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SCIENCE FICTION, FANTASY, AND HORROR

# Fantasy Scroll mag

ISSUE  
09



Hall Jameson • Jordan Taylor • L R Hieber • Lynda Clark • Rebecca Birch  
Robert Lowell Russell • Shane Halbach • Stone Showers • Zach Lisabeth

**Fantasy Scroll Magazine**  
**Speculative Fiction — Issue #9 — October 2015**

**Featuring works by Hall Jameson, Jordan Taylor, Josh Brown, L R Hieber,  
Lynda Clark, Stone Showers, Rebecca Birch, Robert Lowell Russell,  
Shane Halbach, Zach Lisabeth**

This collection is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, organizations, places, events, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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# Fantasy Scroll Magazine Issue #9

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# Editorial, October 2015

Iulian Ionescu

**W**elcome to Issue #9 of Fantasy Scroll Magazine.

We have some great stories packed in this issue for you, but before we get to that, I want to mention one other thing: our year one anthology is coming out! Woo-hoo!

I am really happy to let you know that we took all the stories published in year one and grouped them in a wonderful anthology that will be released in November of 2015 both in print and as an ebook. It's been a long road, but we've done it. I want to thank my co-editor, Frederick Doot for his contribution to this book, as well as all other contributors, including our slush readers, copyeditors, and proofreaders. To learn more about the anthology go to [DragonsDroidsDoom.com](http://DragonsDroidsDoom.com). If you want to meet us, we will have an official launch of the book at PhilCon, November 22. Hope to see you there!

Now back to Issue 9.

We begin with *Thomas Lynne*, a fantasy short story by Jordan Taylor. The author transports us in a southern-US setting filled with fantasy elements that weave naturally with the character's story.

Next is *When Angels Wear Butterfly Wings*, a bone-chilling flash story by Stone Showers, followed by the equally bone-chilling *Sea Found* by L R Hieber. You can learn more about L R Hieber in the interview section.

*Fountain* is next, a science fiction story by Lynda Clark, describing a post-apocalyptic, dog eat dog world where everyone is struggling to survive.

Next is *Beneath the Raven's Wing* by Rebecca Birch, a story that follows a young, female protagonist as she is faced with powers beyond her understanding.

Shane Halbach's *Exit Strategy* follows, a story filled with humor, thievery, and dragons.

Next is a story that truly reminded me of *Alice in Wonderland*. *Where the Millennials Went* by Zach Lisabeth is a story set in an impossible world where strange characters do strange things.

*Scents of Life* is a story about memory, love, and about the power of senses. The author, Robert Lowell Russell, takes us through the evolution of a disease in this heartfelt story.

We end with *The Parting Gift*, a story of loss, pain, and struggle by Hall Jameson.

At the end of the fiction section, we are concluding chapter one of the graphic novel series *Shamrock* by Josh Brown. The ending leaves us wanting more. I am very curious to see what other adventures are still to come in Shamrock's path.

In the non-fiction section we have interviews with authors Michael R. Underwood and L R Hieber and an artist spotlight for Jessica TC Lee, who provided the cover art for this issue. Our Science Corner continues with an article on black

holes by Sabine Hossenfelder. Following, we have two book reviews: *Half a War* by Joe Abercrombie, reviewed by Jeremy Szal, and *Updraft* by Fran Wilde, reviewed by Julie Novakova. We end the issue with a movie review by Mark Leeper for *Pay The Ghost*, directed by Uli Edel.

And that's all, folks! I hope you enjoy it. Don't forget to visit our site for more stories, interviews, and reviews, and to learn more about our upcoming anthology.

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# Thomas Lynne

Jordan Taylor

In the summer I turned seventeen, just two weeks after school let out, Thomas Lynne came rolling into town in that old heap of a car he stole from his daddy. It was a 1973 Chrysler LeBaron, the ugliest damn car you ever seen in your life. It had peeling flat red paint and a dent in the left side door the size of a meteor crater, and its name was Carter, Carter being the name of his dad's high school girlfriend, though not the one that was Tommie's mom. I always told him Carter wasn't a good name for a car, but Tommie wouldn't change it, even for me. He said that name was special, magic, luck—he believed in that kind of thing. I was more of a hopeful doubter.

That day he drove into town it caused a stir, sure enough. You see, folks had got it in their heads that Tommie was no good from the start, on account of the fact that his dad was half crazy even back then, and his ma was some high school girl that left them both as soon as she could to go to college in another state—probably a northern state, Mrs. Wyllis always said. And then she'd say, "And if the fact that she had that baby out of wedlock didn't prove that she was an irresponsible hussy, running off and leaving a baby—a baby, mind you!—with that good-for-nothing Jeremiah Lynne sure did!" I'd always nod my head real sweet and proper, and sometimes she'd add, "Not like you, Janet, dear. Your parents raised you right," and give me this look like she was daring me to contradict.

Jeremiah was known to be the town drunk, a career he probably started back in his own high school days. He claimed to anyone who would listen—and no one did—that he drank because he saw and heard things that weren't there when sober, and if that ain't some kind of twisty logic, I don't know what is. He lived in a trailer right up on the edge of the Boundary Wood—the place he swore those things he saw and heard lived. That was a bit more credible, seeing as how the older generation claimed the woods were haunted, and the younger generation only ventured in when looking for a place to smoke or hook up. Anyway, it was no kind of place to raise a baby, what with Jeremiah half the time drunk and the other half in front of the TV, and both halves mean, and no one was much surprised when Tommie started seeing and hearing things, too.

At this point I should probably admit that Tommie and me was always friends. We met in kindergarten, both kind of outsiders on the playground, and when Tommie says, "I got secret friends in the woods," of course I says I want to see them. I never did see them, back then, and called him a liar and whatnot and we had a fist fight right there under the pine trees, and after that we was always best friends.

We had a special tree that we liked to climb in the woods, an old oak not too far back from Jeremiah's trailer. It was surrounded by a little clearing, its old branches twisting up into a circle of space it had claimed for its own. We'd spend hours up there, pretending we was pirates in a ship, or a robber gang with sticks and slingshots. When we got older and this weren't exactly cool no more, we'd talk my own dad into carrying us to the movies on weekends, although he was never too happy about the matter. In my parents' way of thinking,

girls should play with dolls and have secret pony clubs, not climb trees with the son of the town drunk.

Last time before that summer that I seen Tommie was ninth grade, during which he beat his daddy back one night and ran away. Police say there were shots fired, too, but I ain't too sure about all that. Anyway, he drove out of town at fourteen with no license and nothing but that damn car and the clothes on his back, and was gone for a good three years, me missing him the whole time.

So, when he came up the street that day in June, Carter stalling and clanking the whole way, and people started peeking out their kitchen curtains and even walking out onto their front porches, you can be sure I was right there with them. Mr. Thorton crossed the street in front of the car and stared, and Mrs. Wyllis gave a screech, and Mr. Flowers even mentioned something about going and fetching Jeremiah, but nobody felt much like actually doing it. Tommie didn't mind. He was always one for attention, Tommie—he saluted Mr. Thorton and waved at Mrs. Wyllis like a Peach Queen in a May Day Parade, and I'm pretty sure I even saw him wink at Samantha Windham as she was walking down the sidewalk, though that little slut turned up her nose and took her clickity-clack heels the other way.



I was pretty disappointed when Tommie didn't show up at my house right away, ready to make up for lost time, like. I mean, to be completely honest, Tommie never was hard on the eyes—must have took after his mother—and I'd seen just enough of his green eyes and flashy smile through Carter's windshield to start a slow melt. A few days later, I found out that he had parked that car on the McDowell's empty lot by the woods, and was living out of the car and working for Gus at the machine shop, doing automotive work. Mrs. Wyllis even told me that Gus was letting him take home tools to work on Carter, and that he'd offered to let Tommie room with him, but that Tommie'd said he liked being by the woods. "A strange boy, that one," she'd ended. "Nothing but trouble from the start. I'm glad to see that you're being a sensible girl and keeping away from him, Janet."

Well, of course then I had to go down to Gus's to try and see him. I figured a less private spot than hunting him down in the woods would be better for our first meeting with him back from the grave, as it were. Even so, I put on my favorite low-cut jeans and a dash of bright red lipstick, and I carried my only pair of high-heeled shoes in my hand so as not to get blisters on my heels from walking down the street in them. I gotta admit, the hopeful doubter part of me was feeling more'n a bit hopeful for some magic.

When I got to Gus's, there he was, tinkering around under the hood of Mr. Wilder's car, slouched forward easy as you please, a good six feet of tan, lean muscle. He had an old white T-shirt on with grease spots all over it, black and grimy up to his elbows. When he saw me lingering in the doorway of the machine shop, he slammed down the shiny black hood and wiped his hands off on an old towel. I tossed my hair a bit and tried looking confident. "Hi, Tommie."



He nodded, soft hair flopping forward so that I wanted to run my fingers through it. "Hi, Jan. Come to gawk with the rest?" His accent was different, like music, somehow, tilted off kilter a bit like those celebrities on TV shows. I didn't know what to say then, so I just shook my head.

He sighed like he was mad I was interrupting him at his high and mighty job. "Well, what then?"

"Can a girl not come for old time's sake, like?" I huffed. "Because we was friends? Jesus, Tommie! Used to be I was the only person you talked to in this town, and you've been here for two weeks and I ain't seen you yet, except for riding into town like the mayor in a parade!" At this point I held in the tears, rather delicately, I think.

Before he could say anything, Gus waddled by with the telephone to his ear. "Ain't you off, yet? Git, boy! You can take those tools with you, for Carter. Hi there, Miss Janet." He nodded to me and winked before disappearing into the dim room he called The Office.

Tommie sighed and gathered up his tools, sauntered past me to cross the street and head through town for the woods. I stood there all forlorn—like until he turned back around and asked, "Well? You coming?"



We walked side by side, but never touching, through town, ignoring some curious stares. "Well," I said as we neared the woods, "you gonna tell me where you've been all this time?" Tommie bit his bottom lip and ignored me.

The McDowell's lot was full of moss and patches of overgrown weeds, bordered by tall, dark pines and a few ugly old oaks, stretching away as far as the eye could see. I knew there was a highway on the other side of Boundary Wood, but sometimes it was hard to believe, especially now, with the sun setting behind the trees and all that dark gathering under their branches. Now the lot was also full of Carter, rusting quietly, a matching floppy red tent that looked as if any good wind were apt to carry it away, and the remains of a campfire. Tommie made a funny little bow and grinned at me. "Welcome to my humble abode."

It was humble, sure enough. But there was a kind of magic to it, too. It was the kind of place we would have played when we were little, with secret hiding places and beds made of pine straw and food in a can to cook in the open. We had so much fun, him showing me his camp and what he was doing to Carter with all them tools he took back with him, that I forgot he had been so hesitant to make friends again, even forgot that my jeans were too tight and I was barefoot and carrying around heels.

"Carter's like a legacy, see, between Dad and me," Tommie said, as he pried her open and held up a flashlight for me to see her insides, how she worked. "She's come a long way, been through a lot. There's a special kind of magic in that." He ran a finger over one tube, leaving a lighter gray streak in the sticky black grime. "I wanna fix'er up, who knows, maybe give her away to my own kid some day. She runs ok, but..." He made a face as he forced some cap or another open. "She could run a lot better. And be a sight prettier."

I laughed at that. "That she could. Why, she looks like she's been through hell and back! Pure hell, Tommie!"

That sobered him up quick. "Maybe she has." He grimaced and slammed the hood shut. He turned on me quick. "Let's build a campfire. It's getting dark. And I think I've got some marshmallows left in that bag I picked up at the Stop'n Shop."

There were some left, and we sat side by side with sticks in our hands, curled against the campfire's heat, the trees and the dark at our backs. "I've got some things to say to you, Jan, if you want to be friends now. I might not be here for long." His voice dropped off in the night and I shivered.

"That's ok, Tommie. You ain't got to stay if you don't want to. Hell, nobody wants to stay in this town. But I would like to be friends again, for a little while."

He smiled a bit and touched my arm, leaving little electric shocks tingling on my skin. "I'd like that, I think. Yes, I'd like that," he said as if he'd just now decided. "I've been through a lot of shit, Jan. Not just with my da. These past few years..." He trailed off and grinned a bit. "Well, you wouldn't believe me if I told you. They've been the best kind of good and the worst kind of bad, all in one. Bad enough that I'd never want to go back, that I have nightmares—and good enough that even sitting here with you I crave it. But that's the past now, right?" He smiled at me then and my heart about broke in two. "We're gonna be friends again, for a little while."



