

Newsletter by J.F.NODAR | AUTHOR | AUSTRALIA | NOVELS | STORIES | POETRY J. F. NODAR | AUTHOR

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Welcome to My Monthly Newsletter

DECEMBER 2022

Welcome to this month's newsletter.

It is that time of the year – Christmas – a time when we reflect on what we have accomplished (or not) this past year.

After 2 ½ years of COVID-19 lockdowns, protests, business closures and the rest, humanity has settled down and accepted that COVID will be with us for a long time just like the flu.

I had time to reflect on my life (as well as my wife's) and we had another tough health year but through it all what kept me and her sane was my writing.

At times, I barely typed a word while others they flew onto the page non-stop and the back and forth with my wife, my muse, made us laugh and cry and a few times we even lamented how the past months had taken a toll on our bodies.

However, I can say with great emphasis not on our minds.

So, this month with much gratitude I share this small song of the season at the end of the newsletter.

My article this month is '*Writing is Like Rowing a Canoe*' hope you enjoy it as well as my attempt at poetry: '*Cut Flowers*'.



Writing is like rowing a canoe

OK, the title really got you a bit worry. How can writing be like rowing a canoe, you say aloud?

When I arrive in the USA back in January 1962, alone, I ended up in an orphanage.

The orphanage had about one-hundred young boys all under the age of fourteen.

Going into an orphanage could be a terrifying ordeal for any eleven-year-old boy and while there were moments that really tested me. Mostly, I had a fun time.

One of those times was joining the orphanage's Boy Scout troop. I got to do two things which at the time I thought they would be the most exciting things in my life: fishing and rowing a canoe.

Fishing, for me, turned out to be a bore, and this exercise has helped me in my writing.

How might you ask?

When I am bored, my mind wanders, and this wandering soothes me as I look out my office window onto the park in front of my home. Here I sometimes see young children playing. I might see a couple talking. Someone walking their dog. Seeing these activities trigger a thought for a story or a memory from my past which illuminates my mind and slowly a new story develops.

Boredom can be a blessing if you use it right.

Back to rowing.

The scout leader tells me to get into the canoe and row to the other side of the lake. I never realised this event would trigger a comparison to drafting a short story later in my life.

When I first write, my mind is full of ideas, scenes, characters that I want to bring to life and present to my readers. The experience of rowing the canoe for the first time is similar. My aim was to get to the other side of the lake, avoiding my canoe tipping.

Getting into the canoe was easy, and then I rowed. I saw the shore fade and the other side of the lake felt it was getting closer, so close that I could just reach it in a couple of more rows.

However, I got tired when I got to the middle of the lake and the more, I rowed, the more I got into the open space of the lake. The more tired I became, so I stopped.

I reached the middle of the lake.

Looking to one side, I saw that the shore I just left. It was just as far as the side of the lake I was rowing towards.

All that rowing and I made little progress, I thought.

Writing is so much like that.

You type your way into the middle of the article, the short story, etc and then you stop.

Some folks quit here.

Many writers have no problems starting stories.

Many writers don't even have a tough time completing them.

But it is the darn middle of a story that creates a lot of problems for writers. Including me.

I have gotten up from my keyboard and screamed aloud, loud enough to scare my wife.

My wife came in running to my office once to see what had happened. All she saw was me in a profound mood and with a face that says: 'I don't want to do this anymore.'

The look from my wife tells me that is not true.

So, I sit down and I type a few more words. I repeat this process and before I knew it, I had my short story.

That scream was my turning point, (not to mention the look on my wife's face), the end for polishing off my story.

That experience resonates in my mind each time I have what everyone calls 'the moment' or 'writer's block' because when I remember that instance of absolute frustration at writing, the instance of sheer hopelessness, and I know I am at the middle of the story and that I'm going to finish the story. I know if I continue to work through my chaotic mind, I will finish it.

I will write and write even if I create nonsense sentences or have poor grammar and embarrassing tense changes and do several switches from the point of view of the story. I will continue writing until I reach the middle, and whether it is bad, pointless, or good, I will finish it.

And when I reach the end, I will remember that feeling and keep it until the next story that I find myself stuck in the middle.

Try it yourself. It will liberate your mind!



cut flowers

You are to me like the amaryllis because you are worth beyond beauty.

My life with you is like the anthurium because of the happiness you bring to me.

The aster represents the patience you show for all my crazy things.

While the chrysanthemum epitomizes the fidelity of your love for me.

Thank you for bringing all of this into my life.

In a vase of cut flowers.

I hope you have enjoy this month's newsletter and now for a great treat.

the highlight of the newsletter is my guest author for this month – Mr William Kilpack who is sharing his short story 'Stalker'.



THIS MONTHS GUEST AUTHOR

w. d. kilpack III

W.D. Kilpack III is an award-winning and critically acclaimed internationally published writer, with works appearing in print, online, radio and television, starting with his first publication credit at the age of nine, when he wrote an award-winning poem. As an adult, his first two novels, *Crown Prince* and *Order of Light*, both received the Firebird Book Award, while *Crown Prince* received The BookFest Award. He also received special recognition from L. Ron Hubbard's Writers of the Future Contest for his novella, *Pale Face*. He has been editor and/or publisher of 19 news and literary publications, both online and in print, with circulations as high as 770,000. He is an accomplished cook and has two claims he thinks few can match: cooking nearly every type of food on a grill; and nearly being knocked flat when his grill exploded.

