

One Minute Left

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First Place, BSFS Jack L. Chalker 2015 Young Writers' Contest

Mountain Ridge High School—Frostburg, MD

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The clocks are meant to allow everyone to be organized. There are no surprises in life. At the age of two, you receive your first toy—a doll for girls and an action figure for boys. When you turn four, you start primary school. At the age of 10 you get your first bike. At 16, you receive your clock. At 18, you are assigned a job and your life goes on from there. There are no exceptions and no surprises. Everyone's future is planned out carefully. Every second is accounted for and nobody questions it.

It has been this way for years. The clocks, however, are the newest bit of technology that affect the community directly. There have been plenty of developments, but they are only available to government officials. The clocks came out 29 years ago and have been a part of society ever since then. After years of observation, your match is paired up with you and the two of you receive the same countdown. When your clock reaches zero, you meet your other half.

"Hold still," my mother commanded as she tugged my hair back from my face once again. My unruly black hair was being forced into a tight hairstyle by my anxious mother. Her hands shook unsteadily as she twisted my hair.

However, I had no room to judge. My own heart was racing in my chest though it felt as if it were in my throat.

My clock was down to four hours and thirty-six minutes.

The small countdown on my wrist seemed to weigh heavier as the seconds ticked by at their unusually fast pace. I lifted my wrist and looked down at the thin, rectangular screen etched into my skin. The digital numbers counted down to the moment I've prepared myself for since I received it exactly one year ago.

"There. You're finished." My mother stepped away, releasing my hair and admiring her work.

I looked away from the numbers that would decide my fate and up into the mirror. My hair was twisted and pulled away from my face. The dark strands were braided and wrapped into a bun at the back of my head. My pale skin was dusted with light freckles, much to my dismay, and my green eyes were wide. The fear reflected in my eyes no matter how hard I attempted to calm myself down and force myself to be eager.

I quickly looked away from my reflection and settled my gaze on my wrist once again.

Four hours and thirty-four minutes.

"You're beautiful," my mother said encouragingly, placing her fragile hands on my shoulders.

I didn't reply, my thoughts racing around in my mind. What if he doesn't like me? What if I don't like him? What if this is all a big mistake and I end up with the wrong person? The idea that someone nearby has the same countdown on their own wrist and that I was about to meet them for the first time was unbelievably terrifying.

Nobody necessarily knows how it works. We are never told how anyone could possibly know when you are going to meet the person you will spend the rest of your life with. That's another thing—divorces have been outlawed ever since the clocks were required. Anything could happen, and yet, it hasn't failed yet. There are theories of some kind of magnetic sensor in the watch while others say it's simply magic. However, technology has become more and more advanced every day. It's no surprise to me that the clocks are seemingly flawless.

"Evangeline." My mother said my name in an attempt to regain my attention.

I looked over my shoulder at her. She gazed down at me with a small smile. "You'll be fine," she said, squeezing my shoulders slightly, trying to offer comfort.

From the corner of my eye, I could see the scar from her clock. A day after she met my father, the clock detached itself from her wrist, leaving a pale scar in the thin rectangular shape on the inside of her wrist just above her radial artery. I looked away and back at the mirror. My mother stood tall behind me, my hair the same dark color as her own. She met my gaze as she spoke. "I'll be in the kitchen. Come down when you're ready." She released my shoulders, the comforting pressure and warmth of her hands disappearing along with the sound of her shoes on the wooden floor.

Once her footsteps had vanished, I let out a breath I didn't know I was holding. I looked over at my small, plain bed that was pressed up against the wall furthest from the door. A small, light blue dress with a white lace collar lay tidily on my quilt. My small, black shoes sat at the base of the bed, next to the dress. I began putting the skirt over my head, giving my mind something to focus on rather than fretting over the impending meeting with the person I am meant to spend the rest of my life with.

The blue cotton slid over my head and settled on my body. I reached behind me, sliding my fingers around in a search for the zipper in the back. Once I found it, I pulled the zipper up, securing the dress in place. I smoothed out the wrinkles in the skirt, my hands unsteady and drenched in perspiration. I grabbed the carefully polished shoes and slid them onto my feet before looking in the mirror. I took a deep breath, finding it hard to inhale at all.

I exhaled and left the safety of my bedroom. It was too late to retreat back into the warm, comforting blankets draping over my mattress.

