

Dialysis M for Menace

by

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first published in “*Creatures, Crimes & Creativity 2021*”
by Intrigue Publishing, LLC

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Dialysis M for Menace

Christopher D. Ochs

Switching off his car's ignition, Wyatt Hempson did not like the looks of the neighborhood. Or the sounds. Or the smells. They made the dialysis port under his jacket sleeve itch like poison ivy.

"Beggars can't be choosers," he mumbled to his car. Or maybe himself. "It's the only legal spot for blocks."

The storefronts along both sides of the street scrunched together, shouldering each other aside for precious real estate. Some remained open, others were closing up for the evening, the remainder shuttered tight as a bomb shelter or closed for good. Throbs of bass pounding from two different low riders half a block apart jockeyed for superiority. Threads of smoke from grilled lamb, chicken—or cat—blasted out of a bodega's exhaust fan.

"Chaise, if this is one of your practical jokes," he swore through grinding teeth.

Wyatt read the business card his friend had given him once more after he locked the door to his bucket of bolts. The engine dieseled one last time, like it, too, had misgivings about the depressed surroundings.

As Wyatt walked the uneven and crumbling pavement, locating street numbers proved difficult. He wondered how many more doors he must pass by before arriving at his destination.

The hairs rimming his bald spot tickled and stood, alerting him to the several pairs of eyes watching him with a smorgasbord of emotions—disdain, contempt, anger, hunger. He slowed his pace when a storefront reflection offered him a view of a pair of street toughs standing next to his

car's bumper. One chewed gum like a ruminating cow and wore a wife-beater tee over a chiseled physique. His slim partner had a hair pick sticking vertically out of a sponge twist mohawk.

Three cars ahead, on the hood of a tricked out '64 Impala, sat a burly dude with a shaved head and tattoos lining either side of his jugular.

Wyatt shuffled to a halt in front of a brightly lit door, lettered with the establishment he sought—Eventide Medical. He was startled how its immaculately maintained edifice, awash in a sea of impoverished dilapidation, had escaped his notice while he had searched for a parking spot.

He grasped the door handle and pulled. The whisper of a well-oiled pneumatic door and a cheery tinkle of a shop bell uncannily drowned out the heartbeats of the street.

The tattooed man sitting on his automotive throne flashed authoritative eyes down both sides of the street with the subtlest of nods. Faces veered away from Wyatt. The thugs lounging by his car's bumper returned his nod and retreated. The street returned its collective attention to its evening hustles.

In the front office, Wyatt's nose twitched at the hint of urine that lurked behind the wall of floral antiseptic cleaner. Health and cleanliness posters, interspersed with licenses, awards and certificates of excellence surrounded a reception desk.

A svelte medico smiled a professional welcome at Wyatt. A diagonal bang cut tinted peach cantilevered over her left eye. Her pastel teal scrubs accented her flawless chestnut skin.

"Right on time, Mr. Hempson. My name is Carmina," she said in a persona that tried to be perky and saccharine, but was muted by an underlying fatigue. She primped the ends of her bangs, checking a swivel mirror on the desk's raised customer ledge. "How are you feeling this evening?"

"Best as can be expected," he said with a shrug. "I almost gave up trying to find a parking space."

"So terribly sorry. That's one of the few drawbacks to our location."

Wyatt bit his lower lip before he could blurt out “Few?” or something else he might regret.

Carmina slid over a clipboard and pen with a questionnaire, not unlike countless others Wyatt had filled out in dozens of doctors’ offices, clinics and hospitals. At least, during those salad days when he had a reliable job and insurance coverage, followed by unemployment benefits and COBRA, until they all, one by one, gave out before federal benefits would kick in.

“Once you fill this out,” she said, “our lead tech can set you up in one of our bays in the back room.”

Wyatt frowned his surprise at the forms. The bottom third of the first sheet was redacted, the spaces for responses blacked out as well. He held up the questionnaire to face Carmina and pointed to the shaded area.

She anticipated his question with a nod. “You wouldn’t be here if your health insurance were still in place, would you, Mr. Hempson? Fill it out as best you can. I’m sure it will be fine.”

Wyatt set his jaw, summoning his courage to overcome his distaste of discussing money matters. “Is this on the level?” he said with the apprehension of Oliver Twist asking the hall master for seconds. “The dialysis is free?”

“Not a single penny.” The whites of her eyes were jaundiced. Under these lights, the skin of her palms had the same greenish tint from bile in the blood that his own skin acquired when he missed a dialysis session.