He received both his bachelor's and master's degrees from Westminster College of Salt Lake City. As an undergrad, he double-majored in communication and philosophy while completing the Honours Program. As a graduate student, he earned a Master of Professional Communication with a writing emphasis. He was also a high-performing athlete, qualifying for international competition in Greco-Roman wrestling.

He is a communication professor, and a nationally recognized wrestling coach. He is happily married to his high-school sweetheart and is a father to five children, as well as helping to raise five stepchildren. He was born in Salt Lake City, Utah, where he continues to live, coach, and teach.

STALKERS

The cat purred and trilled, squirming in his hard arms. He scratched the underside of her soft-furred, black chin while he waited patiently. Her paws pushed and relaxed, claws extended

and drew back as she purred, elated to be resting in the cradle of his arms. She stood and thumped her head against the underside of his chin, rubbed it against his thin shadow of whiskers, then continued to his ear and beyond. She crawled agilely onto his shoulder and flopped down with her legs on either side of his thick neck. Once she settled, Kittridge finger-combed the sideburn she had ruffled, returning the whiskers and scattered grays to their proper place. When satisfied, he rested his hands on both of the chair's arms.

"Comfortable, Kitty?" he

asked. "A new client comes in today." She mewed softly. He reached up to scratch her pitch-black coat for long moments, his dark eyes unfocused. His black t-shirt was at odds with the

opulent surroundings, leather and rich cherry wood decor. He sat with legs crossed, black slacks pulling at the knees. Despite being his office, he did not have a desk. If tasks required a desk, he had someone to perform them for him, and she was quite adept at it.

A buzzer sounded at the great, cherry-wood door, and Kitty tensed, freezing into place. "Easy," he said soothingly, rubbing one of her front paws between his thumb and first finger. She

pulled it free, he grasped it again, she pulled it free. He continued the game for another four cycles, then looked toward the door. "Is that long enough, Kitty? Can't seem too eager. We

already sent a hovercraft down to pick him up, after all. That already smells a bit of desperation." She resumed purring and he called, "Come!"

The door withdrew into a wall pocket without a sound, and the receptionist, Miss Dennis, stood framed in it like a fine work of art. She was in her thirties, near his own age, but looked younger. It seemed that the life of a receptionist was much less harsh on the body than his own. She was quite pretty, with waist-length, straight hair and large, dark eyes. Her long-sleeved, red sweater clung to her every curve. She clasped her hands behind her back and stood with feet together, black boots showing below the hem of her black skirt. As per her training, she did not speak first. The new client stood behind her, almost completely eclipsed by her silhouette. That meant that he was a small man, indeed.

Kittridge waited another moment, watching for any response from the client. When none came, he said, "Miss Dennis."

"Mister Kittridge," she responded, chancing a thin grin that vanished as quickly as it came, clearly enjoying the game, even after all these years. "Calvin Cutler," she stated simply and turned sideways in the doorway to reveal the new client, like a curtain being drawn aside. He was, indeed, slight in stature, but carried himself with more than enough pride for a man twice his size. He wore a three-piece suit that must have cost him several grand, although his neck tie was loosened slightly, indicating either nervousness or a recent weight gain. The slight dimpling of acne scars marked him as two things: new money and going through puberty with the limitations of living on terra firma.

"Very good, Miss Dennis," Kittridge said softly, still clutching gently at the cat's paw with his thumb and index finger. "You may go." The woman bowed her head and shot him a knowing smile as she left. The stranger took two steps into the room and the door closed automatically. Kitty trilled like a pigeon.

Kittridge studied his new client with solemn, dark eyes. "I am Devon Kittridge, good sir. How may I be of service?" The cat shifted and he lifted one hand to scratch behind her ear.

"Mister Kittridge, I work for the York firm, Arclite Aeronautics."

"Straight to the point," Kittridge said. "I like that."

Cutler hesitated, then resumed his narrative, apparently not appreciating having his carefully rehearsed monologue interrupted. "I hold an executive position, but advancement has come to a near-standstill." He spread his hands and smiled, the sentiment coming nowhere near reaching his eyes. "I have responsibilities to uphold." The cat sat up and studied Cutler. The client froze, staring back.

"Please continue, Mister Cutler."

The client's smile became more genuine. "The cat's got a thousand-yard stare. Not sure I've ever seen an ice-blue quite like that."

"Do you like cats?"

"I do."

"What do you like about them?"

Cutler answered quickly, "They're self-sufficient."

"Ah. So your 'responsibilities' have nothing to do with family," Kittridge concluded, and Cutler's smile vanished.

"Is that a requirement?"

“Of course not,” Kittridge answered. “So I surmise that you want your superior eliminated ... in order to uphold your responsibilities.”

“Yes.”

“I see.” Kittridge rubbed his chin, then smoothed the graying whiskers in his sideburns, his eyes losing focus.

“Looking for discrepancies?” Cutler challenged. Kittridge’s cold, dark eyes returned to the client, but that was all. “I already submitted the required information. You’re making me recite it, chapter and verse.”