The day passed in a blur, my mind never focusing on any of my lessons. My thoughts remained on the clock and my future. It seemed that once I convinced myself to be excited and of all the wonderful things that could happen, my thoughts immediately turned grim and forced all of the bad thoughts back into my mind.

I battled with my thoughts until my third class of the day.

Five minutes and seventeen seconds.

My hands were slick with sweat and my head felt as if it were full of cotton. I only heard the high-pitched ringing in my eardrums as I numbly sat at my assigned lab table. I glanced around the classroom, searching for a face showing as much anxiety as I was feeling. Everyone either had their head down, typing notes on their tablets, or they were staring into space with their own thoughts occupying them. However, the professor didn't notice. He continued droning on about ionic and covalent bonds.

Minutes passed as hours and my apprehensiveness didn't fade. I didn't dare look at my wrist as I was terrified of what number would be flashing on the screen. I ran my fingers along the hem of my dress, rubbing the material in a small attempt to distract myself. The cotton was soft but did nothing to release the pressure in my chest.

My stomach seemed to lurch uncomfortably and a sense of panic shuddered down my spine. The sound of a loud siren blew from outside. The ear-piercing shriek rang through the classroom and our professor, Mr. Watson, looked towards the windows lining the wall to my right. The alarm came from below the windows and out on the highway running parallel to the school.

Mr. Watson hurried over to the windows and looked down at the highway below. The entire class, myself included, watched him with curiosity bubbling up in our chests. However, not one student moved out of their seat.

I faintly heard the professor speak under his breath before he spun around and ran from the room. We listened to his shoes squeaking against the tiled floor in the hallway as he ran.

Keen on seeing what had made our virtually emotionless professor so concerned, the entire class scrambled from their seats and ran to the windows. I was the last one to make it out of my seat, making me stuck at the back of the swarm of students. I squirmed my way through the mass of 17-year-olds and found a small gap by the window. I pushed past the last classmate and leaned forward so I could see the highway below.

Red and blue lights reflected against the window and I tried to see past the ambulance and police hovercrafts. I squinted against the bright lights and leaned forward until my nose was brushing against the barred-up windows.

The scene below was full of chaos and I briefly spotted Mr. Watson's figure exit the building and rush to the growing circle of professors at the edge of the highway.

Policemen and paramedics were gathered around a body. From where I stood, it looked to be a boy about my age with dark hair. The gruesome sight made my legs grow weak and my stomach twist into an even larger knot.

The sound of my classmates' voices and discussions filled the room.

"Who is that?" a girl near me asked, standing on the tips of her toes to see out the window.

"I heard we were getting a new student today. Do you think...?"

"Evangeline? Are you alright? You look pale."

I never replied and kept my eyes glued to the scene. I watched as the paramedics lifted the boy onto a gurney and hoisted it up into the back of the ambulance. He disappeared into the red and white hovercraft; the only sign he was ever there was the puddle of dark red blood on the asphalt.

"Evangeline Jane Caverly."

I turned around along with everyone else in the classroom when my name was called. A tall woman wearing a formal suit stood in the doorway of the classroom. Her blonde—nearly white—hair was pulled back in a complicated bun at the crown of her head. Her hands were clasped together and she stood with an air of authority around her. Two men in black suits stood motionless behind her, each of them looking at me.

"Come with me," the woman said, standing with impeccable posture. The crowd of classmates moved out of the way, everyone having fallen silent. I stepped towards the woman and her intimidating guards.

I glanced down at my wrist one last time and my heart leaped up into my throat. The numbers blinked but never changed. It was frozen on one minute.

When I looked back up, I was standing two feet away from the pale woman. Her eyes were a light blue and seemed out of place on her sharp-featured face.

I wanted to say something. Perhaps I could demand to know who she was and what was wrong with my clock. Instead, I looked down at the floor and stuttered, "Um, that boy...outside...he was my..." I zoned off, gesturing to my frozen clock.

The woman paused before speaking. "Ms. Caverly, we're sorry for your loss, but you must come with us." Her words seemed sincere but her tone revealed her indifference to the topic. She turned around and her guards shifted so they were out of her way. One of them took their position behind me and the other stood in front of the pale woman.

Part of me wanted to run away, back to my house at the edge of the city and leap into my mother's comforting arms. However, the rest of me wanted answers as to what was happening and why my clock had stopped. As far as I knew, nobody's clock ever paused or stopped before they met their partner. Something was wrong with my clock. For once, it seemed my future wasn't planned out. Whatever it was that was about to happen, it was out of my control and I had no way to prepare myself for what lay ahead of me.