Did she suffer from kidney failure as well? Tough to tell. There was neither a bandage nor a dialysis port on her arms. Wyatt certainly wasn’t going to ask if she had a port in her abdomen.

He took a seat in one of three cushioned chairs with comfort a step above those found in most free clinics, and scribbled away. Referring to his phone more than once for information— emergency contacts and other phone numbers—he followed each electronic search with a survey of his surroundings. His grip on the pen slipped when he met Carmina’s unblinking stare and smarmy grin, of the type that often preceded a terrible joke. He hastily signed below a long paragraph of legalese that

would confound an ambulance chaser. What in the world does *servitium pro sanguis* mean, anyway?

“Very good, Mr. Hempson. Your dialysis nurse, Daichi, will be with you short—”

The rear door swung open. Dressed in scrubs that matched Carmina’s, strode a man with an air of confidence. Tall for a Japanese, he sported a Van Dyke of thick stubble made wide by a disarming smile. Tapping the wall-mounted dispenser, he sanitized his hands as he strolled to the front desk.

“Good evening, Mr. Hempson,” he said while checking his teeth in Carmina’s mirror. “I understand you were referred to us by Mr. Chaise?” He nodded approval at his reflection, then the clipboard. “My, you are the fourth person he has sent to us. At this rate, I should offer him a limited partnership.”

He flipped to the last sheet. “Diabetes, neuropathy... Oh, I see you’re a cancer survivor. Congratulations,” he said, replacing the smile with cheerless professionalism. “You’ve listed the organ affected as kidney.”

“Yes, my left was removed. The right one shut down when I got Covid.”

“So I see on your disease history.” Daichi fixed Wyatt with a piercing stare. “No other cancers? Specifically, no leukemia, no bone marrow?”

“None.”

“No blood disorders you might have omitted?”

“This ain’t my first rodeo,” Wyatt shot back with growing irritation.

“Then we shan’t keep you waiting any longer.” Daichi’s affable smile resembled Carmina’s to a disturbing degree. He guided his patient through the back door into a long room. Five pairs of couches and dialysis machines lined the opposite wall.

The first recliner was occupied by a rotund Latina, her full moon face draped with long finger curls of dark hair streaked with gray, and her eyes imprisoned by strong reading glasses. The steamy cover illustration

and Wyatt's rusty Spanish told him that her book was a romance of the trashiest variety. She pulled her glasses down her nose and examined Wyatt with wary eyes. Her eventual half-smile and curt nod failed to unwind Wyatt.

Led to the third medical recliner, Wyatt draped his jacket on a nearby clothes hook, pulling out his own e-reader prepped for the hours-long procedure.

Settling into the couch with his left forearm on an armrest, Wyatt ignored the inevitable small talk that every nurse babbled, preceding the needle jab into his port. Once Daichi fired up the dialysis machine, the familiar whir of the rotary pump lulled Wyatt into a modicum of relaxation. He tried to focus on his own pulp spy thriller, but his eyes were drawn to the mechanism, a type he had not seen before.

It had most of the typical workings: an impeller pump; gauges and digital displays that monitored pressures, concentrations and whatnot; yards of transparent tubing connecting all those meters; the all-important cylindrical filter; all bound together by an enameled console that could have been cut from a powder blue '57 BelAir.

Two empty receptacles resting on the machine's base commanded Wyatt's curiosity. Most often, there was only one for waste when a connection to a drain was not available.

His whole body tensed when one glass jar began to fill with blood diverted from the filter's output. "Hey, is that supposed to happen?" Authority abandoned his demeanor, though he tried not to sound like a whining schoolboy.

"But of course," Daichi replied with his damnable smile. "You *did* read the admission form, no? If you had any questions, Carmina would have been happy to explain the terms. The agreement allows us to draw a pint of your blood once every eight weeks."

Wyatt's butt cheeks clenched, and his back rode up the recliner. "What on earth for?"

Daichi shrugged, his annoying grin crossing the line into unctuous. "Since we do not charge for our services, we have to make up for it somehow."

“But you can’t sell my blood!” Wyatt reached for the lines to the machine, abandoning his e-reader to clatter on the floor.

Daichi clamped his hands on Wyatt’s wrists. Cold wrought iron would feel just as unyielding.

Wyatt glowered at Daichi. “You of all people oughta know you can’t. Between diabetes, cancer, and kidney failure, no hospital in the world would buy my blood or plasma.”

“Sell? Perish the thought, Mr. Hempson.” Daichi’s smile stretched into a hungry leer. “We have other uses.”