I guess I don't have to tell you how it went, after that. If you're anybody over grade-school, you probably saw it clearer than the town even did, turning up their noses whenever I'd pass now, too. It weren't too bad, though, as a price to pay for having Tommie back. We took Carter to the next town over to see the movies, went for walks in the park, and spent whole evenings by Tommie's campfire, roasting hot dogs and marshmallows and making up silly songs, though we never crossed the edge of the lot and went into the woods. My hopeful part got stronger and stronger, and my doubtful part might've gone into hiding.

Jeremiah never once showed his face—shows what a good-for-nothing father he was. My own parents showed quite a bit more than their face, if you catch my meaning, before throwing up their hands and deciding there was nothing they could do.

When it finally happened, it was August, getting on toward school starting back and my senior year. Tommie had already stayed longer than he expected to, I think. We were coming home in Carter after watching yet another God-awful action movie, driving on the back road along the woods, when Tommie suddenly gave a shout and swerved over onto the shoulder. I screamed and ducked down in the seat, certain we were about to get hit.

"Now what in Jesus did you go and do that for?" I gaped when I realized he was only parking the car and I wasn't meeting my maker any time soon.

"Look!" Tommie pointed into the trees.

It were fireflies. The boy had pulled over for fireflies—but great big ones, white lights close to the size of my fist, drifting with the breeze and winking out to reappear again a few feet away, turning the edges of the leaves around them silver. Now, I don't know what fireflies has to do with climbing in the back seat, but that were the way of it, see, and I'm apt to blame it all on the magic if pushed, which were out in abundance that night. It was so easy, at first, easier than I expected it to be, until it hurt, but that was ok, too, because it didn't last for long. Afterward I was up late in bed, thinking about what Tommie had said about the magic of a car that's been through hell.



Of course I missed a period. Two periods, before I went to the Stop'n Shop and bought one of them little sticks you pee on, and of course it turned pink. Tommie took me to the doctor to confirm what we already knew—magic is powerful stuff. At first I wanted a ring, to protect me from Mrs. Wyllis pursing her lips and not speaking to me and my parents crying their eyes out, but I didn't get one and it all happened as I'd predicted. I can still hear my mother, bordering on good Southern hysterics—"By Thomas Lynne, Janet? Thomas Lynne?"—and my father's gruff, "Well, what did you expect, Laura? She spends all her free time with that boy, doing God knows what down in them woods."

By this time it was October, and Tommie was being a bit more evasive than I would have liked. I finally was fallen to enlisting the help of Gus to corner him in the machine shop. After a whole lot of stormy tears on my part, Tommie finally sighed and glanced around to make sure that we were alone.

"What are you doing on Halloween night?"

I stared at him, certain that my poor ears had failed me. "Halloween night? Tommie, I'm gonna have a baby, and all you can ask is what party I'm going to on Halloween night?" The tears started again, a bit stronger this time.

Tommie ran a hand through his floppy hair. "Not what party—what are you doing? I'm serious. What do your parents do?"

"Stay home and give out candy, same as everyone's parents." I sobbed, not sure what he expected.

Tommie nodded. "Good. Tell them you're going somewhere. Hell, tell them you're going to that kids' party down at the First Baptist. The one Mrs. Wyllis is always trying to get you to help with? They'd let you go to that for sure. Just make sure they think you'll be gone all night."

I nodded. "Alright Tommie. I can do that. What are you planning? We're not gonna run away, are we?"

He looked startled. "Run away? No, I need your help with something." He slid down the concrete wall to sit among the grease stains, and I did the same, feeling like a flat tire.

"You're gonna think this is crazy, but I need you to trust me, Janet." I nodded. "You remember those things I used to see?"

I nodded cautiously. "You mean those things your crazy old man saw, too? Yes." I crossed my arms, realizing this wasn't going any direction I had hoped for.

He bit his lip. "Well, they're real. They're called faeries and that's where I was—with them in the woods—for all those three years, and they're immortal, see, or almost, and so they have to pay a tithe to Hell every seven years to pay for it—you know, 'The price of immortality ain't cheap' and all that—and, well, they want me to be it. They're gonna make me be it. They let me go for a little while, first, like someone on death row's last meal. But they're watching me. They'll be back. And, you know—death row and being given to the devil don't sound so great." He finished and took a big breath, trying hard to grin although it wasn't working.

I must have stared like he'd hit me over the head with his wrench. All I could think about was a murderous Tinkerbelle, and that my baby was gonna be bug-shit fucking crazy.

"I know it sounds crazy, Jan," he rushed on. "Hell, it even sounds crazy to me. But if you could just see them! And you will..." He grabbed my hand. "You will, if you'll do this for me."

I took back my hand. "Do what for you?"

"Rescue me." His eyes were bright, too big in his face. "They're coming to get me Halloween night. It has to be then. They'll take me through the Boundary Wood, to that big oak we used to climb back in elementary school, remember?"

I knew the place—about half a mile straight into the forest, directly behind Jeremiah Lynne's trailer. I had already started shaking my head, but Tommie plowed on.

"They'll be on horseback, all dressed up. You have to pull me off the horse and hold on to me, no matter what happens. The queen will be there. It's like the rules. I'm not even supposed to be telling you this." He was babbling already.

"Fine, Tommie. Fine, I'll do it," I said, more to make him stop talking like a lunatic than because I believed his life was in danger. He gave me a look like a man been rescued from drowning.



On Halloween night I parked Carter a hundred yards down the street from Jeremiah's trailer, and snuck through the waist-high weeds in the back yard, past the blue TV light, cringing instinctively. It already was more of an adventure than I wanted, and I was cold, too, dressed up in some ridiculously fringed costume, all because I wanted my parents to think I was out with Mrs. Wyllis, atoning for my sins by giving out candy to the town's children.

The woods were so dark my eyes wouldn't adjust, and branches kept poking me with hard fingers, leaves slapping me in the face. I did eventually find the old oak, and wouldn't you know there was nothing special about it. It was dark here, too, and cold, and full of scurrings and rustlings that I didn't care to think about. I was just on the point of taking my stupid costume and going home, and God—or faeries—damn Thomas Lynne to where he deserves, when I heard bells. I froze and climbed up into that oak mighty quick, hiding in the darker

dark inside the leaves. Someone laughed, like more bells ringing, a horse snorted, and I peeped through the leaves for my first glimpse of faeries, still half expecting some kids up to Halloween pranks.

It weren't no kids. These glowed. The first was all white, tall white horse and a white lady riding it, shining through the gloomy pines like one of them fireflies made huge. The second was black, that one a man, the third green, and so on. I'm not sure what I had been expecting, but it weren't these tall, elegant, wispy things like moonlight or mist. They moved like no human ever would, even their horses were unnaturally graceful. I was so awed I almost didn't notice that the green was Tommie. They'd dressed him up like one of them, though now I can't remember what it was they wore. Leaves, maybe, or something like Cinderella. They were so close now that they'd soon pass under the tree, and I had to do something quick. I wavered a bit, balanced on a branch the size of my wrist, and, if truth be told, as Tommie passed by up under me, I fell.

Well, I hollered as I fell, and landed right on top of Tommie, dragging him off his horse, and maybe they took that for an attack, I don't know, but there was sure an uproar then. I paid no attention at all, because about this time I noticed it wasn't Tommie I was holding, but a big green frog wiggling in my arms. And then that thing was a snake, and I almost dropped it quick, but it changed too fast, this time something slimy and thrashing like a fish on a hook, with teeth. That's when I remembered what Tommie had told me, leaning against the concrete wall. "Hold on to me no matter what." After that I closed my eyes, and it went better. I felt fur, and scales, and claws, and slime, but I never let go. Eventually I realized it was naked skin and muscle I was holding, and someone was laughing like bells again, so I opened my eyes and let go.

Tommie was stark naked, panting in the glow from the faeries, and it was the white lady laughing.

"Our attacker from the trees is brave indeed, for a little mortal girl." She looked down at me from her horse with a face like the moon. Up close I could see that it weren't no real horse, but something scaly and a bit see-through, like a white sheet on the clothesline, that I might be afraid of. "Tommie, dear, who is this savior?"

Well, I didn't like her calling Tommie "dear," not one little bit, and so I spoke up for myself. "My name's Janet. I'm the mother of his baby." And I stuck my chest out right proud, stood on my tippie toes, too, forgetting I was dressed up like a rhinestone cowgirl for Jesus.

There was a hush in the group, then, and the queen—by now even I had figured that one out—backed her horse away a few steps. "The mother of his baby." She repeated it like she was gonna throw up on my toes.

"Yes ma'am."

Something crossed her face then, the only unpleasant emotion I ever saw in any of them. "And you, Tommie, you choose this..." She paused, like she was thinkin' something mighty different than what she was sayin'. "... Girl over your duty to us?"

Tommie had been standing there silently shivering all this time, but he nodded then.

She narrowed her eyes, glanced one last time at my still-flat belly. "So be it."

I don't rightly remember what happened then. Somehow they were gone, and I got Tommie out of the woods. He was shivering so bad though, we made it as far as his dad's

trailer and ended up knocking on the door. Jeremiah Lynne didn't seem too fearful an enemy after a faerie queen. Eventually Tommie ended up driving me home in Carter, and I slept for a full two days. My parents still think I came home exhausted from good works and saving souls. Seeing as how they're right, I haven't ever had to tell them any different.



I ain't seen the faeries again in a good five years, though I'll feel better when it's seven. I ain't seen that Thomas Lynne in four, though he was here when I gave birth to Thomas Junior. We figured it was a lucky name, seeing as how he dodged Hell and all. I've still got Carter, too, his daddy's legacy, since Tommie went thumbing this time he left. I've been teaching little Tommie all about magic, and the strength of things that's been through hell and back, even if they aren't very pretty on the outside. Even Jeremiah Lynne's been around once or twice "just to see the baby." How I figure, that's two good things that's come from all this—my sweet little boy and a sometimes-sober Jeremiah. Those faeries better think twice if they're thinking on taking any of that away from me.



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**Jordan Taylor** grew up in a small town in the American South, where she was raised on equal parts Jesus and fairy tales. She is a recent graduate from North Carolina State University, where she received her bachelor's in Creative Writing. She currently lives in NYC with her fiancé, Kenan and their corgi, Ein.

# When Angels Wear Butterfly Wings

Stone Showers

**T**he two sat alone in the forward pew, the child dressed all in white, her mother in black. The little girl wore a pair of butterfly wings strapped to her shoulders.

"Momma? Can little girls fly?"

"Of course they can," the mother whispered. The woman held a tattered scrapbook in her lap. She turned the pages slowly, fingers caressing each of the pictures in turn. "All they have to do is believe," she said.

The toddler stood and closed her eyes. Tiny fingers fluttered. Hair shifted. Red shoes lifted from the ground.

"Look at me, Momma," she said. "Look at me, I'm flying."



Father Jack approached the woman carefully. He hesitated before speaking. "I thought you might want to talk," he said.

The mother hesitated for a moment, then closed her book of pictures and hugged the scrapbook to her chest. Above her, the little girl's wings gently brushed the ceiling.

The woman looked up at her priest and tried to smile. "We lived on the third floor," she said. "All of the windows there looked out over the trees below. In the summer, butterflies would sometimes land on the ledge outside—Katy loved to watch them. She said their wings reminded her of angels." The woman leaned forward in the pew. The priest sat down beside her. Above them, the little girl giggled faintly.

"I came out of the kitchen that morning to find my Katy standing on the ledge outside. She wore the butterfly wings I'd made for her, and when she saw me she started to laugh. 'Look at me, Momma,' she said. 'Look at me, I'm flying.'"

As the mother said this, her little girl fell into the seat beside her. One of the child's wings was broken, the other bent backwards at an odd angle.

"Every day my Katy would ask if little girls could fly, and every day I'd tell her that they could."

The mother turned and looked at her priest. "Why would I do that?" she asked. "Why would I tell my daughter something that wasn't true?"



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**Stone Showers** lives in Central Oregon with his beautiful wife and two incredibly intelligent children. He may be somewhat biased about such things, but feels that if you were to meet his family you would agree with him wholeheartedly on both counts. His short fiction has recently appeared, or is due to appear at *Stupefying Stories*, *Niteblade*, and *Black Denim Lit*. He is currently at work on his first novel.