Interview With Mars Three Crew (December)

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Second Place, BSFS Jack L. Chalker 2015 Young Writers' Contest

Bohemia Manor High School—Elkton, MD

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Did we see it happen? No, none of us did. We knew, of course, that it was happening, but we couldn't see. It was night for us, so Earth would only have been visible to the other side. But all of us knew. We had been in constant contact with Control for months leading up to that day. So, no, we never saw it. But when the com lines went silent that night, we all knew. The countdown timer reached zero, and 48 seconds later, we heard the last words from Control:

"Ladies and gentlemen of Mars Three, we bid you farewell from planet Earth."

The broadcast stopped, and that was the end of that.

Were we sad? Of course we were. No human in history had ever felt such terrifying loss. Not Napoleon, not Caesar, no one had ever lived on through such an ordeal. However, if my memory serves me well, not one of us cried on that night. All I recall from those painful moments was the crushing force of silence.

Did we have hope? Well, no. Control gave us all the numbers. We ran simulations, just as they did. We drew up schematics and possible solutions, in tandem with the boys back home, but it was futile. The amount of raw energy, in Joules, required to avert Cataclysm was greater than the sum of all energy produced by every nuclear reactor on Earth, ever. And the boys at Control had a mere five months to dream up the Solution.

The Solution was the international project devoted to stopping Cataclysm. Governments and corporations from the United States, the UK, Germany, China, Russia, Japan, North and South Korea, Italy, India, and France spent an estimated 12 trillion dollars to fund the project.

Though the Solution evidently failed at its main goal, it certainly succeeded in bringing the world's nations together. North Korea, through much trouble, hastily joined the United Nations in order to assist the project. Wars in the Middle East essentially went on hold, while every group rallied to build the Solution.

On April 10th, two months before Cataclysm, we watched a live video of the first rockets going up. The launches of A and B were synchronized, with A lifting off from north of Beijing and B from Cape Canaveral two hours later. Rockets C through Y went up in the following weeks.

Starting on May 21st, the 25 unmanned vessels were all doing a delicate dance around Cataclysm. The comet was estimated to be four to five hundred miles wide, but we never really knew because of its outer cloud. Caty emitted giant geysers at almost all angles, making her virtually impossible to measure. These same geysers were the reason that initial plans would have failed. NASA experts insisted that a nuclear explosion would drive Caty off course, but nukes would have been simply blown off course by the geysers. And a nuclear bomb only works up close.

Getting close to Caty, close enough to kick her off course, now, that was the challenge to be met by the Solution. The rockets, controlled by Centers in Beijing, Houston, Mumbai, and Pyongyang, spent three days linking together into a massive landing craft. The product, known as "Z," was a ring formation 10 times larger than the Chrysler Building.

June first was the highly-anticipated day of the landing. We stayed inside that day, glued to the crackly screen in the common room. Shortly before Martian sunset, Z made its final descent into Caty's frigid atmosphere.

Control agreed with our estimates that Z would withstand no more than two direct geyser blasts. The odds were five to one that three or more blasts would occur.

When Z was still 20 miles up, the first geyser hit. Nothing critical broke, at least, not that we were told. I personally believe we were very lucky on that one.

Only two miles later, the second geyser made an even more direct hit. The Mumbai center lost all contact with their rockets, though that glitch may have been an error back home. Z went into a spin of about 40 revolutions per minute, which the boys probably could have corrected if Mumbai had still been online.

Z had made it all the way to three miles from Caty's surface when Beijing gave the order to slow down. Counter-thrust engines ignited, decelerating Z towards a soft landing.

Then geyser three hit, and it was all over. Only Houston remained in contact with two rockets, E and R. Scrambling to save the mission, they tried to detonate before landing. Only E went off, anyway, and it was too far up to have any effect.

At the third geyser, public broadcasts stopped. We saw everything, but the rest of the world was kept in the dark. This was intentional.

Before the first rockets even launched, an international conference was held. All nations participating in the Solution agreed that, in the event of a catastrophic failure, the people of the world wouldn't be informed. I can understand their thinking. If the world knew that an unstoppable comet was still hurtling towards Earth, chaos would have broken out. Looters, robbers, murderers, and anarchists would have ruined the last nine days of humanity on Earth.

