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## FICTION: The One by Iulian Ionescu

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Words by

**Iulian Ionescu**/ Photo illustration by **Alex Koshelov** .

David had been in charge of counting since yesterday, after Juan died. He drew the shortest straw and got stuck with the damned job. The assignments were final, so, as the dawn lumbered over the city ruins, he began counting.

“Do they have to spread everywhere?” he whispered, walking around a shell hole in the sidewalk.

Thirty seven, thirty eight, thirty.

He stopped and watched a man lying flat on the ground, face down. The body appeared rigid, so David nudged him with his foot.

Dead.

He grabbed one of the black flags from his pocket and shoved it in in the man’s back. The metallic spear pierced through the stiff flesh and bent. David crouched on one side and looked at the man’s face.

Karl.

He turned a few pages of his notebook and stopped at the list of names. He looked up Karl Shultze and crossed it out.

David took a deep breath and gazed at the horizon. The bright sun sparkled over the collapsed Eiffel Tower, melted by one of the bombs years ago. The twisted metal frame lay crumbled like a defeated Titan, crushed by a giant fist.

“Karl?”

David jumped out of his thoughts and peered over his shoulder. Tahar. He snarled on the inside.

“Yes.”

Why isn't he dead? David thought and looked at Tahar with narrow eyes. He snorted and spat on the curb as the fetid stench of death started to creep up his nostrils.

“How many?” Tahar said, poking the corpse with a stick.

“I haven't finished,” David mumbled and walked away. He felt Tahar's eyes following him, probably plotting his next murder. Prick. He could just smack him with a shovel, if it wasn't for the rules. The damned rules.

Thirty nine, forty, forty one. Last three.

The three men looked at him with empty eyes, crammed together inside the carcass of a bus. He wrote the number in the notebook and put it back in his pocket. They'll be next, he thought with a sigh, and walked away.

He stopped to admire a seven foot mountain of female mannequins, piled up next to three incinerated cars and an ocean of skeletons in army suits. He wondered if someone piled the mannequins as a cruel joke or as a pathetic monument for those soldiers who died years ago.

David closed his eyes and took a deep breath. He hoped he could still smell it— the perfume, the sweet smell of female skin. Instead, a thick stench of wet ashes filled his lungs.

He extended his hand and touched one of the wigs. The head snapped off and rolled at his feet. David coughed and belched for the third time that morning.

He continued to walk around the big crater in Champ de Mars, trying hard to ignore the pungent bile in his mouth.

#

Next day was ‘ammunition day’. David hid in his favorite basement, under La Café de Pierre. They usually drop a few crates on that street and he hoped he'd get at least one firearm this time. Otherwise he'd have to find another hideout— that prick Tahar already knew about his spot.

There was no need for counting on fight days. At least I won't see anyone's pathetic eyes, he thought as he sharpened a kitchen knife.

He cracked the basement hatch and peered at the sky. The referee wasn't in flight today, but he knew they had to be watching. Either over the walls, or some other way.

The crates are late again. Damn.

He knew the rules— no crates meant find your own weapons. He returned to the kitchen and grabbed another knife and a cleaver.

The fight days only last eight hours, so he could hide for a while or go on attack. The three guys from yesterday were an easy target— they could barely move.

Three victims get you safe for one week.

Safe, he thought and scoffed. No one's safe and no one is sane anymore. Without the referee up there, Tahar will probably cut his throat in his sleep, fight day or not.

Better safe than sorry, he thought and kicked the cafe door open.

#

Five weeks later, the crates were still not there, and neither the referee nor any of the mentors appeared in the sky. David peered through the window and saw Tahar perched behind a statue. He pulled the string on the bow he crafted from a branch and a piano chord, and aimed. He released the arrow and watched it fly like a rocket. He whistled. Tahar turned and the arrow smashed through his forehead and pinned him into the soil.

David threw the bow and exited the Louvre. It was a lovely day in Paris. No fires. No floods.

Nobody.

He took his notebook out. One, he counted.

He wrote the number down, circled it, and put the notebook back in his pocket.

Two hours later he reached the gates and hit his fists on the metal. "I won, open up!"

No answer.

David piled a few empty crates and climbed up the wall. It was risky— they could strike him dead for that. But he clenched his teeth and kept going. After all, he won.

Will they cheer? Will there be an official ceremony?

He reached the top and stood up on the gate.

He looked around and saw no one. No ships, no soldiers, no committee.

He didn't get it. They promised... They promised the winner...

"Wait," he whispered and picked the notebook with trembling hands. One. Only one. That's it!

There was nothing else to amuse them here. They must be long gone, seeking other planets to play their sick games. He was all alone. All alone with his prize.

David laughed, arms up in the air.

He was finally the One. The one and only owner of Earth, won fair and square in the last rotation of the Alien Games of 2157.

- Iulian Ionescu lives in Clifton, NJ. He is a science fiction and fantasy writer and encourages readers to tell him what they think. You can do that via his website, [www.iulianionescu.com](http://www.iulianionescu.com).

Meet the illustrator, Alex Koshelov, [here and watch](#) the stunning video that became his photo

illustration for this story.

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