“I never read about a job or the client before meeting him the first time,” Kittridge answered. “I found that it can cloud my judgement. I prefer to meet clients with a clean slate.”

“I find that knowing all I can about the opposition only makes me better equipped to negotiate.”

“I am not the opposition, nor is this a negotiation,” Kittridge responded curtly. “You went through a great deal of effort to find me. Even more to pass a very rigorous screening process. Your identity, background, financial status, and even your credit scores have been triple-checked. If you were not who and what you claimed, you would not have been able to pass through the front door, let alone find it.”

Cutler’s confidence wilted slightly and he looked around the lush office, the three walls covered in bookshelves and hardbound books. “Yours is the only chair,” he observed.

“You won’t be here long enough to require rest,” Kittridge answered, smiling thinly, then his voice resumed its business-like tone. “You are aware of the rates I charge?”

Cutler opened his mouth to respond, then clasped his hands behind his back and spread his feet slightly further apart. Despite the fancy suit, his military background practically screamed as he assumed parade rest. Cutler smiled thinly, the first truly genuine facial expression yet. “Of course, sir,” he answered, confirming his military history with the reflexive “sir.” Kittridge understood that all-too-well, requiring years for him to break that same habit. “I am prepared,” Cutler said. “Your accounts are already being augmented.” Cutler took several steps toward Kittridge and the cat rose to her feet and hissed sharply. Kittridge raised a hand, although Cutler had already frozen into place midstep.

“Kitty has trust issues,” Kittridge said. “In any case, I don’t shake hands, if that was your intent. I don’t risk that you might be carrying something nasty.”

Cutler backed off, and said, “The firm screens all employees regularly.”

“Before you leave, Miss Dennis will handle finalizing the contract.” Kittridge rubbed the underside of the cat’s neck, and watched as the man’s confused expression shifted toward anger,

then cooled to hate, a vein swelling in his temple. “You may go, sir,” Devon said, smiling. The impulse to say “dismissed” was almost irresistible, but he managed it. Of course, when Cutler did not move, Kittridge felt a stab of annoyance but, when he spoke, his voice was cold. “Miss Dennis is more than capable to handle you, Mister Cutler. You may go.”

“Very well,” Cutler growled and left the room in a flourish of cologne-tainted breeze. The door closed automatically and Kittridge continued to scratch at the cat’s chin, smiling thinly. The self-importance of the super wealthy never failed to amaze him. Granted, Cutler was very likely self-made, clawing his way up from the depth of ground-anchored social class — which deserved respect — but feeling entitled after that fight soured the admiration’s vintage.

Kittridge lifted the cat from his shoulders and sat her on the chair’s arm against him. She trilled softly and immediately climbed into the center of his lap. He stroked her neck absently. “What do you think of our client, cat?” he asked. She fell on her side and snuggled into the niche between his crossed legs. “He certainly had his pride,” he continued. “Not terribly stable, though: angry, afraid, perhaps a touch mad.” He rubbed between the cat’s eyes with his thumb. Kitty rested her chin on his thigh and closed her eyes. Moments passed, then the door opened without the announcing tone. Miss Dennis entered and smiled warmly.

“Everything is in order,” she said. “Funds received.”

“Anything I should know?”

“He complimented my boots.”

Kittridge’s brows shot up. “Really? How often did he glance at your ample bosom?”

“Not once.”

“Interesting,” he breathed. “How did I miss that about him?”

She moved her shoulders slightly, almost a shrug. “Job’s here in York,” she stated worriedly.

“The fee was adjusted accordingly?”

“Of course.”

“You are as lovely as you are clever.”

“I’d kiss you, but I don’t want that jealous bitch to snag my sweater.”

As if in confirmation, Kitty lifted her head and hissed.

“York,” Kittridge said, as if tasting something slightly unpleasant. “A difficult place to operate.”

“Too many lights,” she agreed.

“And too many motion-activated systems.”

Miss Dennis added, “Whatever happened to the days of working on terra firma?”

The cat sat up and meowed. “You’re right, Kitty,” he said. “Why am I sitting on my ass? What are we waiting for?” He picked her up with both hands and sat her on the floor. Miss Dennis leaned in to kiss him lightly on the lips, and Kitty leapt back onto his lap to hiss and swat at her. Miss Dennis immediately flipped her ear, making the cat flatten them even more.

“He’s mine, too!” Miss Dennis declared firmly. “And you’re my cat!”

“She does get possessive,” Kittridge agreed.

Miss Dennis smiled warmly. “Please be careful.” “Job seems easy enough.”

“They all do,” she responded.

“And none of them are.” Kittridge stood, sending Kitty leaping off his lap again.

* * *

Kittridge stepped one foot off of his hoverbike onto the rim of the floating island that held York far above the decadent wasteland that had once been New York City. He looked down at the tops of decrepit, crumbling buildings, rising from sea water like islands in and of themselves. When the glaciers melted, sea level rose roughly two hundred thirty feet, submerging even the Statue of Liberty below the surface. In some places, entire states were lost, like Florida. Of course, that the ocean was still a drab brown near the shore, before it faded to greenish, then blue, was a mystery unto itself. With York hovering a mile above the new sea level, he could see it all. He had to admit that the shift in colors was rather beautiful. If only it did not butt up against the eyesore of what remained of New York City. The saving grace was that the sun had already set and the sky was growing steadily darker, although the hundred or so hover craft and hoverbikes sailing around York in all directions had not even turned on their headlights yet.