# Sea Found

L R Hieber

I'd been so aroused by the idea of him for so long, actually *seeing* him was like a first kiss. The Young Man of the Sea. He'd haunted the shore for a century. Thinking of him had become a full-time job.

Our family's summer cottage sat squat on the Connecticut coast, on a rough piece of land no one else had ever felt the need to build on. My Uncle Frank, though, thought it was worth a try. Even after rebuilding it three times after various storms, he still deemed it the best spot of land in New England. Uncle Frank hated anything west of New England, where no one knew the meaning of fresh seafood. Uncle Frank was Mom's brother and accompanied us on all vacations whether we liked it or not; a sour, stubborn tour guide.

Something heavy hung in the air the summer the ghost and I finally met. Lovecraft was right: New England is inherently odd. But, in the end, that's a good thing.

I agreed to spend my twentieth birthday at the cottage, in hopes he'd pay me a birthday visit.

The only thing I didn't like about the cottage was the water. I don't know how many times I said no to boat rides. Uncle Frank said I was un-American for not going near the water. His spite had nothing to do with patriotism and everything to do with his seafaring blood. If I'd gone vegan and refused to eat lobster he would have exiled me.

Our cottage had an attic, and I claimed the long, shadowy space for my own. A few small windows faced the ocean. I'd stand watch to see if a ship might crash. I didn't mind looking at the water, when it was far away.

An out-of-tune piano loved only by me sat against the far wall of my dim gray haven. I'd play études in a minor key and stop to listen when the wind began to howl and whistle through the rafters like a wheezing bellows. I watched horror movies on an old TV and wished I lived in them.

Whenever the family was able to coax me from my attic perch at dinnertime they tried to connect, to find out what I was interested in. They asked what I wanted to do for a living, and I could only shrug. I didn't think I was good at anything.

Mom asked me why my friends from school hadn't called. I opened my mouth to explain that my friends had decided I was too weird and didn't talk to me anymore but my tongue wouldn't work.

The only thing that had really kept my attention was *him*. The story, as passed along by sailors and homebodies alike, was that during the nineteenth century, a painter lived nearby, a handsome young aristocrat. One night a spiteful rival broke into his studio and struck a match.

The studio went up in flames as a full moon illuminated the scene. Hundreds of original canvasses were reduced to ash. His life's work, his companions, perished in an inferno of paint and turpentine. The following evening, maddened, the aristocrat crept into the culprit's bedroom and, with a hand-saw, severed each offending hand. He skewered the palms on the rival's own front gate.

Maddened by his own actions, the aristocrat ran to the cliffs and threw himself on the sharp rocks below. His body was taken by the water and never divulged.

By the next full moon, a gaunt form in bedraggled, bloody clothes was seen in vaporous grayscale haunting spots of foggy coastline. Maybe he was looking for his paintings. Maybe something else. It was said he could only be seen when the moon was very bright and the fog set the rocks glowing.

Supposedly, he'd stare into children's nursery windows. I kept hawk-like watch, but he never came to mine. It was said he caused shipwrecks by tampering with the lighthouse. Unfortunately, no ships ran aground that summer.

Once, at dinner, I finally tried to ask Uncle Frank about him. He scoffed. Ghosts didn't exist. Uncle Frank hated anything supernatural almost as much as he hated anything west of New England. I tried to protest, but he told me to shut up and eat my lobster.

I took up painting. I dreamed of ghosts and history and became unsettled by simple things. Once I saw a car and got confused. I put batteries in the wrong way. I was baffled by the device that played my favorite slasher flicks. The nineteenth century crept over me like a brain fever.

I imagined him haunting me. Just me. Mine. My friend, my very own personal specter, bound to me in an otherworldly pact. He wouldn't think I was weird; he'd understand and keep me company. But every time I gazed out the window, he escaped my grasp.

To lure him in, I tried many tricks, everything but going near the water. I read about candle magic and spell casting. I drew symbols and charms with chalk in wide circles on the floorboards. I lay awake, attempting lucid dreaming.

Finally an idea struck me as I watched dust dance in the moonbeams piercing my filmy curtains. I jumped to my feet and began painting in his homage.

Hastily, messily, I painted my mind's idea of him; dripping perspiration onto porous watercolor paper. I ran to tack my amateur masterpieces on the walls while brooding Tchaikovsky poured from my stereo.

The lamps at both ends of my room flickered. A cold wind blew out my candles. The temperature in the room dropped drastic degrees. I slowly turned to the landing of my attic stairs.

He was floating on my threshold. My heart leaped.

"I've waited for you my whole life," I blurted. "Please stay."

His specter form was shaded in black, white, and every gray between. Dressed in a frock coat with frayed embroidery, his ruffled, open shirt was torn over his breast like Byron. His features were smooth and angelically sharp; his brow noble and youthful, his lips thin and deliciously curved. His hair floated as if under water. I'd imagined angels. But he was so much more. I fell to my knees. He stared at me.

"I'm Christine," I choked. The spirit blinked semi-transparent eyes. "What's your name?"

He smirked, condescending.

"Oh, I guess you can't tell me, can you?" I loosed a nervous laugh.

He shook his head. Floating about my room, he admired my paintings with a wide smile that created hazy dimples. I blushed. "They're for you..."

Drifting to my bookshelf, he paused and bobbed anxiously in the air. He pointed to my *Complete Works of Poe*. A floating finger fixed on one word.

"Edgar," I murmured, turning to him with a thrill.

Edgar nodded, pleased.

The waves crashed against the shore in a thundering clap that jarred the water from its sensual rhythm. Suddenly, Edgar glided toward the threshold as if summoned.

"Edgar, wait," I gasped. He turned again. "Will you come back?"

Edgar stared mournfully at my hands for a long moment before nodding. Then he turned and dissipated down my stairs.

I collapsed on my bed and stared at the rafters, alternately giggling and sniffing.

Finally, as weeks passed, I felt whole. Purposeful. At home. Befriended. My family turned a blind eye to my increasingly withdrawn life. My birthday passed without much note. I think Mom baked a dilapidated cake and cooked some sort of crustacean for supper. They gave up trying to get me to go for a boat ride. Uncle Frank thought maybe I should move, somewhere west of New England.

I lived for a bright moon. It didn't even have to be full for him to come. I was special.

Edgar watched me paint. He would point to areas that needed improvement. Amused, he would watch me tinker on the out-of-tune piano. He was fascinated by my hands. I asked if he missed greasy paint on his fingertips, the slow drag of a brush across a canvass. He nodded and stared at me like he was starving. I didn't mind what parts of me his eyes drank up. I wanted to share everything with my new best friend; the man I loved.

He listened as I awkwardly confessed dark secrets. I declared my hatred for the people and things of the twenty-first century. I dressed for him in the fashion of his day; something I rented from a dusty place in town. When he saw me in that moth-eaten dress, his transparent eyes glistened with tears that couldn't manifest into water.

We waltzed to Strauss. His arm chilled my side as we twirled about the room. Head to toe, I shivered with delight. I wrote him sonnets about vengeance, hands, and the moon. That hypnotizing, luminous sphere was our lone, silent chaperone.

One night, I couldn't hold back. I told him I loved him. His dark eyes burned with a particular light I'd never seen.

Edgar focused on the white chalk I'd used to make symbols on my floor. He'd tried to use his incorporeal energy to shift objects before; to varying degrees of success. On this night he managed to muster enough force to lift the chalk and draw a shaking line that curved into a heart. He looked at the heart, then at me.

I wept openly, bemoaning the deliciously doomed love affair of the living and dead. Edgar, floating over me, shook his head and smiled. For a long time we stood listening to the crash of water on rocks.

His eyes looked me up and down, speaking wordless desire. His ghostly finger traced my outline from yards away. The moon pierced my room in bright silver shafts like searchlights. He pointed his finger down my body and this time I understood. My breath was ragged. My blood raged, pounding in tandem with the ocean.

Trembling, I undressed before him, letting my simple white sundress fall from my body. I let his eyes trespass me, wishing to be ravished for the first time by an essence.

In a moment that lasted for eternity, his semi-transparent body drew closer. My skin, already covered in goose-bumps, chilled further. Moisture frosted. He was inches from me. He bent his head and reached out a hand.

Icy air seized my neck. Icy air kissed me. I gasped and ice danced around my tongue. Cold tendrils caressed every curve of my body. I moaned and my breath came out in clouds.

The chill withdrew suddenly. Without hesitation I stumbled forward, craving ice to dive deeper. My mind swam. I had to be enveloped again. I had to have his pulsing cold. I needed him. Without him, I was a friendless misfit. He stared with severity at the moon and floated out the front door. Naked, shivering, unheeding, I followed. I had nothing; no place to belong if I didn't have him.

I didn't want to hear the waves grow louder. I hated water.

A spectral hand reached for me, desperate. I stumbled on the gravel of our front path, trying to keep pace with the form that began to blend with the thick fog all around me. The vapors kissed my flesh.

Edgar's blue-black eyes shone through the fog; a lighthouse in reverse. He flung his arms wide, yearning to fall into me.

As the waves roared, the shadow of his head turned to stare longingly at the moon and disappeared from view.

"Edgar, wait!" I stumbled forward.

The rocks below me were very sharp. But it was only a brief transition from searing pain into numb vapor.

Now I don't mind the water.

Now I look in your houses.

Now I scare your children.

Now I float the coastline, drawing ships on the rocks. I'm the lighthouse that sometimes goes dark.

Edgar's gone. Maybe he paints with blood in hell, staring at his own hands, curious. Maybe he waltzes with other naked girls in their attics. Or maybe he floats between heaven and earth writing sonnets with quills plucked from plummeting angels.

At first, I couldn't understand his betrayal. But once I began my own haunts, it didn't matter anymore.

I, bloody seraph in shades of gray, vaporous and seeking the seduction of your senses, have taken his place. Finally, I belong, here on my coastline. I've become more than those movies I wanted to live. I float in infamy, not imagination. I used to be useless. Once wayward, now found, I have my place.

But I'm not giving it up. No one will take over. The shoreline's mine.

Come gaze at the water, my young man. Come dream, come play. The crash of the sea is our waltz, never mind it's out of tune.

I know you need a friend. I know you're awkward, backward; desperate for companionship. I was like you. But look at me now; your angel and paramour. I'm all you need. I know you'll follow me. They always do.



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Actress, playwright, artisan and author **Leanna Renee Hieber** is a reincarnate Victorian and an award-winning novelist in the Gothic, Gaslamp Fantasy genre for *Tor Books*, with such titles as her new *Eterna Files* saga and her acclaimed *Strangely Beautiful* saga and *Magic Most Foul* trilogy.

# Fountain

Lynda Clark

Maude stepped back from the shadeglass, squinting. They had said the future would be bright, but this was ridiculous. Shielding her eyes, she looked past Martin, curled up on the rocking chair on the porch, and tried to make out the origins of the approaching dust cloud. Riders—it looked like—though who would be out with the suns at their zenith was beyond her.

Simon mewed from the kitchen as Magdalena rubbed herself against Maude's legs, prompting Maude to fix them all some food. She keyed in the combination for the pantry's lock and the door slid open to reveal her meager supplies. It wouldn't be long before she'd have to make the long trek to Fountain to stock up. How she hated that town—its ways and its memories.

She ripped open two packs of instameat and emptied the freeze-dried contents into a pan on the burner, then topped it up with water from the filtration tank and set the burner going. Graham and Willard joined her by the window as she squinted out onto the plains once more.

Definitely riders, two of them, on the native strokers, not the souped-up horses the settlers used. Maude found herself reaching for her fission rifle. She never really held with all that stuff about native raiding parties burning their victims alive and eating the charred meat, but you could never be too careful.

"You can never be too careful," she echoed her thoughts to Mimi. Mimi eyed her for a moment, then yawned.

They were closer now, the big, shambling creatures moving deceptively fast. Poor strokers. They'd been bioengineered so much they more closely resembled giant sloths than their amphibious ancestors. Their riders were crouched forward, their faces swathed in fibrocotton to protect their skin from the glaring heat. No one was more sensitive to the heat than the natives.

The instameat on the burner bubbled hard, huge globs of meaty gravy popping to the surface, but Maude was concentrating too closely on the approaching riders to turn down the heat. They weren't following the line of the road. They were headed across country, directly for Maude's shack.