A punch to the gut would have stunned Wyatt into silence just as quickly.

Without warning, Daichi jerked upward and twisted to face the door, his whole body taut as a tightwire. The smile vacated his face, replaced by a distressed pucker. “Did you hear that? No, of course you didn’t.”

Wyatt cocked an ear in the direction of Daichi’s stare. The door failed to muffle the unexpectedly harsh jangle of the storefront bell. Sounds of a scuffle erupted while the strident clangs continued. Blows landed plain as the crack of a whip, and were answered with grunts of pain. The Latina and Wyatt exchanged confused glances of alarm.

Crashing through the splintering doorframe rocketed the street Hercules in the wife-beater. His unconscious form slumped, doubled over in the corner. Through the jagged opening floated his wiry cohort, suspended by a gloved hand wrapped around his throat, hooked beneath his chin. He pulled the hair pick out from his curls, revealing tines that flashed like daggers. The thin street punk stabbed once into the arm connected to the glove. His strike deflected off a thick leather sleeve. A second gloved hand shot out from the door, claspng the attacker’s wrist and crushing it until the thin man dropped his weapon. A lightning punch between the eyes, and the thug joined his unconscious colleague on the floor.

A blur of teal, a rush of air, and Wyatt’s hair ruffled past his eyes. The hairs on his arms stood at attention, like he lay near an electric dynamo. He goggled at the leather straps that had appeared seemingly out

of nowhere, securing his forearms to the couch's armrests. His jaw went slack at the portly woman, struggling against her own pair of new restraints.

Daichi had disappeared from Wyatt's side, interposing himself between his patients and the door. Fists angled at his side, and knees slightly bent to pounce, he flattened his hands and shifted to a defensive karate stance. "Stay in your seats. Don't pull out your tubes," he barked with the command of a field general.

"As if we could," snarked the woman, rocking her bulk back and forth in the recliner.

Wyatt shivered, astounded by how so much could happen within a heartbeat, let alone before he could even react.

A tall man wearing an ankle-length leather greatcoat and boots with steel toes tinted black clambered through the doorway wreckage. Long straight flaxen hair dangled in front of his dark brown eyes. He clomped one step, then another, before reaching into his coat. Daichi broadened his stance, leaning forward to spring into a charge. The escapee from the Matrix pulled an ornate cross glinting of silver from under the coat's folds and thrust it forward like a shield.

"Cherish your final moments in this world, foul beast," he bellowed. "Know that it was a Knight of Van Helsing that sent you to the bowels of Hell."

Daichi relaxed his fighting crouch and stood tall. "You can't be serious."

With a wild roar, a mountain of flesh plowed through the remains of the door. The husky tattooed gang leader tackled the knight, driving him into the wall. The studs behind the drywall groaned and buckled under the impact.

The silver cross jounced across the floor, coming to rest inches from Daichi's foot. He picked it up and tossed it hand to hand, testing its heft. He tasted it and nodded with unhurried approval. "Impressive. Three nines pure. Blessed by a cardinal no less."

The blond knight heaved the thug away, then elbowed himself out of the cratered gypsum and wood. He flourished both sides of his

greatcoat outward. The tattooed man snarled and dove shoulder first at the man in black. His trailing arm cocked back with a set of spiked brass knuckles clenched in his fist. With a swirling wave of the knight's greatcoat, the gangsta fell into the blackness of its folds, like a rabbit disappearing back into its hat.

"Luis! *Mi hijo*," the Latina screamed. She attempted to cross herself, but her restraints held fast. Her pleas for help and mercy for her son were followed by a stream of Spanish obscenities that would make a Vegas madam squirm. Half of them she directed at her straps, the rest at the knight. Wyatt feared his ears might cave in from her cannon blast shrieks.

Daichi snapped his head sideways, facing the Latina. "Be quiet," he commanded with an intimidating snarl. She froze mid-expletive, and a dark patch appeared between her voluminous thighs.

Wyatt's spine chilled at the sight of Daichi's profile. Eyes glowed like blood set on fire. His nose had flattened to two viper's pits. Long fangs, half a dozen in number and sharp as razors, sprouted at impossible angles. They punctured and sliced his own feral lips stretched across a mouth two times too big. Wyatt blinked tears out of his eyes, and Daichi's visage had become sane again.

"Care to join that churlish lout in the screaming chaos, demon?" The knight unfurled the other half of his coat. Motes of gypsum dust fell into a black vortex that swirled along what should have been its inner lining, spiraling down into some impossible point that seemed infinitely far away.

