

an excerpt from the short story

Gas Warfare

by Tina Wahl

When Boots woke up, he was in a hospital. The lights flickered and buzzed. Someone was crying. He remembered stumbling through the emergency room doors after the explosion. He had made it inside before the doors became jammed with other people trying to get in and some trying to get out. Doctors and nurses, bound by their Hippocratic Oath and the by fact that they were trapped, did what they could for their poisoned and dying patients. Boots had stumbled to an unoccupied plastic chair and passed out.

Someone had covered him with a sheet. Boots peeked out of his protective cocoon. He didn't see any more rubber soled nurses running around. He didn't see any care worn doctors either. Aside from the buzzing and the distant crying, the place was silent, haunted.

Boots got to his feet. He felt a lot better than he had, better than he had hoped to feel ever again. It was strange. He stepped over the body of an old woman, her wig askew. Her face was singed and Boots could see her cheekbone. Next to her was a boy, about six years old, his hair and the skin of his chest had burned away. Boots saw two nurses, apoplectic, eyes bulging. Exposure had apparently affected its victims differently.

Boots made his way to the doors. He had to climb over a cairn of bodies to get there. Outside, an ambulance and an EMT vehicle had collided, spilling their passengers onto the tarmac. Lights still flashed urgently.

He was hungry. He saw a fast food restaurant across the street. All of its windows

were smashed. A curious thought meandered through his sluggish synapses. He brought up his left arm to look at this watch. The digital date was three days later than he expected. Had he been asleep all that time? It seemed impossible. More probable that his watch was malfunctioning.

Still, he had eaten lunch at this same fast food joint just a day before the chaos and look at it now. Boots entered the ransacked restaurant. Birds feasted on sesame seed buns. They paid no heed to Boots aside from flapping their wings; an inky, black warning.

The stations behind the counter were filled with lakes of grease and islands of moldy, decaying food, rotting produce. The power was out. The refrigerator was filled with sour milk products. His last chance for sustenance was the walk in freezer. The air that puffed out when he opened the door was not much cooler than room temperature. Boots found thawed chicken fingers and hamburger patties. Snagging the patties, he headed out to the tables outside. On his way, he took a stack of salt packets.

He sat on one of the tabletops, pushed off the litter and ignored the dead young woman at the next table. He removed two dripping, red patties and squashed them together. He sprinkled them liberally with salt and took a greedy, juicy bite. Blood dripped out of the corners of his mouth. He grabbed a handful of napkins from the dispenser on the dead girl's table. After lunch, Boots disposed of the empty packet which depicted a happy cow and read "12 patties".

He visited the men's room to wash his hands. A skylight illuminated the room in the absence of electricity. Boots scrubbed his hands, splashed water on his face. He dried his face and hands and met his eyes in the mirror. If there had been air in his lungs, Boots would have

screamed.

His face had never been traditionally handsome. Now it was a nightmare of patches of pustules and gaping abscesses. Boots grappled with his clothes to check the rest of his skin. His chest was relatively untouched compared to the crisped skin of his neck. His hair stood out, black and healthy in contrast to the horrifying visage. He tried to remember what he had been doing before it happened. A memory bubbled to the surface of the treacle in his mind. He had been wearing gloves and a hardhat. He worked construction. His clothing had provided some measure of protection to whatever was covered.

How could he be alive? Boots wondered. He tried to take a deep breath to yell out his frustrations. Nothing happened. But he could run, and he did, hurdling over tables and through the broken windows.

to be continued...