She hefted the rifle, making sure all its functions were operational. "Just you try eating my skin, you fishy sons of bitches."

Gary sniffed the air and yowled, drawing Maude's attention back to the food.

"Goddammnit!" Maude snapped, turning the burner off.

She paced the kitchen, breathing fast. They were almost upon her. She could hardly run out there and confront them; she'd be a walking melanoma in seconds. But the shack was so small—if she stayed inside they'd overpower her for sure.

"What do I do, what do I do?" she muttered under her breath. A memory from Fountain tugged at her. Surrounded, cowering, but the name-calling wasn't enough. They still picked



up stones and dirt to pelt the freak. Strike first, or they would, that's what Fountain had taught her. She planted herself opposite the door and trained her rifle on the handle.

Outside, there was a dull snuffling as the stokers came to a stop. Boots clumped up the porch steps. Through the window she saw Martin stand up on the rocking chair and hiss, ears flat, hackles raised. She had tried to teach the cats that a shady patch of porch couldn't protect them from radiation, but some were too stubborn or too stupid to stay indoors. The neat row of little graves out back—unmarked and obscured by drifts of sand—attested to that.

One of the riders was clutching his stomach and Maude wondered if she should try to take him out first. The other one leaned toward the window. Maude showed him the rifle, an empty threat, but perhaps he didn't know that. If she shot out the window, she'd die a slow, irradiated death, and if they made it through the front door, she'd only have one shot before they were on her.

He raised a gloved hand and spread his fingers. She exhaled, relieved. Human.

"What do you want?" she shouted.

The front one pointed to his companion and then made a crude gun with his fingers. Maude moved closer. She could see the blood darkening the fibrocotton of the rider's tunic, the spreading stain. Maude sighed. Just because they were settlers, didn't mean they were honest. They could still beat and rob her. Fists and threats, that was often the best someone like Maude could expect.

She saw herself, much younger, pinned down on a bed at the saloon in Fountain by a whisky-breathed farmer. Breathing the stale sweat of the previous bodies that had writhed on that mattress, feeling his weight, knowing there was no escape. If Marianne hadn't clouted him around the head...

Well, that was the risk you took out here. People tried to hurt you and if they got hurt in return, well, that was on them. Nodding, Maude opened the door, shielding herself behind it.

The riders were barely over the threshold when the injured one collapsed. Without thinking, Maude closed the door and rushed forward to help him to his feet. She could feel his bony frame through his clothing. She wondered a moment about his mittened hands but dismissed the thought. The first rider had already shown his fingers. It was fine. They were settlers, not natives. She was just paranoid and jittery.

The uninjured rider came to support his companion and together he and Maude struggled through to the kitchen, then lowered him into a chair. The uninjured rider unwound the fibrocotton buff from his face. From *her* face. Maude had thought herself the only woman mad enough for a life in the desert, and her circumstances were less than ideal. This one was young, younger than Maude at least, with hard, sun-reddened skin and small, bright eyes. Her pupils had retracted to pinpricks from the hours spent outside.

"Bryony," the woman mumbled, pulling off her gloves and extending a hand.

"Maude," said Maude, wondering how long it was since she'd touched another person. "And your man here?"

"My girl," said Bryony, eyeing the hissing cats, "is Katie. Do you have a medikit?"

"Of course, of course, I'm sorry."

Another combination lock under the filtration tank and a drawer slid open to reveal some sterisheets and a tube of anaesthetic ointment.

"You don't have no grafters? No synthskin?"

Maude shook her head. "They're expensive. You get anything that requires 'em out here, you're dead anyway."

Bryony sighed. "Of course." She took out the anaesthetic and a handful of sterisheets. "Better than nothing, I s'pose."

She stepped toward her partner and took hold of the hem of her tunic. She hesitated, then looked at Maude. Maude put this down to anxiety about the inevitable pain she was going to inflict by moving the garment.

"Do you mind?" Bryony asked.

Maude wasn't sure what was being requested. Slowly it dawned on her that Bryony was shy about showing her girl's flesh to someone she'd just met. Blushing, Maude turned a half step away.

"What happened?" she asked, trying to distract herself. It had been a long time. Maude couldn't remember the last time she'd seen a person, never mind someone young, attractive, and within touching distance.

"Oh, you know," Bryony's voice was muffled, like she was stooped over. "Misunderstanding with Sheriff Gustav."

Maude knew only too well. Gustav had strange ideas about law and justice. The soft rustle of fabric drew her away from unpleasant memories of Fountain and Gustav. She didn't want to look, but her eyes were hungry for anything, any kind of glimpse, no matter how futile. She'd resigned herself to a life alone, but that didn't mean she didn't have the same desires as everyone else. She stole a look as Bryony was dabbing at the open wound and gasped in horror.

"You brought one of them into my house?!" She wheeled around, searching for the rifle. Goddammit, she'd dropped it by the door to help Bryony carry this... *thing* into her shack.

Katie, if that was what the damn thing was really called, leaned away from Maude's clenched fists as if she feared a blow. Maude saw the circle of angry faces again, stones poised to be thrown, no matter how much she pleaded. Hate borne of ignorance driving people to cruelty and violence. She paused. What if she'd misinterpreted what she'd seen? What if the girl had psoriasis or some other skin ailment? She glanced at the mittens. No, that sealed it. Definitely a native. God only knew what lurked under that face scarf.

Bryony bent over her companion's wound, squeezing out a small amount of anaesthetic. Katie stiffened, gripping the base of the chair. Bryony worked quickly, peeling the backing paper off a sterisheet and gently patting the adhesive antiseptic bandage into place. Job done, Bryony stood. She was tall and broad, but it wasn't her size that made Maude feel small.

"I'd'a thought you of all people would know life ain't always black and white."

Maude swallowed. Bryony must be a Fountain girl. Just because Maude hardly ever went there, didn't mean people didn't talk about her past and the way her father reacted to it.

"C'mon, Katie." Bryony lowered her shoulder and her companion gripped it weakly. "We wouldn't want to bring the posse knocking on Madam's door."

The words stung like thrown rocks.

They had almost made it to the door before Maude found her voice again.

"The food's prob'ly ruined, but you can have some if you want."



Maude cleaned the dust off the spare plates with an old rag and then set the table, embarrassed by the mismatched cutlery and congealed food. Katie and Bryony didn't seem to notice. They kept a watchful eye on the window and jerked when Willard leaped onto the kitchen counter with a loud thud.

As Maude served the two girls and then her menagerie, she did her best not to stare at Katie. She'd never seen a native up close, and the ones she had seen were always swathed in protective clothing. The *Fountain Bulletin* said the natives smelled strongly of dead fish and had needles for teeth, but Katie was hardly the terrifying monster in the picture on the board. Sure, she had larger eyes than a human, and when she blinked her eyelids came in from the sides. But her skin shone with tiny, iridescent scales. She had no hair, but her feather-like crest reminded Maude of a tropical bird.

Katie smiled shyly and looked down at her plate, and Maude realized she'd been staring too long.

"Sorry," she said, reddening.

"It's okay," Bryony answered, picking at her meat with a bent fork, "people expect a creature from the deep."

"Doesn't she speak?" Maude asked, watching the webbing between Katie's fingers flex as she reached for the pepper canister.

"She can, but it's exhausting for her in this heat. Plus we're low on water. Need to conserve her supply."

Maude nodded thoughtfully, studying the breathing apparatus that concealed Katie's gills.

If the aquatic natives were the vicious savages the settlers made them out to be, maybe they had good reason. 1775-E had once been covered pole-to-pole in water. When the terraformers arrived, they were only supposed to create a couple of landmasses, make the place habitable for humans. But they malfunctioned. Within a week, ninety percent of the planet had become a deserted wasteland.

"Well, you can fill up from my tank before you go," Maude said. "Where is it you're goin'?"

"Heard there's an oasis down south. Trying to get Katie there before..." Bryony left the sentence unfinished, but Maude knew what she meant. The natives didn't have much of a lifespan without constant access to water. "You ever thought of moving further south?" Bryony continued. "They say livin's easier down there."

"Not for an old lady like me."

"You could get some surgeries. You're not so old as to be unsalvageable." Bryony threw her a saucy wink, and Maude smiled in spite of herself.

"Too many surgeries on this old body already." She sighed. "And anyway, I don't want to be owin' nothing to no one in Fountain. Never again."

That seemed to be enough to remind Bryony of Maude's past. She nodded once, and they finished their food in silence. Maude refused to think about Gustav telling her the crowd gave her what she deserved. She wouldn't give her old man one more second of her time.

The silence made Martin's sudden yowl all the more startling. Maude was at the door with the rifle in her hand before she'd even thought about it, Katie and Bryony close behind her. She pressed herself flat against the wall, motioning for them to keep quiet and stay out of sight. She peered out at the porch. Nothing. But she wasn't fooled. Martin cowered beneath the rocking chair, tri-colored tail twitching. Someone was there. And she could guess who.

"Gustav?" she called out, priming the rifle with her thumb.

"Sheriff Gustav to you."

Maude's stomach went cold. Sweat broke out along her hairline and trickled down the back of her neck. She swallowed hard, willing her voice strong. "You got no business here."

"I think I'll be the judge of that." Gustav's boot banged the center of the door. Though it was an iron door, Maude had never maintained it, allowing it to be ravaged by rust. A few more kicks like that could send it flying. She glanced back out the window. The shadows of the scrubby ferns were longer than before. Two of the suns dipped toward the horizon; danger hour was over.

She waited until he'd wound up for another kick and then opened the door. Gustav stumbled into the room, eyes blazing. Maude knew that look all too well. Excitement at the prospect of administering "justice."

"Well, well," he said, running a hand over his short black beard, "looky here. How's it going, Junior?"

Maude couldn't stop herself from seeing the skinny boy held down on the bed by the drunken farmer, crying out for help, no one doing anything until Marianne took the initiative with a heavy old vase. And because it was Fountain, word got around. Gustav's boy thought he was a girl, let anyone who wanted to take him like he was one. She'd cried and cowered and they'd thrown stones and Gustav had done nothing but tell her she deserved it.

Gustav watched her. He'd had a lot of surgeries; his skin was still as tight and smooth as when they'd landed, but Maude knew he was decades older than her. Hateful old man. Always wanted to control everything he touched. Maude met his eyes, wishing her fury could kill him where he stood.

"Why don't you just ride on back to Fountain?" she asked, looking through the doorway for his horse.

"He's cloaked," said Gustav smugly. "Clever, ain't it?"

"If you're a pig shit thick bastard, then I suppose it'd seem clever." Maude checked her nails, keeping the rifle trained on his crotch. "Me? I think it's a dumb gadget for a sneaking dog."

Gustav leaped forward and she fumbled the rifle, still afraid of him after all these years. Strike first or they will, hadn't she learned anything? He was on her in a flash, squeezing her cheeks with his big hard fists.

"Why don't we stop dancing around and just—" he purred, just like the old days.

"You put her down!"

Maude turned her head, surprised to find Katie standing in the kitchen doorway.

"Hooooo!" Gustav let out a catarrhal laugh and dropped Maude. He rubbed his dirty hands together. "I knew it. Freaks find freaks. C'mon, Missy. Back to jail for you."

"Like hell it is!" Bryony charged out of the kitchen with the big brass pot, still hot from the burner, and swung it hard at the side of Gustav's head. He crumpled to his knees and Bryony probably would've gone on beating his head until there was nothing left if Maude hadn't dragged her away.

"If you girls could give me a moment," she said, calmer than she felt, "Gustav and I have something to talk about." Her heart hammered in her chest.

Katie and Bryony looked at each other. Bryony at least would understand. Word got around in Fountain. Katie seemed hesitant, lingering, unwilling to leave Maude alone with this monster, but Bryony steered her outside.

They loved each other, those two, and they deserved a life, anyone could see that. And the man on the floor, he wouldn't allow that. He'd hound them like he'd hounded Maude until she found the strength to leave.

She pressed the muzzle of the fission rifle to Gustav's chest and cocked her head to one side. She'd always thought that when this day came, if it came, she would make some sort of speech. She would stand over Gustav looking elegant and murderous as a lioness and tell him how much he had hurt her. Not just on that day, but before then, whispering his poisonous little asides to her from infancy to puberty. Unnatural. Unwanted. Unclean.