Since the hoverbike had stopped, Kitty poked her head out of the compartment where cycles once held liquid fuel. Being battery-powered, the “fuel” now sat between the biker’s thighs. The only time that was a problem was on longer trips, where the solar panels had to kick in to keep the battery charged. It tended to get a bit warm in a part of the body where there was a dense concentration of nerve endings. Kittridge reached into the compartment and lifted out Kitty with one hand to hug her against his chest. “Soon, we’ll have to talk to Mayor Farrell about this, Kitty. It’s long past time to sweep away that awful mess down there.”

He bent low to set the cat down on the platform, still straddling the gap between his bike and the sky island boasting the world's largest city. While bent down, he detached a silver disc from behind the foot rest and dropped it into the edge of the platform, a length of spider-thread cable attached to its center. It caught and held firmly, forming a magnetic seal, then the cable shortened, being drawn into the hoverbike's chassis until it rested right up against the platform. The spider thread was literally thin enough to floss his teeth, although he would not recommend it. He had done it once, on a dare and under the influence, then had to get some dental work to repair the damage to his gums.

He swung out of the saddle and a gust of wind hit him, nearly pushing him backward a step, forcing him to lope lightly away from the edge. His weight gone, the hoverbike bobbed slightly. He walked the five yards to the edge of the opaque, gray dome enclosing York. It rose a thousand feet overhead and extended five miles to the West. The cat rubbed against his legs and he plucked her up to sit her on his shoulder like a pirate's parrot. Her claws dug into his t-shirt, a sensation that had evolved into a sense of comfort in situations like this. Devon took the final step for light to flash briefly against his calf as he triggered the electric eye. A smooth, deep voice, very deliberately masculine and authoritarian, said, "Name and code."

"Kittridge, Nathaniel," he lied. "M58734-Alpha-1." Another gust of wind rocked him lightly and the cat growled softly, no doubt warning him that dislodging her from her perch would be unwise. Of course, it was taking longer than usual to be permitted entry. "Don't disdain a blessing in disguise, Kitty. This means that lots of people are going in and out tonight. That's good cover." Finally, the computer waded through its backlog of security checks.

"Very well, Kittridge, Nathaniel," the deep voice came. "Proceed." A door hissed open a few feet to one side and he left the cool wind to enter the moist, warm air of the city within. In the same moment, he left the noise of incessant wind, trading it for the chaos of twenty different styles of music playing within his earshot, voices in as many languages, and other sounds of civilization. According to the docustreams, the interior of York was similar in many ways to big cities on terra firma, particularly the biggest cities in Japan. Of course, with most of their nation gone, it made sense that they would do their best to recreate it up here. The black cat dropped off his shoulder, padded ahead, and the door swished shut again. Kittridge watched the cat for a moment, city lights flashing beautifully off her glossy, well-groomed coat, wondering what the transition was like for a creature with hearing so much more sensitive than his own. When a dozen yards away, Kitty stopped and looked back at him, as if asking, "Coming?"

Kittridge smiled thinly and followed. Most people understood that they were recorded when they passed through entry points. They had to use their names and codes, which logged their movements. What most people did not realize was that they were also scanned from head to toe, recording physical dimensions, gender, hair and eye color, and the composition of their clothing. Soon, he reached the end of the alley created between two buildings built right up to follow the arch of the outer dome. On either side were open doorways with the slight scent of urine emanating from within. Kittridge entered and

marched past a man who did not wait long enough to dry his hands after washing them, then a woman emerged from a stall, most of her face concealed behind a filtered mask. He actually liked it when women wore masks: it allowed him to focus on the beauty of their eyes.

Kittridge reached the last stall and entered. Immediately, he pulled off his t-shirt and turned it inside-out, then held it in one hand as he dug a small spray bottle out of his pocket. He pumped the top with his index finger, spraying the outside of the fabric with a fine mist. He sprayed the front, then the back, then replaced the bottle in his pocket and pulled his shirt back on. Immediately, he could feel the nanobots he had deployed doing their work, altering the fabric at the molecular level, changing it from cotton to a synthetic fabric. At the same time, it tightened, forming itself to his frame, leaving nothing loose enough to catch or snag on outcroppings, let alone catch at his fingers. That done, he took a plastic cup out of his sock and put it down the front of his slacks, shifting and adjusting it for comfort. Last, he sprayed his slacks, performing the same transformation as he had his shirt. If he was scanned again, his clothing would be made of different fabric, and his gender would be obscured. Some might claim that he was being paranoid, but that did not mean that no one wanted to kill him. In fact, a great many people would very much enjoy emptying his crematory urn into a backed-up toilet, then giving it another filthy flush.

The mark was in a sleek apartment complex near the center of York. It was not a long trip getting there via the public transport trolleys racing practically everywhere anytime, day or night. Of course, he would not be using such transportation. Security scanners were in every trolley doorway. Worse, with Kitty in tow, too many took notice, some even asking if she was real. The question was one thing, but trying to pet her was another. Too often, she reacted defensively, typically drawing blood. Both elements drew more attention than even a standard trolley scan. So Kittridge would avoid both by making the trek through the area with the least of both.