On the morning of June second, the President of the United States addressed the nation, saying that, "Despite near disaster, the detonation of nuclear warheads aboard Z sufficiently altered the trajectory of Comet Cataclysm, moving its path a safe

distance away from Earth.” He gave a speech afterward, commending the scientists of NASA and all world groups involved in the Solution. Other world leaders followed suit, proudly announcing the success of the mission.

While millions celebrated in the streets, we bit our nails and kept our mouths shut.

Within the elite few who knew the truth, a whispered controversy erupted. Houston and Pyongyang insisted that Mumbai had given the order to slow down too early, and that in doing so, they had put Z in the path of the third geyser. Beijing stood with Mumbai, saying that slow-down had occurred only two seconds earlier than intended, in an attempt to compensate for delay in communication.

As for me? I saw the debate as frivolous. The director of communications at Mumbai, on the other hand, shot himself in the head two days before Cataclysm. The chatter died with him.

June 10th came on Earth. Control sent us the timetable of what would happen: Caty would impact roughly over Cairo at 11 AM local time. People wouldn’t even have time to panic. We knew we wouldn’t see, and I don’t think any of us wanted to. Instead, we all sat in the common room and listened to Control for as long as we could.

At 4:08 AM, Eastern Standard Time, Control issued those final words:

“Ladies and gentlemen of Mars Three, we bid you farewell from planet Earth.”

Us four astronauts put down our headsets and sat on the plastic floor, staring at the ground. Minutes later, Dr. Marco, a crewmate of mine, stood up and returned to his sleeping quarters. The other two followed suit shortly thereafter.

After some time sitting there, praying to myself, I opened my eyes and started to put away the headsets. One after the next, I wound up the wires and tucked them away beneath the main console. Just before I unplugged the last one, I glanced up at the control panel.

To this day, I don’t know why I checked the indicator lights. I knew very well that Earth had just been ravaged by the impact of Cataclysm. I knew that Houston’s communication towers would be destroyed, and that the “Line Active,” light would be dark.

But when I looked up, the light was still on. I remember thinking to myself, what a tragic glitch. I know there’s no one on the other end.

I unplugged the last headset.

Audio transferred to the main speakers.

The voice of a man from Control echoed off the common room walls:

“...Three, Mars Three, do you copy? This is Control, in Houston, Texas. Mars Three, can you hear me?”

“Yes!” I replied, baffled to hear Control still intact. After so many minutes, the shock waves would have...

“Word just came in from Cairo. Caty has diverted course.”

At first, I thought I was dreaming. Or perhaps that I was hallucinating. Five years on Mars messes with one’s mind. Then, when I realized that the transmission was real, I shouted for the others to come back:

“Dr. Marco! Ava Lee! Harriet! Come quickly! Earth is saved!”

They came running. Ava Lee tripped and fell into the room. After helping her back to her feet, I turned up the volume in the common room.

“Cataclysm hit the atmosphere, as expected,” Control continued, “but ricocheted back into space. The report we have says, ‘a massive sound wave in the air seemed to reflect back into space, propelling the comet in the opposite direction.’”

We danced, sang, laughed, and thanked our lucky stars that by some miracle, our home planet was intact.

In the following weeks, reports from Control explained what caused the unanticipated phenomenon. Apparently, the sonic blast of the Caty hitting the atmosphere over Cairo resonated back in a precise frequency, granting a temporary “reverse gravity field” beneath the comet. Some conspiracies pointed to the resonating chamber inside Khufu’s pyramid, not far from Cairo. If that turns out to be true, then we’ve opened up a whole new can of worms.

So did we see it? No; no one saw it. Cataclysm was averted, by some miracle. Meanwhile, the Solution project had brought the whole world together. The wars that had been paused never resumed. Treaties were signed between even the bitterest of once-rivalling nations.

Cataclysm saved the world.



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Balticon 48 Hall Costume Winners

**Peoples’ Choice Costume:
#44 “Everquest Faire” By Lady Osma**

**Best Young Fan Costume:
#27 “Ariel” by Emily**

How the Rav Tricked the Dragon: An Amshi'in Folktale

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Third Place, BSFS Jack L. Chalker 2015 Young Writers' Contest

Home Schooled—Columbia, MD

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It is said that long ago, my people, the Amshi'in, did not deal well with the dragons, in much the same way the Parcafesh and the Sevallin do not deal well with them today. In those days, the Amshi'in had no need for travel or craft, instead spending our time herding and farming in the south.