But now, looking down at his sunken, burned face, little more than a grinning skeleton draped in donor skin, now as she took in the knowing look in those hateful eyes, the self-satisfied smirk on those thin, cruel lips, she knew she should save her breath for someone who cared.

So all she said was, "Bye Daddy," and fired.



Bryony patted the dusty soil flat with the back of the spade and nodded curtly at Maude.

"It's done," she said, slipping away to retrieve the stokers.

Another mound. Another unmarked grave. Soon the sand would shift and only Maude would know it was there.

Maude groped around beside the burial plot, trying to find the damned cloaked horse without getting kicked in the face. She felt its neck, warmth coming off it in waves, and moved her hands up to the side of its head. Where was the switch? The horse kicked up dust as it sidestepped nervously away from her.

Katie stepped forward, put her hand over Maude's, and made a brisk circular motion with her fingertips. Katie's hand was cool, the scales rough but pliant, like the pads of the cats' feet. Maude's heart beat faster. The horse appeared, large and black and glossy, a welcome distraction.

"Thank you," said Maude, suddenly feeling self-conscious as Katie gave her hand a squeeze before moving away.

Bryony returned, leading the rested stokers. "You sure you won't change your mind? That horse looks a good one. I'm sure he could keep pace with the stokers if you asked him to."

Maude smiled. For a moment she thought about it. Seriously thought about it. Turning up in a place where she had never been Gustav's son, where she was just Maude and always had been. It would be nice.

But then she glanced around, and there was Simon, rolling in the dust, and Magdalena, sniffing at the freshly dug earth until she sneezed and sneezed, and Graham, sprawled out on the porch, blinking slower and slower as sleep gradually overwhelmed him.

"Who would look after my little ones?" she said with a smile. It was only a little sad. "I tell you what, though. I think I'll use this fella to ride into town and visit Marianne. Can you imagine people's faces?"

"I sure can." Bryony, now atop her stoker, gave one final, fond smile before winding her face cloth back into place. Katie saluted with a mittened hand and then circled her stoker, kicking it into a fast lope.

Maude stepped up onto the porch with her cats and watched the riders until they were specks on the horizon once more.



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**Lynda Clark** lives in Nottingham, in an area described by Channel 4 as "one of the most impoverished in Britain" which came as something of a shock. There's a tram network and everything. She likes writing about losers, outsiders, and weirdos in worlds that are almost ours, but not quite. She doesn't see the point in genre and borrows liberally from science fiction, fantasy, horror, crime, noir, fairytales, and popular culture. She has been a supermarket lackey, a trainee florist, a bookseller, and a video game producer. Now, she's mostly just a mess, trying to make money from her writing, surviving by living off her long-suffering husband. Someday, she might become an adult. That day is not today.

# Beneath the Raven's Wing

Rebecca Birch

**T**he haunting masculine voice that had drawn Moira into the night tickled at the edge of her hearing, rich and sweet as honey fresh from the hive, seeming to come from everywhere and nowhere, but always just ahead in the heavy fog that swirled over the lands around Castle Clary.

Moira picked her way forward. Pine needles littered the carpet of moss, pricking her bare feet. Gray wisps of mist that had rolled in off the loch coiled around her, grasping and cold. Nothing moved in the darkness. No tiny paws skittering. No hooting owls.

Moira's father, Lord Clary, forbade his children from leaving the castle at night, but this once, she had disobeyed, unable to ignore the voice that clung to her like a cobweb, familiar as her own skin, although she couldn't remember ever hearing it before. The voice caressed her earlobe, her spine, sending shivers coursing down her limbs.

Her toes curled, reaching for the river of energy she could always feel surging beneath the rock and soil of her father's domain, but it was so distant she could hardly sense it. How far had she wandered to be so lost? She who knew Clary's every swell and valley, every hidden copse and badger sett? What spider would she find at the end of this sticky strand?

She bit the tip of her tongue and tried to think back, to retrace her steps, but all she found was the voice that turned her blood to mulled brandy. Nothing that would tell her the way back to Castle Clary with its warm fire and comfortable familiarity—the lord and his men drinking and singing until weariness dragged them to their bedrolls, hounds begging and picking at the scraps, her sisters plying their embroidery needles, giggling and tittering over whichever handsome man had caught their fickle eyes that day.

The voice vanished.

Moira shivered and pulled her woven shawl tight against the silence. Her fingers tingled, half numb, though she couldn't say whether it was from cold or from fear.

A twig snapped.

She was not alone.

Moira raised her chin. A daughter of Clary feared nothing. "Who's there?"

Something breathed close by, a wisp of sound that set Moira's pulse thudding. Her mouth tasted like bitter sap.

"I am Corbet."

The mist magnified his voice, so it felt as if it came from all sides at once. A strange lilt tinged his words, thick and round at the edges. Not from Clary, nor any of the adjoining territories. Moira's fingers tightened in the fibers of her shawl. Dizziness hummed in her ears. She shouldn't be here.

"Show yourself."

Pale blue light flared. Moira raised a hand to block the glare, peered through the spaces between her fingers, and stumbled back a step. A dark figure stood less than an arm's length away, so tall she had to crane her neck to see his face.



Black hair, black eyes, and broad shoulders draped by a cloak of raven feathers stretching nearly to the ground. A long, beak-like nose dominated his face, framed with a shadow of dark stubble covering the pale skin of his strong jaw and narrow cheeks. Black feathers hung in his shoulder-length hair.

Moira's heart thudded faster than a wren's.

"Who are ye? What do ye want?" she asked, crossing her arms over her chest. Her finger grazed the cool metal of the Clary ring she wore on a cord around her neck and she curled a knuckle through the wide band.

The man took a step closer, so close his warmth heated her chilled skin. He smelled of cedar and heather and rain. Bending down until his lips were a breath from her ear, he whispered, "Who do you want me to be?"

The deep voice thrummed down her spine and nestled in her belly like a hot stone. Moira knew the voice now. She'd heard it while she slumbered. She closed her eyes. This was a dream. Some manic, fevered dream sent to torment her for being so foolish to ignore her father's edict. Desperate to ground herself, she reached again for the land's energy, but it had receded so far it was nothing more than the brush of thistledown, tickling her soles.

Moira forced her eyes open. "I've no want for ye to be anyone."

Corbet straightened, lips curving into a half-smile. "You are wise."

"If I were wise, I wouldn't be here speaking with ye. I'd be safe in my father's house."

"You think your father's house so very safe?" The light pulsed. Belatedly, Moira wondered where it came from. It seemed to radiate from Corbet himself, shimmering in the air around him. "I would venture to disagree," he continued, "given how easily I gained entry to lure you away."

A breath full of mist coated Moira's tongue. She swallowed. "Take me back."

"Your only safety now is beyond the mist." A sweep of his hand took in the fog that pressed in all around them. "You cannot go back."

"Cannot?" Moira forced her gaze from Corbet's long, tapered fingers and glared up at him, embracing the anger that flared in her breast. The gusting wind didn't touch him. Not a hair stirred, not a feather. Dream or not, he was not of this world. He could not command her.

"Watch me."

Turning her back on him, Moira walked blindly into the fog. Her feet shaped to the ground and she kept one hand raised protectively in front of her face. Step after step after step, with no aim other than *away*. Did Corbet follow?

Thunder crashed, echoing through Moira's skull. Harsh wind raced before the storm, raising ominous creaks and groans among the unseen trees. Her skirt twisted around her legs, threatening to hobble her. The air tasted like damp linen.

Rain sluiced down, drenching her through, turning her skin to ice, but did nothing to clear the unending fog. Teeth chattering and sodden, Moira walked on, not knowing whether Castle Clary was ahead or behind, but too cold now and too afraid to stop moving.

Somewhere nearby a wolf bayed, hollow and hungry. Answering howls rose up on all sides. She was going to die. Lord Clary's headstrong youngest daughter, too wild to know her place. Out of doors as often as she could manage, barefoot and bareheaded, more a wisp than a woman. So different from her sisters. Would they mourn when she was gone?

Moira broke into a run, but stumbled and crashed to the ground. No air. Her chest spasmed, and her mouth opened and closed like a beached fish. She staggered to her feet and leaned on her knees, gasping for breath.

The mist took on a harsh amber glow, revealing a circle of wolves, their muzzles low to the ground, fur bristling at their necks. Rumbling growls shivered through the air. Moira froze, her mouth tasting as if she'd bitten cold steel.

"My children will not harm you," said a husky feminine voice. "Not without my command."

Moira spun toward the voice. Two wolves pressed themselves apart, leaving a narrow pathway between their gray- and silver-streaked pelts.

The amber light brightened and a woman stepped between them. Glimmering motes like smoldering embers drifted around her.

Where Corbet was dark, this woman was deathly fair. Luxuriant pale curls draped down her back. Ash-white hair covered her bare arms and neck, thinning almost into nothingness on her face, but a dusting grew even there. Her long nose hinted at a wolf's snout. A narrow, draping gown of gray fur hung from her shoulders, split halfway up one thigh, revealing a muscular limb, also coated with white hair, and ending in a foot that was an amalgam of human and wolf. Sharp, bony ridges protruded toward the skin's surface and dangerous-looking claws dug into the ground below.

"Poor child," the woman murmured, "you are lost and frightened."

Not more than an hour ago, Moira would have denied it. Now, she said nothing, only hugged herself close and tried to still the trembling. The subtle rush of Clary's energy stream was nothing more than a memory. She had never felt more alone.

The woman reached one claw-tipped finger toward Moira's cheek. A musky, animal smell with undertones of rot emanated from her skin.

Moira jerked away, a sick feeling working its way up the back of her throat. The wolves' growls intensified.

"You've not asked me who I am." When she spoke, the wolf-woman's lips parted to reveal long, sharp canines. Blood red gleamed from her eyes.

Moira found her voice. "I do not care to know. All I want to know is how to get back to Castle Clary."

The woman chuckled like a grouse's thrum. The sound ricocheted through the mist. A vein throbbed at the base of her throat.

Moira stood stiffly, her shoulders back, trying to maintain as much of her dignity as she could dredge together.

When the woman stopped laughing her smile shifted, leaving only a predatory glint of teeth. "I am Yndris, the Reaper. I cut the threads of the unwanted and unclaimed. The left-behind ones who've not been called back beyond the veil."

"I don't know who ye think I am, but I'm not unwanted, nor unclaimed. My father is Lord Clary and this is his land."

"And your mother?"

Moira glanced at her hands. "She died in childbirth."

"Is that what they told you?" Yndris tipped her head to the side and ran the tip of her tongue over her lips. "Pity. But so like mortals. Easier to say she died giving you life than to say she never wanted you at all. Yes, you are Lord Clary's child, but your mother belonged to my world. She exiled you beyond the mists before you'd suckled your first milk."

The wolf-woman stalked forward, circling Moira, tracing a claw over the soft skin of Moira's neck. "Your time is ended, abandoned girl."

A shudder rocked Moira from crown to toes. She couldn't move. Couldn't breathe.

It was a lie. A foul, evil lie. Her mother had loved her—enough to risk her life to bring her into the world. Hadn't she?

"Don't fear," Yndris said, caressing Moira's throat, encircling her neck with her long, powerful hands. Her voice dropped to a sickly-sweet whisper. "This won't hurt."

The wolf-woman's claws pierced Moira's skin.

Too late, Moira's paralysis broke. Too late, she tried to struggle. Too late, and cold, seductive lethargy slipped through her veins. No air. No strength. Her vision tunneled until all she could see was the wolf-woman's blood-touched eyes.

The wolves sidled close, nipping at her legs.

"Don't be greedy, children. Wait until she's dead before you feast." Yndris's voice sounded as if she were speaking through uncared wool.

A raven shrieked and plummeted from above, black wings flapping at Yndris's face, talons outstretched, scratching, clawing. The wolf-woman released Moira, pulling her hands over her head to protect herself from the onslaught.

Air raced into Moira's lungs and vertigo slammed through her. Her knees gave out and she crumpled, but before she hit the ground, strong arms swept her close, wrapped in the scent of cedar, rain, and heather. Vast wings stretched wide, glimmering with pale blue light, and then she was rising, up and up through the mist, leaving behind the baying wolves and the Reaper, shrieking curses after her.

Moira twisted in Corbet's arms, wrapping her own around his neck and burying her face in the soft feathers that bloomed over his chest. Safe. Protected. With each powerful flap of his wings the muscles against her cheek flexed.

"I told you that you could not go back," he said, his voice edged with strain.