Daichi sniffed the air. He held the silver cross aloft in his bare hand and waggled it at his opponent. He lobbed it across the room, the knight catching it with his free hand. The tall man crouched, anticipating an attack that never came.

"Who are you, O bumbling Knight of Van Helsing?" taunted Daichi. "And what moron is your Patriarch?" Every honorific was soaked in contempt. "Let me guess. From your ineptitude and the lingering incense in your hair and coat, my money's on Malachi of Innsbruck."

"Bumbling? *Inept*?" the knight piously harrumphed. "I am Gideon

of Piscataway.”

Wyatt and the Latina mugged at each other in disbelief and snorted, “Piscataway?”

A pause of doubt crossed the tall knight’s visage. “Wait... You know of my master?” he said with caution, all bombast gone from his baritone.

“Yes, *inept*,” Daichi repeated, firm as granite. “If you had taken notice of the certificates in the front office before blasting in here, you would have seen in addition to my degrees—and my half-sister’s—a certificate and blessing from none other than Malachi’s brother, Philip of Salzburg.”

Daichi craned his neck, angling to look through the gaping hole that had been a door. “Carmina, are you all right?” he called out. “Could you bring in the Van Helsing certificate, please?”

Following a crunch of glass, her unflinching cheerful voice piped through the doorway. “Sorry, Daichi, but my leg’s broken.”

The two combatants exchanged glances, Daichi’s one of angry annoyance and the tall man’s somewhat sheepish.

“Not to worry,” she added, as if she could sense the brewing animosity. “I’ll be right as rain by tomorrow morning.”

Sliding the silver cross back into his greatcoat, Gideon shook his head. “If you are not a vampyre, then what *are* you?”

Wyatt found his voice, though only enough for a whisper. “Vampire?”

“A *dhampyr*, of course.” Daichi set to undoing the lady’s restraints, speaking to her in assuring tones. Standing erect, he chortled at Gideon’s look of confusion. His shoulders fell with a sigh. “Don’t they teach you *anything* at Vienna? The offspring of a vampire and a mortal. My mother was a Shinto nun from Kyoto. Carmina’s mother was a zombie, stolen from a Haitian shaman of the darkest sect of Santaria.”

“Zombie?” muttered Wyatt, his word a barely audible croak. He tried to swallow his panic, with the hope of wetting his parched throat.

“Then, who is your sire?” Gideon demanded grimly.

“I will not speak his name, until I face him and kill him for what he

has wrought in Carmina and myself.” Daichi’s anger flared, and his features distended once more into demonic nightmare. “Ask Malachi. He knows my sire’s name. If your order manages to locate him before I do, you shall notify me so that we may dispatch him—together.”

“Vampire? Zombie?” cried out Wyatt. He struggled in vain against the unforgiving straps. “What kind of insane asylum *is* this? Let me outta here!”

“You shall come to no harm under my watch, good sir,” said Gideon.

Facing away from the knight—and human again—Daichi rolled his eyes. He undid Wyatt’s straps while employing the same calming tones he used on Luis’ mother. “Gideon is quite right. No one here means you harm.”

“But you’re a vampire. And she…” he pointed his aching hand past the wall. “She’s a zombie. She’s gonna eat my brain!”

“Oh dear, no,” replied Carmina from the other room. “You’re thinking of a ghoul. Entirely different creature. It’s a common mistake, no thanks to all those silly movies. Zombies are poor souls poisoned and vodoued to become the living dead. Forced to be the shaman’s slave, or worse.”

“We are *dhampyr*, Mr. Hempson,” said Daichi while undoing the second strap. “My half-sister and I share many attributes with our sire. But unlike that monster, *we* have souls. You saw our reflections in the mirror, did you not? You even witnessed me holding a cross. If I desired, I could take a *bath* in holy water.” He stepped back and folded his arms. “Though only half-human, we desire to live among other mortals. We therefore devised this rather clever way of satisfying our baser needs, while helping as many people as possible.”

Almost in unison, Wyatt and Gideon said, “I don’t understand.”

“I subsist on the blood drawn from my patients. And in return, I supply a service for people like yourself and Luis’ mother here, and many others who cannot afford dialysis for one reason or another.”

“But you drink our blood,” Wyatt repeated with a whimper. Lightheadedness ate at the edges of his sanity.

