries a “ghost gun” as well as has ropes trailing the ground from both wrists and ankles. When he gets riled up, his eyes burn with green fire and his “ghost-ropes” writhe

like snakes. A vigilante spirit of supernatural justice. *First Mention: “Passersby”.*

The Weather Warrior aka “**Atonin Servas**” (m., human): A tech-based ecoterrorist who wants to “return the world to its natural state” and rule over all people as “Custodian of the Pure Earth”. Developed micro-teleportation technology with which he manipulates pressure systems, adds and removes moisture from select regions, and thereby creates micro-weather events. Leader of **The Cloud Crew**. *First Mention: “Passersby”.*

Organizations *(Affiliations, Businesses, Groups, and Teams)*

The Cloud Crew: A team of eco-terrorists working for **the Weather Warrior** in an effort to return the world to a “pure” ecological state. Mostly humans using concealed technology that resembles natural objects or traditional “magic items” in their efforts. Most can simulate weather events such as mild tremors, lightning bolts, wind blasts, and water blasts. *First Mention: “Passersby”.*

The Copperstone Hotel: An old, upper-class hotel over a hundred fifty years old located in the **Copperstone Hill** district in **Otawatapolis**. *First Mention: “Passersby”.*

Hammerson’s Jewelers: International jewelry corporation headquartered in **Otawatapolis**. Main offices are in **Riceway**. Hammerson’s has four retail locations in the city. *First Mention: “Passersby”.*

Metro Free Clinic: A free medical clinic that serves the poor and needy. Located in **Riceway** in **Otawatapolis**. *First Mention: “Passersby”.*

Otawatapolis Station: The main bus and rail station in **Centertown, Otawatapolis**. *First Mention: “Passersby”.*

The Protectorate: A team of eight international superheroes with global membership who have a frequent presence in **Otawatapolis**. *First Mention: “Passersby”.*

The Pure Earth: A group of extreme environmentalists (mostly human; rather racist) who want to lower civilization’s impact on the world to next-to-nothing and live, perpetually, in a primitive state of civilization. Some of their members have spun-off terrorist cells over time including **the Weather Warrior** and **the Cloud Crew**. *First Mention: “Passersby”.*

Silver Heights Memorial Cemetery: The oldest cemetery in **Otawatapolis**—located at the edge of both the **Copperstone Hill** district and the **Silver Heights** district—established around three hundred years ago. It is rumored to be a favored haunt of **Vengeance** as a few sightings have spotted the ghost, there. *First Mention: “Passersby”.*

All ***Gratitude and Thanks*** to Jakebe, Rane: the Pen Dragon, Graveyard Greg, and Sorien for being beta-readers and providing support as I worked to develop this wonderful, wild world!

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First digital edition October, 2019

Layout and design by David J Rust
B&W illustrations commissioned from L. Frank/Wom-Bat
(<http://www.furaffinity.net/user/wom-bat/>)

ISBN 978-1-3704-4343-7 (ebook/digital)

Published by Sylvan Scott
www.smashwords.com/profile/view/SylvanScott

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