"I don't understand," Moira whispered, her mouth filling with down. The wind whipped her words away, and she wondered whether he could even hear them. "I want to go home."

Corbet did not reply. His labored breathing rasped in his chest. Soon, they circled downward. With one final sweep of his wings, he landed, Moira still clasped close.

As soon as she realized they were down, she released her grasp and slithered to the ground, pressing away to give herself some distance—space to think, to breathe. She grasped the Clary ring at the base of her throat in a tight fist, feeling the embossed stag's head press into her palm.

The mist was thinner here, letting in slivers of light from the gibbous moon. Water lapped against a shrouded shoreline. A chorus of frogs creaked and croaked in the darkness. Best of all, the rush of energy flowing underfoot throbbed near the surface, vital and pure.

While Corbet caught his breath, Moira peered into the distance. A low slope showed through the mist, nothing more than a dark silhouette, but combined with the sound of the

loch, it was enough. She knew where Castle Clary lay. Just on the far side of the rise, nestled up against the shore. She wondered if the guards would hear her if she screamed.

Corbet touched the small of her back. "I know you want to return, but you must understand it is impossible. Yndris is relentless. She will find you. She'll set her wolves on your family, until none remain to guard you, and when you stand alone amidst their corpses, she will kill you. It is who she is, Moira. Her nature. You cannot outrun her, nor can you protect those you love."

"So it's true? My mother wasn't of this world? She's... what then?"

"Fae," he said, pulling back his shoulders, the sharp prow of his nose proud in silhouette against the moon. "Like me. Like Yndris. With no desire to be bound to a half-mortal child."

Moira regarded him. His wings were gone, replaced once again by the cloak of feathers. She touched his hair with tentative fingers, tracing one quill that hung there to where it grew from his scalp.

His thin lips parted on a soft exhale.

"And what of you?" she asked, pulling her hand slowly away. "What do ye want of me?"

"To see you safe. To bring you through the mists to the Otherworld."

"Why?"

He looked away, black eyes glinting. "My father was the one who brought you here. The Lady bound his word to bring you beyond the mists. She meant for you to die, but he could not bring himself to abandon you. He stole the ring you wear around your neck, which she had kept as a talisman of her conquest. It marked you, so your father would know you were the fruit of the dalliance he used to try to fill the emptiness where your sisters' mother would have been had she not gone to an early grave."

Corbet glanced at his hands. "The Lady learned of my father's treachery and banished him and all his kin from her realm. I was only a boy." He raised his eyes, his gaze tracing over Moira's face. "We had no home to return to, and he felt responsible for your fate, so he remained near, your unknown guardian."

"Outside the boundaries of the Lady's land, the long years of my father's life waylaid him. He who had once been strong and vigorous faded, becoming bent and feeble. At first, I resented you, but as the years passed and I grew to manhood, I came to understand his feelings—and to share them. When he grew too weak to watch over you, I took his place, both of us hoping your mother would change her mind and claim you before maturity drew Yndris to cut your life threads."

Moira blinked. "But I've never seen ye before today."

"I do not always wear this form. I can travel as a raven, and I have walked your dreams. If you listen with your soul, you will find me within." His fingers coiled with hers. "Come away with me. Leave this world behind before it's too late."

Moira hesitated, glancing back toward Castle Clary. Torchlight danced over the rise. Shouts filtered through the mist. "Moira! Moira, where are ye?"

Tears leaped to her eyes, but did not fall. She stared back at Corbet. "Not wanted, Yndris said? Do they sound as if they don't want me?"

The dark arches of his brows drew close, etching a long furrow between them. "They are mortal."

"And aren't I half mortal? Why would ye care what happens to a mongrel like me?"

Corbet released her hands and cradled her head, pulling her so close his scent filled her, his resonant voice vibrant and penetrating. "Because I love you. Let me claim you and Yndris will have no power over you."

Moira forced her arms between them, fighting the lure of his words. "How can I leave them? They're my family." She turned toward the castle and shouted, "I'm here!"

"Moira?" The torches drew toward them, the shapes of the bearers beginning to solidify through the fog.

Disbelief etched itself over Corbet's sharp features. "You've killed them, Moira. Yndris won't hesitate." He cocked his head, listening. "She's coming. I cannot protect them."

"But I can." Moira closed her eyes and concentrated on the rush of energy surging below. Now she knew why none of her family could feel the magic in the foundations of Clary. She was half fae. She sensed power beyond their capabilities. And what she could feel, she could wield. "I will not live in fear."

Moira knelt and laid her hands flat on the grassy earth. Pouring all her will into her palms, she opened herself to the deep part of her that had always remained hidden, waiting to be set free. Energy raced toward the surface and up through her hands, filling her heart, her chest, her lungs—permeating every inch of her, until she thought her skin would burst with its cool, swift-rushing power.

"Moira, girl!" Her father's voice. Her father's arms, pulling her upright, engulfing her in a bone-crushing embrace, his thick auburn beard scratchy against her forehead. "You're safe."

The wolves' howls pierced the mist, far too close. Moira wriggled free of her father's arms and pressed him behind her, toward the huddle of guardsmen who had come in his wake. He stumbled, unprepared for her magic-fueled strength.

Corbet stood at Moira's side, tense as bent yew wood, his fingers curling and uncurling, knuckles the color of midwinter frost. Her father's eyes passed over him as if he were invisible.

The wolves burst into view.

Moira sank her feet toward the source of her power, rooting herself to the earth. She raised her arms and shouted wordlessly. Silver light burst from her hands, forming a shield around her small band of men.

The first wolf leaped toward them, hit the shield, and fell back with a pained whine. Moira forced the shield outward. The searing silver touched the wolf's hide and it leaped backward, yipping and nipping at the singed patch on its shoulder.

The remaining wolves stalked the edge of the shield, ears pulled back, teeth bared, quivering with blood hunger.

"Impressive." Yndris stepped out of remnants of mist and inclined her head. "But you won't be able to hold your shield forever."

"As long as I stand on Clary land, I can hold this shield until the seas run dry." Moira's voice did not tremble. The wellspring below surged through her. In that moment, she felt invincible.

The wolf-woman's nostrils flared. Her lips curled back to reveal her fangs. Fierce and dangerous in her unworldly beauty.

"Moira wields the deep magic, Yndris," Corbet said, resting his hand on her shoulder. "By the laws of our folk, she now has the right to claim herself."

Yndris's eyes narrowed to ruby slits. "She's the whelp of a mortal."

Moira bristled. Power radiated through her, lifting the hairs on her arms, tingling in her fingertips. "Unwanted, ye said. Unclaimed. Well, I have been claimed. By my father and by the deep roots of this land. You have no right to me."

Yndris looked between Corbet and Moira. Moira returned her stare without flinching, drawing strength from both the land and Corbet's silent presence.

Yndris pressed her lips together and beckoned her wolves with a flick of her hand. "The Lady will hear of this. She will not be pleased."

The mist rushed forward, enveloping Yndris and her wolves, and then it was gone, leaving nothing but brilliant stars dancing overhead and the croaking of frogs. Moira released the magic, sagging against Corbet when it fled from her limbs.

The world felt as if it inhaled, caught in a frozen moment. "It's over," Corbet whispered. "Well done."

"What happens now?"

He brushed his fingers against her cheek. "Now you go home. When you are ready to learn what lies beyond the mists, I'll be waiting."

The world exhaled a rush of heather-tinged breath, and Corbet was gone, leaving Moira cold and unbalanced.

Lord Clary blinked and rubbed his eyes, looking around him in confusion. "Moira? What are ye doing out here? We've been searching for ye."

She sighed. "Nothing, Father. I'm sorry I worried ye. I'm ready to go home."

Moira let her father wrap an arm around her shoulders and lead her toward Castle Clary. Energy pulsed through her with each footstep, clear and fresh as rainwater.

A raven's call broke through the night. Moira looked up and found its dark shape perched on the castle's battlements, black eyes glinting.

Sending a trace of magic from her toes down through the earth and up along the stone wall, she brushed the raven with a soft touch. An answering tingle fluttered in her belly, ripe with promise.

Moira smiled and stepped into the warmth of Castle Clary, surrendering herself to the fluttering care of her sisters. They shepherded her to her sleeping pallet and tucked her under layers of woolen blankets, urging her to rest.

She laid her head on the pillow and waited for sleep to claim her. Would Corbet walk her dreams this night? She found she hoped so.

The foundations of her world had shifted. Clary was still home, but there was a new world now that she could claim, and claim it she would, beneath the raven's wing.



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**Rebecca Birch** lives in Seattle, Washington, where it doesn't really rain every day. She's a classically trained soprano, holds a deputy black belt in Tae Kwon Do, and enjoys spending time in the company of trees. Her fiction has appeared in markets including *Nature*, *Cricket*, and *Fireside Magazine*. You can find her online at [www.wordsofbirch.com](http://www.wordsofbirch.com).



# Exit Strategy

Shane Halbach

Delevan looked around the nondescript street again and squinted down at the scrap of cloth in his hand.  
*12 Carver's Street, 2<sup>nd</sup> bell.*

This was the place.

Delevan knocked hard on the solid oak door. Just because someone wanted to play faces and masks with him, didn't mean he needed to participate. He knocked again, louder.

An older housekeeper opened the door and looked cross for a moment before looking down and seeing Delevan standing there.

"Well?" he asked, gruffly.

The woman hurried to stand to the side and he brushed by her. She closed the door, crossed the room, and exited through a second, interior door without saying a word.

Delevan felt his grumpiness inching toward true anger.

The room was large and well apportioned, much nicer than the building had looked from outside. He was standing in a great room with a large hearth on the far wall. A thick, red rug and an enormous wooden table, polished until it shone in the light from the big windows, dominated the center of the room. An oil painting hung on the wall showing a realistic depiction of a pear, of all things.

Delevan snorted and walked around the table, selecting the high-backed wooden chair that allowed him to see all the doors. He hated this room, with its ridiculous painting and enormous furniture. His legs dangled impotently, and he couldn't rest his elbows on the table without looking like a pouty child.

Almost as soon as he was seated, there came another knock at the door. Again, the matronly housekeeper appeared and admitted a giant man with short-cropped hair. He wore leather breeches under a brown, rough-spun tunic in the Krykaran style: as long as a robe in front and back, but cut to his waist on the sides. His arms were bare and twined with tattoos. Incongruously, his fingers glittered with jewels, and he wore a silver sigil pinned over his heart.

The man took the seat around the corner to the left of Delevan, putting his back to the windows. He nodded to Delevan, but said nothing. Delevan said nothing either, for the moment allowing the game to play out. The man seemed at ease, but was probably just as clueless as Delevan.

Finally, footsteps approached from the inner door, and a small woman in pants and a deep green tunic entered the room. She wore her black hair long down her back, and her woven gold belt was slung fashionably off one hip.

"I should have known," muttered Delevan.

"Ah, gentlemen, I'm so glad you could make it," she beamed. "Delevan, this mountain next to you is Alden."

"Al-DEN," corrected Alden. "Al-DEN. Is strong at end, like spitting."

"Now I understand the silly sneaking about, but what I don't understand is why the Queen of Thieves felt she needed to meet with me," said Delevan.

"Queen of Thieves, is it? I thought it was Lewin the Bold," she mused.

"Aye, and Lewin the Ruthless, and a lot more besides. There's no shortage of names to call you."

Lewin laughed. "And what do you call me?"

"I don't," said Delevan.

"You should thank me, you know," Lewin continued. "You've just been recruited into the score of a lifetime. Of many lifetimes."

Delevan snorted. "Recruited? I don't think so. Which one am I, the fiddler? I'm too ugly to be the lover, unless you've got a very peculiar mark."

Lewin's smile widened lazily. Delevan would have sworn it curled up at the edges, like a cat's.

"You could say that. The mark is Staamgrin."

"Staamgrin? The *dragon*?" asked Delevan in disbelief.

"Just hear me out," said Lewin.

Delevan shoved his chair back and hopped to the floor. He glanced at Alden to see if the big man would try to prevent him from leaving, but Alden was inspecting one of his jeweled rings.

"It's impossible, and it's crazy. You're familiar with the phrase 'safer than a dragon's horde,' right? There's a reason they say that."

"Anything's possible with the right plan," said Lewin.

Delevan had already started for the door. "There's nothing you can say that would make me step foot in that abattoir."

"Some said it was impossible to get a supply train into Blendigstagg," she said, low and quiet. "Crazy, even."