Kittridge emerged from the lavatory and picked up Kitty with one hand, pulled open a belly pouch, and slipped her inside. She managed to turn two circles when pressed up against him, which never ceased to amaze, then poked her head out. He dug a pair of black discs out of his pocket and pressed his thumbs against the center of both, deactivating the electromagnets, which allowed the discs to separate. He pulled spider thread from each of them, hooking the loose ends to the outside of his hips and, more importantly, the heavily reinforced beltwork.

The darkest point in the alley was a recessed, vertical half-pipe where several varieties of pipes and conduits were mounted, containing fiber-optic cables and other such materials that kept that area of York functional. The half-pipe was not much wider than a man's shoulders, designed to help maintenance techs ascend and descend their length as needed. Kittridge had discovered another very special use for them quite some time ago. He crossed to the half-pipe and bent sideways, arm extended, then bolted straight, throwing the black discs as far as he could. They struck the back of the half-pipe with a soft tap-tap, then the spider thread started to retract, pulling him upward. Kittridge rested his toes against the sides of the half-pipe, his fingertips against its back before him. Soon,

he was twenty or so feet off the ground, where he detached one of the discs and threw it again. As soon as it locked down, the second detached and rose above him steadily. At the last moment, the cable jerked sharply, sending it upward the same distance as the first. Kittridge rose another twenty-odd feet and he repeated the process, ascending the half-pipe quickly. In a matter of moments, he was at the top, ten stories above the ground, where he detached the discs from the half-pipe, the hooks from his belt, and replaced it all in his pocket. That done, he dug into the pouch around Kitty's warm body, then drew out a black rectangle of fabric. He worked it loose into a sheer balaclava and a pair of gloves. He pulled them all on, then waited a few heartbeats for his body heat to activate the process that would contract the fabric to fit him snugly. He crossed to the edge of the building and walked along it, looking down. Quickly, he located the feed conduit from this building to the next. It was the width of his palm and mostly flat, mounted to the building at regulation twelve inches below the top. Kittridge stepped down onto it, bending his other leg to the point of discomfort, his hand on the roof, then turned and faced the far building, a regulation eighteen of his steps away. He marched across the open space almost casually, only extending his hands once to reassert his balance, which triggered another annoyed growl from Kitty.

He repeated this time and again, moving from one building to the next, ascending through maintenance half-pipes, crossing, ascending again, crossing again. At long last, he reached the mark's living complex, one of four of the tallest buildings in York. Whereas most of the buildings were sleek and smooth, these four were multi-faceted, with decorative ledges at seemingly random locations. In the end, he thought it made the buildings look like incredibly large pipe cleaners. Then again, it also made them vulnerable in ways that others were not. It was for this purpose that he brought Kitty. As a rule, Kittridge worked alone. The exception was in York. He dropped the feline onto the ground and she looked up at the side of the building.

"Go," he said, looking up, as well. The cat meowed, as if to warn him that he had better follow closely, then carefully picked her way onto the first ledge. As usual, he could not help but be in awe of the cat's dexterity and truly complete lack of fear. As Kitty quickly moved from ledge to ledge, sometimes stretching her frame to reach the next, sometimes leaping across gaps too far for her to reach, he could not help but envy her sleek grace. Finally, she had moved far enough ahead that he followed, his own motions silent and cat-like as he kept pace, often needing only one movement to match four of hers. Steadily, the pair circled around the corner to another face of the building. Kittridge caught a ledge with both hands and pulled himself up to rest a knee on it, then worked up to both feet. In that time, she had already crossed five more ledges. He matched her fluidity with precise, sharp motions.

Kittridge reached the destination, where he stopped and looked around. "No cameras seeing shadows," he muttered under his breath, and looked down a hundred-fifty-story drop, then up at another hundred stories rising above. He lowered onto one knee and Kitty leapt down from a higher ledge. He lifted her with one hand and slid her back into his belly pouch while, at the same time, he twisted a small, plastic compartment from the

inside of his belt to the outside. He pressed his index finger on one end, then tapped out a memorized cadence, and it clicked softly. He pushed his finger inside, pushing a small drawer out the other side. Resting inside was a small, black cube with two tiny lights on its front, no larger than a die at the craps table. He pressed the front of the cube against the right side of the window at eye level, waited for the faintest glow to show on the inside ledge, then moved it steadily, following the side down to the bottom, across to the left side, up along it, then across to complete the square. Immediately, the thick glass came free, falling inward, but his free hand moved quickly, catching its top edge. Warm air flooded down over him and Kitty growled softly. Very slowly, he rotated the piece of glass around, the cube adhering to one corner, until it rested on the floor. Kittridge twisted the cube and it detached. He bent to step in through the window and move quickly aside, to avoid remaining silhouetted. Every sense straining, he replaced the cube in his belt compartment and slid it closed. All the while, Kitty's tail lashed anxiously inside the pouch, pressing against his belly and sliding across it, only to repeat the process. Slowly, he pushed Kitty's head down into

the pouch, then pressed it closed until it sealed. Her tail persisted in its angry dance.

