

Futures

The watcher in the vale

A fair reflection. By Dan Koboldt



ILLUSTRATION BY JACEY

The knock on my door came at mid-morning. Three confident, staccato beats. It was miles to the nearest settlement, and my little stone keep wasn't listed on any map. I'd made no effort to scrub the weather stains from the old stone walls. The unidentifiable shrubs and saplings threatened to swallow the entire structure. In short, my humble abode was as hard to find as any place in the Galaxy.

But still they came.

Three more knocks. I yanked open the door. A young woman in a Space Corps uniform stood there. Probably early thirties or a bit older; I was losing my ability to tell. Three stripes, so a lieutenant. She had red hair, green eyes and the unmistakable set to her shoulders possessed by someone who's made up their mind. The familiar smells of ozone and sanitizing foam still lingered around her. Fresh off the shuttle, then.

"What?" I demanded.

She blinked, then cleared her throat. "My

name is Karina Fawcett."

"Pleased to meet you." I made it clear with my tone that I wasn't.

"I understand there's a device here that allows one to see the future."

"Who told you that?"

"Someone I know."

"Does that someone have a name?"

She stared at me. "I forget."

"Then go away." I slammed the door.

She didn't knock again. I hoped that would be the end of it. In my heart, I knew it wouldn't.

When I went out to collect firewood, Fawcett was still there. She sat in the shade of one of the misshapen trees. I didn't see her until I was halfway down the path. I ignored her, but felt her eyes on me as I dragged a large bough to the keep and got to work with my axe.

I fell into a rhythm of setting, chopping and stacking. Working with wood relaxed me. Kept my mind off things, like the ever-present temptation to have a look myself. I didn't realize she'd moved until her shadow fell across

my chopping block.

"I'd like to look," she said.

"No, Lieutenant Fawcett. You really wouldn't." I scooped up the split logs, turned my back on her and went inside.

She didn't bother me again until the next morning. I stomped out to haul water from the well. She was waiting by my door when I returned. Judging by the wrinkles in her uniform, she'd spent the night on the ground. The bags under her eyes told how well that had gone.

"You still here?" I asked.

"I want to look."

"You really don't."

"Why do you keep saying that?" she snapped.

"In the hope that you might listen." I held up a hand to forestall the inevitable protest. "I know, I know. You have an important decision to make and you need to know how it turns out." The interstellar war had raged for six years. Last I'd heard it was going poorly for both sides.

That gave her pause. The look of astonishment said I'd hit pretty close to the mark. To be fair, it wasn't hard to guess what a young officer from the Space Corps wanted to know. "I've got to know," she said at last.

They all came this way, desperate to see what the future held. I shook my head. "You might see something you don't like." That happened sometimes. Even worse were the ones who took their glimpse and didn't see *anything*. Given the precise focus of the instrument and the way the timing worked ... well, it didn't take a prophet to know what that meant.

"I understand," she said.

"Whatever you see, you probably can't change."

The silence stretched between us. A breeze ruffled the otherwise still mountain air, shifting a few strands of auburn hair across her face. It reminded me just how young she was. So few years under her belt, so much weight on her shoulders.

She stood up straighter. Stuck out her jaw. I knew what she'd say next. "I've come to look,

and I won't leave until I have."

I sighed to myself and gave a tight nod. "Come on, then."

As I entered, I brushed a finger across a tiny sensor panel on the door frame. A soft chime sounded. Lieutenant Fawcett harrumphed. The biometric security always surprised people, especially the military types. I hefted the bucket onto my wooden table.

I offered her a drink, but she only had eyes for the instrument. It was a shimmering glass oval, two metres tall, mounted into the stone at the back of the keep. The Lens, it was called. So named because it showed you a moment two months, two days and two hours into the future.

"It'll only work once for any person. Do you understand?" I asked.

"Yes."

"You know the words?"

She bit her lip, nodded, and looked up at the glass. "Mirror, mirror."

I didn't look. I never do. Still, I couldn't close my ears to the noise. The roar of space engines,

the dull thuds of explosions. The screams.

When the vision faded, I could read the devastation on her face. "I tried to tell you."

She moved to the door, which I hadn't bothered to close. I followed her outside. It was mid-morning by then; the sun had crested over the high ridge and chased the mist away. She set off at a slow but deliberate pace, heading away from the spaceport into the tall and mist-shrouded mountains. Never said another word.

I shook my head and would've gone back inside, but I spotted movement from the edge of the vale. A man this time. He wore the other uniform but marched with that familiar, grim purpose towards my door.

Dan Koboldt is the author of *Gateways to Alissia* (Harper Voyager, 2016–18), *Putting the Science in Fiction* (Writers Digest, 2018) and the science-fiction novel *Domesticating Dragons* (Baen Books, 2021).

THE STORY BEHIND THE STORY

Dan Koboldt reveals the inspiration behind *The watcher in the vale*

I had the idea for this story when I saw a photo of a brown concrete house nestled in a green grass field. The house is squat and windowless, its weather-stained façade marked only by a faded red door. Blue-grey mountains loom in the distance. I wondered what kind of person might live in such a desolate, isolated place. It would be someone who intentionally removed himself from society. Someone wants to be left alone.

Naturally, any decent story would feature a string of unwanted visitors coming to call.

The Lens, the science-fiction element of this story, offers people a glimpse of the future. One view per person, and the price is the knowledge that no matter what you see, you're powerless to change it. The caretaker of the device understands the burden of prescience. Even though he doesn't welcome visitors, he tries to talk some sense into them.

We get the sense that he never succeeds. After all, people want what they want, and rarely what they need.