Blendigstagg. The name twisted like a knife in his gut, and he stopped mid-stride. Delevan knew if he were facing her, she wouldn't have a smile on her face anymore. He didn't turn.

"After all this time..." said Delevan.

"You always knew I would. You knew that this was part of the deal."

"You were repaid a hundred fold. It's cost me plenty already."

"But you gained just as much. The siege was lifted, Blendigstagg was saved. You won the war and became a hero."

Delevan turned then, his face reddening.

"Don't overstep. You saved the lives of me and my people, but you weren't there for the rest of it. You weren't there when I took the Horn, or anything after. You don't know the first thing about what I've gained or lost."

Still, he went back to his chair at the table. Alden was studying Delevan's broad features with sudden interest.

"I'll hear you out, and that's it. And then we're through."

"That's all I ask," said Lewin, the hard mask of her face replaced once again by the easy smile. Delevan knew now which one was real and which was an act.

Faces and masks indeed.



Lewin unrolled an old scroll on the table, weighing the corners down with polished stones.

"Staamgrin's not the first resident of The Rookery, and a lot of the ruins of old Hybrith still exist up there. This," she said, tapping the scroll, "is an old structural drawing, obtained at some personal risk, which shows the palace where Staamgrin has his lair.

"The drawing shows an old servants' corridor running to a tiny delivery door, just on the east side of the throne room."

Delevan interrupted. "Staamgrin has been there for sixty years, at least. Do you think he hasn't found all of the servants' entrances?"

"He knows," said Alden. "They always know. But also always think they are very clever."

"Alden thinks that dragons leave some entrances open to entice thieves."

"Easier than hunting. Dragons eat much."

"And you two seem to be in a hurry to oblige him," said Delevan.

"It's Alden's theory, not mine. This door is not exactly an open invitation. It can only be opened from the inside."

"But if you're already inside, you don't need the door," said Delevan. "Teleport?"

"No. In fact, no spells of any kind will function inside the lair. Except for Staamgrin's, of course."

"I believe Staamgrin has an amulet for his own magic, like nulling for spell-nulling, if touching you."

"How do you know so much about Staamgrin?" asked Delevan.

"In Krykar, knowing about dragons is the wisest thing. Where do you think this Staamgrin comes from?"

"Don't let Alden fool you. In addition to being a dragon expert, he is also an accomplished mage and artificer, which is particularly necessary for our plan."

"I mistook him for a jeweler."

Alden held up his hands, wagging his fingers so the jewels on his rings flashed in the light. He pointed to a fat ruby.

"With this one, I feel no fire." He indicated a pale blue sapphire. "This one lets me breath under water." Next, a sickly yellow stone. "This one makes me immune to acid. When I have enough rings, I will be invincible."

"Do you have a ring to protect you from getting chewed up and spit out?"

Alden grinned broadly for the first time, and clapped Delevan hard on the shoulder. "No. There is no ring for that."

"I guess it wouldn't matter much, since magic won't work in Staamgrin's lair."

Alden's grin turned feral. "Staamgrin has spell-nulling. Rings is good Krykin artificery. Totally different."

Delevan turned to Lewin. "Okay, I understand why you're willing to cut Alden in. But why me? Surely you had other people to blackmail."

"Because you're calm in battle. Because you're loyal to a fault. And most of all, because you always do what needs to be done."

Delevan frowned at her.

"Cut it, Lewin. That silver tongue won't work on me."

"Well, there is one more thing," Lewin smiled winningly. "You asked how we're going to get inside?"

"Yes..."

"You're going in—"

"No."

"—alone, with no weapons—"

"No."

"—smuggled inside of an urn."

"Absolutely not."

"Think of how much gold is just sitting up there, waiting for us to take it. Enough to rebuild an entire nation."

She gave him a significant glance.

"The last thing a nation needs is gold stolen from a dragon."

"It's a pretty good fee for spending a little time in an urn."

"Wait a minute. You're only cutting me in because I'm short?"

"You were the only dwarf I could get on short notice."

Alden barked a laugh. "Short notice!"

Delevan ignored him. "Even if I were going to let you pack me in a vase like a mackerel, which I'm not, and even if this secret door exists, which it probably doesn't, there's still the question of how we get the treasure out of there. The three of us could hardly carry enough to make it worth our while, and Staamgrin would hunt us down like rabbits before we could even get off the plateau."

Lewin was undeterred. "You leave the exit strategy to me. All you have to do is open that door. Alden and I will take care of the rest."

"No way. I'm not going into a dragon's lair, alone, without even knowing how you plan to get the gold out. For all I know, I'm the distraction so the two of you have time to escape while Staamgrin has his dinner."

Lewin looked at Alden.

"Show him."

Alden reached under his tunic and took out two small pieces of black cloth, unfolding them on the table. Each a matte black with no shine, about fourteen inches in diameter. He put one of the circles in front of Delevan and smoothed it flat. He stood up and walked to the far end of the table, placing the other circle there.

"Now, you watch," he said, and thrust his arm through the piece of cloth, past the elbow. Incongruously, his arm thrust out of the circle in front of Delevan and slapped him hard on the cheek. Delevan thrust himself away from the arm in surprise, lost his balance, and went over backward in the chair.

When he scrambled to his feet, Alden's arm still rose from the table, like a serpent. He waggled his fingers.

"Blinking hell!" swore Delevan.

Alden removed his arm from the hole on his side and the disembodied arm on Delevan's side slipped back into its hole.

"Is linked," said Alden. "Dragon's gold goes in one side, comes out other. We shovel in, ba ba ba, room full of gold."

Delevan was quiet for a long time, and Lewin knew enough not to press him. The fabric holes disappeared back under Alden's tunic. Finally, Delevan sighed.

"So?" asked Lewin.

"You know how much that gold could mean to us."

"Loyal to a fault, and always does what needs to be done," quoted Lewin.

"Do I at least get to see the urn first?" asked Delevan.

"Is better not," said Alden.

"Don't worry," Lewin cut in quickly. "For most of that part, you'll be asleep."



Delevan awoke in the dark, with his legs cramped close underneath him and his arms crossed tight against his chest. He had a moment of panic, but mastered it as his memory came back.

The last thing he remembered was allowing Alden and Lewin to pack him into the tiny urn, so small that from the outside Delevan had sworn he wouldn't fit. Lewin had been vague about how long he would be magically suspended, which meant that it had probably been a long time. Several days at least.

He guessed that he was now residing in Staamgrin's treasure room, the anti-magic shell around the lair having nullified Alden's sleeping spell.

The urn swayed as it was carried. Not knowing who, or what, was carrying him, Delevan tried to breathe as shallowly and quietly as he could. After a time, there was a grunt and a clang, as the urn was placed on the ground.

Delevan strained his ears for any further sound, but no clues about the world outside the urn filtered through. He couldn't tell if he was alone or not, but caution seemed to dictate that he wait.

Eventually, his legs started to cramp, and he had an itch on the back of his head. Sweat trickled into his eyes, causing him to squint. He couldn't tell if it had been half a day since the urn had been set down, or only moments. He suspected the latter; the threat of a massive dragon swooping down on him was making it seem as if time were passing faster than it really was.

Delevan waited until his legs were screaming, then waited longer. He could endure this; he had endured worse.

Finally, when the shaking in his cramping legs threatened to start rocking the urn, he leaned his head forward until he could feel the cool metal of the pressure plate that would release the catch on the lid.

Slowly he pressed with his forehead, until he heard the click of the latch. It echoed over and over in his ears.

Delevan held his breath, but no dragon fell upon him with fire and claws. No dragon-servant or toady came to investigate. He let his breath out in a huff and then he didn't care anymore; he needed to be out of the vase.

He wriggled and kicked, worming his way upward toward the lid. His head burst out through the top in a wash of cool air. He filled his lungs with it. The air was dry with a faint acidic smell, but smelled better than Delevan had expected from a dragon's lair.

He pushed down with his legs, wriggling to free his shoulders. The urn rocked back and forth and, before he could free his arms, tipped forward, smashing him face first into a pile of gold coins, chalices, and keepsake boxes decorated with jewels.

Lying on his side, he was able to pull his arms out and then haul the rest of his body out. He lay on an uncomfortable bed of gold, breathing hard.

"Looks like nobody's home," he mumbled to the semi-darkness. Alden must have known that would be the case. Delevan had no idea how much time Staamgrin actually spent in his lair, and suddenly realized it had been a colossal oversight not to ask. He wiped a thin trickle of blood from where a gemstone had cut his cheek when he fell and wondered what else he had forgotten to ask.

Eventually he dragged himself to his feet and set off in the direction of the servants' corridor. He kept low, scuttling from mountain to mountain of treasure, expecting at any moment to hear the slither of scales on coins, or feel the wind of wing beats from above.

There were gold and silver trinkets of every imaginable shape. Silver bracelets set with moonstones, golden chalices with leaping stags set in diamonds, and coins showing the faces of emperors long forgotten. The sheer variety was staggering, and Delevan found it difficult to keep moving past it. Even a random armful from any of the piles would be enough to replace every leaky roof in Hostenfallen, double the forge space in the commons, and buy new breeding stock for the goat herds to boot. It would be a huge step on the road to reclaiming the people they had been before the war.

He shook his head and moved on. He'd never escape with the gold alive. Like it or not, he was dependent on Lewin and her exit strategy.

Finally, he located the tunnel that lead away from the main treasure store and followed it to the door. He could move quicker in the tunnel without the feeling of eyes watching his every move.

The door was stone with a complicated-looking mechanism holding it in place, but when Delevan tugged on the lever, it opened easy enough. The door rumbled and air and light streamed in from outside.

"About time!" said Lewin, but her tone wasn't annoyed. In fact, she seemed downright gleeful.

She brushed past Delevan. When they were through, Delevan let go of the door and it immediately slammed shut with a clap that made him wince. Alden handed him a shovel.

"Is not time for standing around like deskreegin," said Alden. "Dragon lives here you know."

Lewin didn't wait for Delevan to take the lead, but started off toward the treasure room. Delevan trailed behind them, for the first time starting to feel optimistic.

Lewin didn't stop at the first mound of treasure, but instead led them deep into the room before stopping at a pile that looked indistinguishable from any of the other piles.

"Here," she said.

Alden produced the fabric circle and placed it carefully on the ground. When he stood back up, Lewin took a coin from the pile and tossed it into the hole. Delevan held his breath while the coin spun through the air, sailing through the hole and falling for a few seconds before bouncing with a clink on the stone floor of Lewin's vault.

They took a moment to grin at each other before immediately going to work with their shovels. Each clattering shovelful sent another load of priceless treasures bouncing into Lewin's storehouse. The noise was tremendous.

Suddenly the room shook with a sound that drowned out the bounce and clatter of gold and silver. The roar was loud enough to rattle the stacks of precious metal and freeze the three of them in place.

Staamgrin was back.



Alden dropped his shovel and ran for it, his footsteps quickly disappearing into the treasure room.

Lewin calmly picked up his shovel and dropped it into the hole before redoubling her own shoveling efforts. The cascade of metal into the hole was louder than ever.

"Lewin, we have to get out of here! We're out of time!"

"We have a few more seconds. Help me!" she cried.

Delevan took her arm and began to tug her away.

"Lewin, listen to me! It doesn't do much good if you can't spend it! And you can't spend it from inside a dragon's gullet."

Lewin shook her head to clear it before tossing in their two shovels. Then she kicked in a few rings and some silverware for good measure.

"NOW!" roared Delevan and tugged hard on her arm, sending her sprawling forward. Then she was up, and the two of them were running.

"We have to get back to the door," said Delevan.

"No, don't bother. That was a one-time use."

Delevan slid to a halt.

"What do you mean, a one-time use?"

"Sealed. We assumed opening the door would also notify Staamgrin. Looks like we were right."

"So we're stuck in here with a dragon? And Alden is the only one who could have helped us, that coward."

"No, I told you, you have to be actually touching Staamgrin for magic to work in here," Lewin muttered absent-mindedly. She began patting her pockets. "Hey, did you see me grab the..."

Suddenly, Staamgrin was there, lunging over a pile of gold and snapping his enormous jaws. Delevan knocked Lewin to the side just as the huge maw slammed into the ground where she had been standing.

Staamgrin's head was enormous, bigger than the two of them combined. He probably could have swallowed them both whole without even having to chew.