He had intended to make the mark's death appear to be from natural causes. There was a particular blend of biomech that he administered through a mist, much like how he treated his shirt and pants, which disrupted the body's autonomic nervous system, resulting in an almost instantaneous shutdown of the body's involuntary physiologic processes. Of course, if Kitty's response was anything to judge by, that plan was not going to be carried out. He reached behind his head to a plastic harness that ran along his spine, grasped the grip of a slender pistol and twisted it slowly, withdrawing the weapon and bringing it down in front of him to grip it in both hands. The pistol was light, slim and stream-lined, measuring less than four inches high and long, so the muzzle extended only a finger width past his knuckle. It was not the prettiest weapon, by any means, looking almost like its polymer frame was pressed in a waffle iron, but it was nine millimeter and held four rounds. It was more than sufficient in a pinch, which is where he was. Kittridge closed his eyes and reached out with his other senses, straining to hear even the slightest whisper of breath, and his nostrils flared ... and caught a whiff of cologne. It was faint, but he still recognized it. He had scented it earlier that very day. The cat's tail lashed inside the pouch and he rested a palm on her side until she stopped, then resumed his two-handed grip.

Soundlessly, Kittridge crossed the room, pressed his back against the wall beside an open doorway, leaned in to peek through, then back again, just as quickly. He inhaled deeply, filling his sinuses with the scent. What was happening? It was not the first time that Kittridge had been set up. Being in such a violent business, it was, for lack of a better word, part of the business. People do not like it when their friends, family, and coworkers get dead. With all Kittridge's years of experience, his marks tended to have very powerful friends who could buy their way into or out of nearly every situation. So why would Cutler

go to such extreme measures to set Kittridge up, only to bungle the job by not showering off his cologne? Cutler might have been a lot of things, but he did not impress Kittridge as stupid.

Kittridge slid soundlessly around the door jam and froze, waiting for his eyes to adjust to the deeper dim. It was not helping much. That could mean several things: every window was covered with blackout shades; the power was out in the apartment ... or both.

Kittridge had always prided himself on his natural night vision. He could see better in the dark than most, but this was definitely outside the norm. The glow of a lit clock display was often enough for him to see vague shapes, but there were nothing to see. No glowing numbers from clocks, no LEDs marking light switches ... nothing. So the power was cut, deliberately or otherwise.

Keeping the weapon ready in one hand, Kittridge pressed his fingers through the seal in the top of the belly pouch and took out the cat. Cautiously, he lowered into a half-crouch and tossed her back into the room he had just left. Straightening again, he reached inside the pouch and immediately found his goggles. They were small, with oval lenses and could be clipped quickly onto the bridge of the nose. He did just that, then tapped the lenses. Immediately, the room lit with shades of green night-vision — in time to see his attacker coming at him with a black rod in hand. Kittridge had no time to react as the rod struck the weapon, knocking it out of his suddenly numb fingertips, but it bought him some time. He caught the rod in one hand, but his attacker was smart enough to release it and come back with his elbow, striking Kittridge in the center of the forehead as he tried to duck the blow. It snapped his head back so sharply that everything went black, night-vision goggles or no, and Kittridge dropped to one knee. Gratefully, the goggles were still on his face and, at that level, he spotted a target that would fit the situation nicely. He grabbed the attacker's testicles in one hand, yanked and twisted. The man roared in pain and leapt away. Kittridge followed immediately but was still slightly dazed. When he swung the rod, he missed, and the unspent energy of the attack twisted his hips and shoulders too far. Immediately, the other man's knee or shin struck his right side, on the back of his ribs. He was unsure if he had ever been kicked that hard before. Pain exploded through his ribs on that side, at least one of them likely broken. Worse, however, was that he was unable to catch his breath.

Kittridge retreated, trying to get his lungs to inflate, but the attacker did not give him a moment's respite. He kicked again, but Kittridge crossed his wrists and blocked it at shoulder level. That it struck so high — aside from his brief glimpses of the man — indicated that his attacker was bigger than Cutler. In that moment of contact, he clamped both hands down on the attacker's ankle and shoved it overhead, slamming the man into the wall, then rested it on his shoulder to free one hand for two solid punches to the man's groin. Again, he roared in pain and, with Kittridge pushing so hard into him, lifted his other leg and gave Kittridge a taste of his own medicine. If it was hard to breathe after the rib injury, it was nearly impossible after the man kicked him in the groin so hard that he thought he might vomit. Kittridge staggered backward and barely pulled his head back in time to avoid a punch, but it clipped the edge of his goggles, sending them flying. He