“Yes, despite its taste. Like cheap wine filtered through dirty underwear.” Daichi’s stomach gurgled on cue. “Carmina’s lot in life is worse. She must consume urine once a day. We can only guess why. Something to do with that shaman’s *coup poudre*—zombie powder—his zombie curse, or both.”

“It’s not pleasant, believe me,” Carmina butted in with morose sarcasm echoing from the front room. “We’ve tried and tried, but we can never fully remove the taste of that horrid dialysate.”

“But ours is a true symbiotic relationship. We are fed, and the entire community benefits. Everybody’s happy. Even the local gangs are in on the agreement. This office—the whole street—is neutral turf. Speaking of which, Gideon, if you would be kind enough to return my patient’s son?” Daichi angled his finger up and down at the knight’s greatcoat.

Gideon opened the fold of his coat and mumbled softly. Out of the silence keened a soft high pitch. It grew into a scream spilling out of a vast cavern. Luis tumbled out from a burst of blackness, his shriek strangled to silence as he gulped for air like a drowning man. His face two shades lighter than the rest of his body, he clawed at the back of his skull.

“Is it gone? Is it *gone*?” he gibbered, the light of sanity absent from his eyes. His fingers trembled around a circle of exposed and smoking bone. The surrounding flesh sizzled with the stench of burning acid.

The room spun for Wyatt. He saw three of everything. A burbling sound came somewhere from the left. His arm felt like a dry sponge. The stench of blood and piss filled his nostrils. The room grew dimmer.

“*Shimata*,” Daichi exclaimed, though his voice reverberated through thickening gray gauze. “The dialysis unit drained much more than a pint of blood. The waste container is overflowing, too. What a mess...”

Blackness and silence enfolded Wyatt.



Wyatt gradually perceived the color of the room, the push-pull of someone’s calm, deep breaths, the pervasive odor of wood and gypsum in the air, the slickness of his sweat on Naugahyde, and two dark forms standing at his sides. He blinked his eyes and wiped away the goop blurring his vision.

The woman, her injured son, and his goons were gone. The floor around the doorway had been swept clean, though the gaping hole in the doorway and the cratered wall remained. The row of dialysis machines stood silent, and a bag of clear liquid was connected into his port. On his right stood Gideon, his hands clasped in front of himself, and sullen as ever. By his left, Daichi held Wyatt's wrist, checking his pulse. He greeted Wyatt with an easy grin, nothing like his storefront smile.

"Ah, our patient is awake." He settled Wyatt's wrist with a compassionate pat. "As soon as we replenish your fluids with the saline drip, Mr. Hempson, you're free to go. Make sure to set up this month's appointments with Carmina before you leave. And don't worry about her. Now that she's had the urea extracted from your dialysate, she's almost fully healed."

"Must be all that adrenaline you pumped out, Mr. Hempson," she chimed in from the other room. "Who—Better than a double espresso."

"The same goes for your blood," Daichi added, smacking his lips.

Wyatt scrutinized Daichi's face and general demeanor. He seemed fuller, more vital, stood an inch taller.

"Now if you'll excuse me, I have some paperwork and repairs to attend to." Daichi hopped through the doorway, nimble as a ballet dancer.

Wyatt scowled at Gideon, who remained quiet and stoic. The knight returned his stare, deadpan as a corpse.

"What are you hanging around for?" Wyatt repositioned himself in the couch, hoping to relieve his aching tailbone. "I thought you'd be long gone."

"I have a favor to ask of you." the brooding knight asked, pursing his lips tight after he finished.

"...And?"

"Apparently, word travels quickly in this neighborhood." Gideon shifted his feet. His sneer exposed gritted teeth with every word. "My conveyance has been stripped, and now rests atop cinder blocks. Might I trouble you for a lift?"

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Christopher D. Ochs' foray into writing began with his epic fantasy *Pindlebryth of Lenland*. His short stories have been published in the *GLVWG* and award-winning *BWG* anthologies and websites, and by *Firebringer Press*. Using his skills learned with the *LVS*, he crafted a collection of mirthful macabre short stories, *If I Can't Sleep, You Can't Sleep*. His latest novel is a gritty urban fantasy/horror, *My Friend Jackson*, a Finalist in *Indies Today's* Best Books of 2020.

His current projects include: two sci-fi/horror novels *Sentinel of Eternity* and *No Place Like Home*; a prequel novella and a second novel in the *Pindlebryth* saga.

Chris has too many interests for his own damn good. With previous careers in physics, electrical engineering and software, CGI animator, classical organist, voice talent on radio, DVD and OTAKON, it's a wonder he can remember to pay the dog and feed his bills.

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