We had few cities, but we had many smaller towns and villages. One of these villages was built beside a mountain, for the northern part of that land has many mountains. On this mountain, a dragon took up residence, and there it lived, stealing sheep from our herds to eat. Dragons were unusual in our land, but they came in from the northern mountains sometimes, although they could not abide the desert.

When we had cities, at this time, priests, the ones we call rav, often traveled from one to another, seeking scholarly debate. As it happened, one day a rav was on his way, meaning to reach the capital before the Harvest. He was ahead of his schedule, and decided to stop at this village to rest himself and his beasts, at least for a day or so, if only for the Sabbath.

When he arrived, he found the village quite empty; for all it was mid-afternoon, and there should have been people in all the streets. He quickly found himself an inn, and when the sun had gone down and the innkeeper had not lit the candles for the Sabbath as is customary for the Amshi'in, he inquired as to why.

"The dragon does not allow it," the man replied. "He says if we are to worship any god, let it be him."

The traveler asked, "Can your rav do nothing?"

The innkeeper shook his head. "Our rav is dead. He was among the first killed by the dragon when he came here a week ago, and our rav tried to reason with him." The innkeeper looked at the rav thoughtfully. "He will be wanting to meet you. He takes tuppence from all travelers who pass through this town."

At this, the rav resolved to do something, for he was a righteous man, and unable to sit by while people were suffering. And so the next day, he took his sacred books, of prayer and writings, and went to the dragon's cave.

Now, all know that dragons have a love of carvings and jewelry, paintings and rugs, all manner of things finely crafted by the delicate hands of artisans among men, for they themselves cannot work the forges and tools required with their great and clumsy claws. Fewer know, however, that equal is their love of magic and knowledge, for God gave the gift of magic to them when all was first created. It is with this magic that they breathe fire.

But when they breathe fire, they use a great deal of magic, and in seeking bigger and more beautiful displays of flame to impress potential mates use all of their energy. Thus dragons are always seeking ways to augment their wizardry.

"Dragon!" called the rav as he stood outside the mouth of the dragon's cave. "Dragon, come out, for I, a priest of the people called the Amshi'in, have an offer to make with you."

"What could this mortal, a priest of men have to interest me?" called a booming voice that made the rav shake in his boots. "I am undying, unless I am struck in battle. I have no soul for your god to punish or reward, in this life or the next. I have a village of loyal servants, and a feast of their livestock whenever I hunger. What could you, a poor and traveling priest offer me to tempt me so?"

"Magic," replied the rav when the dragon was finished. "My people have a great knowledge of the magic of this universe, and this is my offer: That I will teach you all I know of this force, and in return, you will let me pass on my way to the capital of this land."

The dragon considered. "Come in, mortal," he said. "I will see what you can teach me – if you are able."

The rav entered the cave, and had he been a man of lesser courage, he might have turned and fled at the sight that awaited him. There knelt in the cave a great lizard, the size of 10 horses, with claws large enough to grasp the oil jars that must be moved by two men, and carry them easily. He had wings that were huge and bat-like, stretching upward toward the hole in the ceiling, and a tail like a green whip. He watched the man with goat eyes the size of dinner plates from his seat on a pile of bones, left from his feasts on sheep, goats, and men.

"Go on," said the dragon. "Begin."

So the rav sat in front of the dragon, and he took from his bag his prayer book, and he began to read. He read first the opening prayers for a service; and he read from the Book of Beginnings, and the commentaries, all in our language of Amshekret, that even then was spoken rarely. He read also poems, the ones from our kings, that told of our history. The prayers for oneself, and for others; for our land, and for other lands, and those that praised God and swore allegiance to Xem.

He read for 30 days, and 30 nights; indeed, he read past the end of Harvest and into the beginning of winter, but it did not matter to the rav, for true piety is doing good in this world. On the 41st day, he read of God calling down retribution on those who did evil, and from the sky there came a jagged line of lightning, and a roar of thunder, 10 times as loud as the dragon could roar! The lightning, lined in pale blue struck once, then twice at the dragon, and the great lizard fell...dead.

At this the rav closed his book and went on his way, for not once, in all those 30 days and all those 30 nights, did he ever reveal a secret of the magic the Amshi'in practiced.

And that is the story of how the rav tricked the dragon.