heard them clatter across the floor, but he could hear the man's breathing. He punched with all that he was worth, but struck the wall and felt the board break apart, then again, as his fist passed through into the next room. When he tried to yank it loose, his forearm would not come free. Kittridge had been punched enough times that he recognize the feel of a man's knuckles striking the side of his face, snapping his chin sharply to the left. He immediately tasted the coppery tang of blood — then he heard the yowl of a cat in a fury, followed immediately by the man's cry of alarm. Kittridge rested his free hand on the wall and yanked the other free, then felt something under his left foot. He dropped to one knee and scrabbled at it, recognizing the feel of his dropped weapon. Kittridge snatched it up and fired at the sound of the man's cries of pain, unloading the magazine. Each flash of muzzle flare allowed him a split-second of light to adjust the aim on his next shot, then nothing. There was an instant of silence that felt far longer, then the heavy thump of the man hitting the floor. Kittridge dropped to hands and knees and struggled to take a deep breath. He wanted to call out to the cat, but he could not breathe, which meant that he could not speak. He worried that he might pass out, which might lead to him being apprehended for murder. For one thing, his pistol was small, which meant that it had no silencer. He closed his eyes and willed his muscles to relax ... and took a shallow breath. At the same time, he felt the silky brush of the tip of Kitty's tail across his eyelids. A moment later, he heard her purring. Kittridge sat up and lifted his palm, then whispered, "Time." The muted glow of four numerals showed through his skin and, in turn, the glove. It was a pale shade somewhere between pink and orange: 2-2-1-4. In a strained whisper, he said, "Timer. Five minutes." A dot appeared beside the last digit and Kittridge double-pumped his fist, extinguishing the display. He twisted out the case inside his belt, but pressed out the small drawer the other direction. Inside was a short cylinder. He took it out and pressed the back end, igniting a red light. He shined it on the body of his attacker, lying spread eagle on the floor. Kitty strolled casually over to sniff silently at the body. Kittridge croaked as he got back to his feet and approached cautiously, looking over the rest of the room with the light. With no power, there were no cameras or other security tech. He swung the circle of red light back to the body. The face was uncovered, other than night-vision goggles similar to his own, but these were strapped on. He gripped the light-stick in both hands, twisted it, then bent it in half. He directed the light at the body and squeezed, snapping a picture, then straightened it back into a short stick. Kittridge scanned the room a second time. He still had to struggle to breathe and had undoubtedly contaminated the scene with his own DNA, but that could not be helped.

Kittridge bent over the top of the corpse and inhaled, verifying that the man was, indeed, wearing Cutler's cologne. Once again, it made no sense. This man had clearly been a professional. Why risk a mission by giving off such a distinct odor? Then again, maybe it had not been a mistake at all. Kittridge rose and trotted across the apartment, sweeping it quickly with the red light as he breathed laboriously. He peeked quickly into one doorway: office. The next was a half-bath. The next was the bedroom and, laid out on the bed, face-down and nude, was a dead man. A spiked, leather collar attached to a leash encircled his neck, but he did not seem to have enjoyed the experience. "Shit," Kittridge hissed, then crossed to the lifeless body to shine the light on the corpse's face: its eyes were open and scattered with red spots; the tissue immediately surrounding the collar was inflamed with

enough swelling that it was almost flush with the top of the leather strap. Nonetheless, it was clearly the mark Kittridge had been hired to dispatch. Kitty loped lightly onto the bed and sniffed at the dead man. “Meet our target,” he said.

Kitty continued to sniff curiously, until her head jerked up sharply as a palm-sized piece of glass on the night stand vibrated. Kittridge crossed to it, fully transparent from this angle, then quickly flipped it over with the tip of his little finger. A screen stood open on the other side, showing a photo of Cutler and the mark at a table in a restaurant, each smiling happily. “Ah. So the cologne was not a mistake.” The image of Cutler on the glass vanished, returning the device to crystalline transparency. Kittridge once again gripped the light-stick in both hands, twisted it, bent it in half, and took a picture of the mark. As he straightened the camera back into a short stick, he turned and trotted silently out of the bedroom and back to the room where he had entered. He did not recognize the other assassin, but that was no surprise. A stab of paranoia gave him pause. Had the second killer been intended for Kittridge after he finished the mark? He shook off the thought as soon as it came. For whatever reason, Cutler had double-booked the hit. There was little other explanation.

Kittridge bent and picked up Kitty with one hand, groaning as he bent over, then slid her back into the belly pouch. He took a deep breath and gasped as pain shot through his frame, starting in the right side of his back and radiating out to the top of his head and his other extremities. Hurting that badly, it was likely a rib separation rather than a fracture. He reached around to feel at his back and, thick as his thumb, felt the rib that was bulging out of place. Kittridge took another deep breath and thumped his back sharply against the wall, knocking it back into place. He let out a long, relieved breath, then bent to slide out the window. A single tone sounded, just loud enough for him to hear, as the five-minute timer elapsed. Kittridge double-pumped his fist and looked down at the first of three police transports to come to a stop outside the building. He moved quickly, retracing his steps along the outside of the building and down to the next landing, as silent and precise as a cat.

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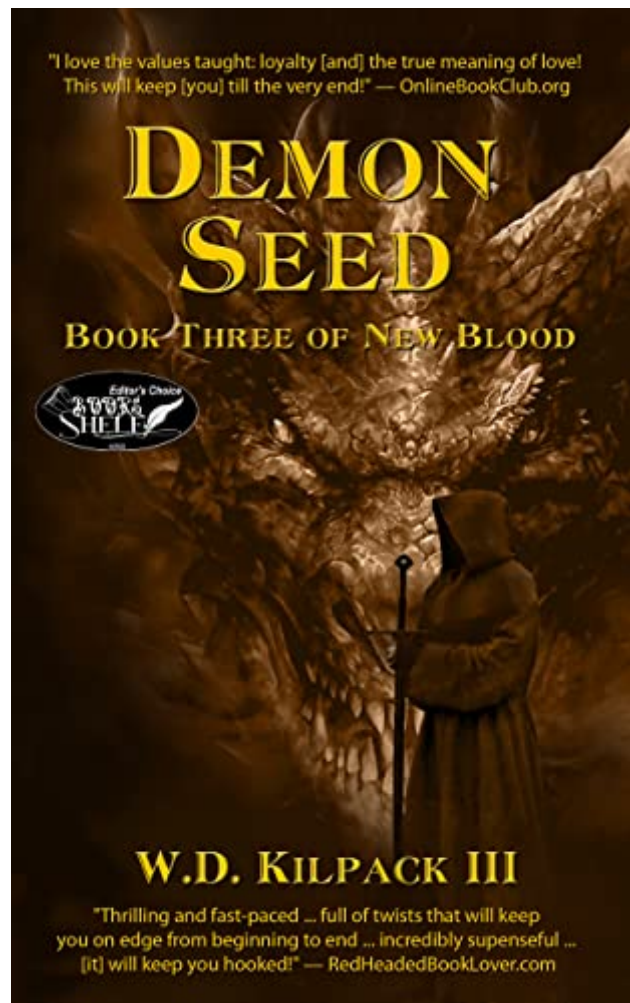
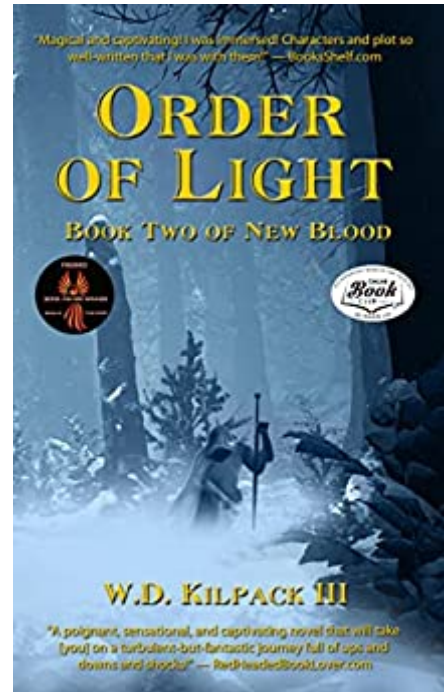
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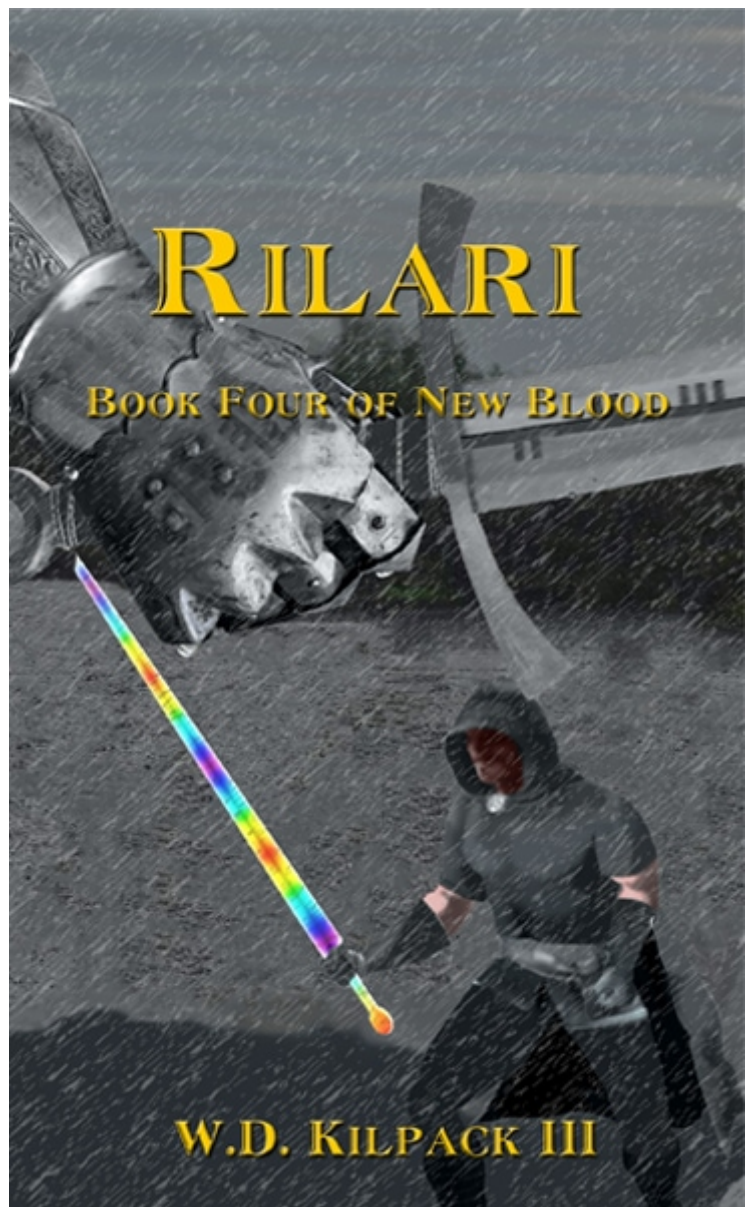
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