"We have to go back!" shouted Lewin, stumbling to her feet. Lacking any other plan, Delevan scrambled after her.

Staamgrin didn't bother going around the treasure mounds, he simply plowed right through. Delevan rolled to avoid Staamgrin's teeth and almost got buried under a wave of gold trinkets knocked by a tree-sized foreleg. Lewin leapt the opposite way, and Delevan lost sight of her.

Delevan bowled into some sort of statuette and came to rest in a heap. Staamgrin's head snaked high, high above him, fixing him with glittering eyes. Delevan could not gain his feet in time for another dodge.

"Staamgrin, hau aulfin!" cried a voice in Krykaran. "Ausen ta Krykar lasten hollousk!"

Staamgrin's head whipped around like lightening and Delevan saw Alden standing atop a treasure mound, his arms raised. Alden bellowed and Staamgrin struck like a snake, his head snapping forward, jaws wide. The impact shook the floor of the building.

When the enormous head rose into the air again, Alden was gone.

Delevan wasted no time mourning him, lest his sacrifice be wasted. He struggled to his knees and then his feet, skittering deeper into the dragon's lair.



Delevan crouched low, listening intently. Coins and other trinkets bounced and clattered from all around him. Some of them were no doubt just resettling after all of the commotion, and some of them were Staamgrin attempting a stealthier approach. *Which was which?* That was the question.

Delevan saw movement out of the corner of his eye and he dove to the side, but it was only Lewin, waving her hands at him furiously. He scuttled to her position on all fours, like a dog.

"We've got to get back to where we started," she whispered. "Gods curse and wrack my stupid head! I forgot to grab the hole!"

"Forget the blasted hole," Delevan hissed back. "That monster ate Alden whole. What in blinking hell was your plan to get out of here?"



"If we don't get that hole, Staamgrin can track us straight home. Either we get away clean, or we're as good as dead."

"You'll never find it in here."

"I know right where it is," Lewin pointed at the ceiling a little ways off. "Do you see the intersection of those two beams? I set us up right under that."

"Okay, so walk over there and get it."

"You're coming with me. You've saved my life at least twice so far. I need to keep you close in case I have to repay the favor."

"If we hadn't come here, nobody would have had to save anybody's life!"

"True," she said with a smile, "But nobody would have a vault full of gold waiting for them at home, either."

Together they wove their way back toward the pile that Lewin had indicated, sneaking as quietly as they could. Delevan thought perhaps he heard the scrape and slither of something large to their right, but it could have been his imagination.

Their particular pile of treasure had been decimated, flattened by the passage or attack of Staamgrin. However, the hole was nowhere to be seen.

"Where is it?" she hissed.

"Assuming this is even the right place, it must have gotten buried," said Delevan.

Lewin began searching frantically through the treasure on the floor.

"Shh!" hissed Delevan.

"We've got to find it before Staamgrin..."

"No, shhh!" said Delevan.

Lewin stopped digging. Faintly, metal clinked nearby.

"There!" said Delevan, pointing to something moving beneath the gold.

Lewin pounced and swept away the gold around it. Beneath several inches of treasure lay the hole, slowly emptying the trinkets piled on top of it like sand through an hourglass.

Lewin snatched up the cloth triumphantly and put it in her pocket.

"We have to move! Staamgrin surely heard us," said Delevan.

"No need," said Lewin, no longer whispering. "We're back on plan."

"Back on plan?" asked Delevan incredulously. "Was it in the plan for Alden to get eaten?"

"Yes," replied Lewin.

Ice water ran through Delevan's veins.

"And is it in the plan for me to be eaten as well, Lewin the Ruthless?"

"Yes," replied Lewin again. "Time to execute the exit strategy."

At that moment, Staamgrin stalked low from behind a pile of treasures, his enormous head rising silently to tower over them.

Lewin spoke urgently in Delevan's ear. "You need him to swallow you whole. Try not to get bitten."

"Thanks for the tip," said Delevan sarcastically, pushing her away roughly.

"Once you're inside, Alden will teleport you out!"

Delevan turned away from the dragon who was about to eat him and looked fully at Lewin.

"Wait, being eaten by a dragon really was your plan all along?"

"Why do you think we didn't tell you that part?"

"I'm not going to just allow a dragon to eat me."

"What choice do you have?"

Staamgrin roared at full volume. His head dove at Delevan, faster than thought. Delevan had no chance to avoid it, but it still took every ounce of nerve to keep from dodging the dark, tooth-lined cavern speeding toward him. The enormous mouth closed around him and Delevan drove forward, arms up like a diver.

He was still screaming when he felt large hands grabbing his forearms.



"It's more than we dared to hope," said Lewin. "We didn't account for how much went through when Staamgrin knocked the pile on top of the hole."

"I can't carry my full share with me. Can I trust you to keep it for a while?"

"Lewin the Trustworthy they call me."

Delevan snorted.

"I think I'll start by buying a kingdom," she continued. "A nice one, too, not like this dump."

"Nations are perhaps more expensive than you realize," said Delevan quietly.

"Don't give it all away, okay? Keep something for yourself for once."

"And Alden?"

"More rings I would guess. His materials are very expensive."

"If you were wrong, and Alden's magic didn't work even while touching the dragon, we'd be so much meat in Staamgrin's stomach right now."

Lewin shrugged. "No risk, no reward."

"Very well, then," said Delevan, stepping up onto his new pony. "It's a long ride to Hostenfallen."

"Go carefully; I hear there are thieves about."

"No risk, no reward," he called over his shoulder.

The shaggy pony started slowly for the west, and Hostenfallen.



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# Where the Millennials Went

Zach Lisabeth

**I**t used to be that a girl child of eleven or twelve could slip into the Garden of Sweet Tea and Crisps on any errant sunbeam, just as long as the sunbeam entered her window at a forty-five degree angle to the wooden cracks in her bedroom floor. Naturally. When she felt so inclined, she could swim through her kitchen cupboards and into a wide body of stardust and dandelion fluff in which no one ever drowned. The Pajama King of Picture Books extended royal invitations, spoken in color, to any child attuned to the peculiar language of mice. Those days are gone now. Blame it on hormones in the milk.



"This is the detainee?"

"Margaret Anne Gotsch, born June 21, 1979. Age: 35. Parents: Annabelle and Bertram Gotsch. Reported missing December 21, 1987. Known aliases: Queen of the Snickets, Lord Protector of the Quarks, and Madame President."

"How long has she been in your custody, Inspector?"

"Seventy-two hours, Herr Schrödinger."

"Escape attempts?"

"We've kept her secure. All the precautions you requested are in place."

"All the precautions?"

"We had trouble locating a lamb born during a total lunar eclipse."

"A partial eclipse would have sufficed."

"Yes, sir."

"Has she said anything?"

"Quite a few things, actually. Nothing pertinent. She's been requesting a pot of tea since our extraction team brought her here."

"Give her nothing."

"Yes, sir."

"Send the transcripts of your interrogations of Ms. Gotsch to my quarters. I'm going to speak with her myself now."

"She hasn't eaten or slept since arriving, sir. Maybe we should give her some time. Start fresh tomorrow."

"The orchid mages from the Pajama King's court won't wait for tomorrow."

"Yes, sir."

"Something funny captain?"

"No, sir."

"You won't be smirking when you're face to face with a legion of teddy bear dragoons mounted on unicorn destriers."

"Yes, sir—I mean, no, sir."

"Do I amuse you, Inspector?"

"If I may speak freely, Herr Schrödinger?"

"Speak."

"I've read your field reports thoroughly, and there's no one closer to the Escape Phenomenon than you, sir, no one on God's green earth. But teddy bear dragoons? Pajama mages? It all sounds a bit too silly."

"You think there's something silly about the Jolly Gopher of Grindlehook's plot to distribute tambourines on the Isle of Wight? You think it's silly to be concerned about unionized Lumpkins diverting the Dandelion River into New York City discotheques and Parisian wine bars?"

"No?"

"No, Inspector. It's no coincidence that the Pajama King of Picture Books started growing coffee beans in his Quark fields mere days after the gibbering gibbons unlocked the secret to brewing candy corn into beer. The interrogation must resume. Immediately."

"She's just a girl, sir."

"That's where you're wrong, inspector. That right there is a woman."



One cool winter's morning after a dusting of snow, young Maggie went outside in search of polite conversation. She was tired of gossiping with her bedroom mice, who were pleasant enough but rather intellectually slight. Even nine-year-old ladies crave substance on occasion. During one of her governess's frequent cigarette breaks, Maggie tottered off into a nearby glade to seek out the company of a vole. Strictly speaking, Maggie had never spoken with a vole, but she'd heard good things from the mice. She found the vole seated on an Adirondack chair casually reading the morning's paper.

"What are you reading?" asked Maggie.

"Would you believe it?" said the vole. "In a fortnight that old bulldog will become the longest serving prime minister in this century. The whole world is going to hell in a hand basket, I tell you."

"That doesn't sound very nice," said Maggie.

"It's not supposed to be nice. It's politics."

"That's not what I mean. What would you say if she was a man?"

"The same things I say about the illiterate thespian our American cousins seem so enamored with, I expect."

"I'm not enjoying this very much," said Maggie. "I think I prefer the company of mice."

The vole set down his paper and cleared his throat with a pronounced *ah-hmm*. "Pliant little things, mice. Always darting about carrying messages from the Pajama King of Picture

Books, trying to outrun the Boneless Emperor and his Band of Belligerent Boys. Thankless work, but they have the disposition for it, I'll give them that."

Maggie lifted one eyebrow at the vole. "The Pajama King of Picture Books?"

"Oh, my." The vole daubed his brow with a handkerchief. "You don't know."

"I know a great many things."

"I'm sure you do. Have a seat, Miss Maggie. I find this topic is best discussed over a spot of tea."

A tiny teapot appeared on the table opposite a second seat proportioned for Maggie's bum.

"Have you ever awakened from a dream in the night, so certain that it had been real? And even though you wanted nothing more than to return or, at least, hold on just a second longer, the dream escaped through your fingers like so much sand in a sieve?"

"Yes," said Maggie. "All the time."

The vole filled Maggie's cup with steaming tea and bent over the table conspiratorially. "What if I told you there was a place where you never had to let go? Where you could pull your dreams into reality just because you wanted to inspect them in the light?"

"I think that would be a peculiar place, indeed."

"Finish your tea."

Maggie did as she was told and placed her teacup down in front of the vole. "May I have some more?"

"Just wait for it, Miss Maggie."

The sun inched over the tops of the trees and cast a soft but determined beam down upon the teacups below. The vole nudged Maggie's cup into the center of the light with his claw and bid her lean over it to have a look.

Where there should have been droplets and dregs, a bucolic picture resolved: tiny wrinkled men with drooping ears like gym socks laboring harmoniously in a bluegrass field beneath a smiling sun. The little creatures picked suckers off vines while dancing in time to the merry playing of a walrus with a baritone sax. Since the acoustics of the teacup were less than ideal, Maggie leaned closer to better appreciate the complexities of the walrus' loping tune. It was a melody she'd heard before. In a dream.

The vole crept up behind Maggie and gave her a gentle push.



"Ms. Gotsch, or should I call you Madame President?"

"Either will do. I'm not a stickler for formality."

"Margaret, then. Do you know who I am?"

"That depends, Herr Schrödinger. Who do you want to be?"

"I'd like to be your friend, Margaret. But the tenor of our discussion turns primarily on your willingness to cooperate."

"My life is quite literally an open book."

"I'm so glad to hear you say that. Really, I am. Let's get one thing out in the open, then, shall we? I know you're behind the Escape Phenomenon."

"Is that what you're calling it?"

"12,178 young women, ages eighteen to thirty-three, missing in the last year under the same mysterious set of circumstances. None of the cases present with any obvious signs of foul play. If you have a better name, I'd hear it."

"Coincidence?"

"Cute."

"You don't like coincidences, do you, Herr Schrödinger? You're a man who likes to be in control."

"I'm asking the questions here, Margaret."

"There are some things you just can't dictate."

"I've found several of your little portals, Margaret. My soldiers destroyed the old icebox sitting in that flat in Notting Hill. Filthy thing was riddled with Lumpkins. We dredged a pond outside Aalen that reflected children's dreams after it rained. I'm on to you. Stop laughing."

"I'm sorry, Herr Schrödinger. Do go on."

"I know you're the President of The Worldish. I also know that your term, for lack of a better word, is up. You can't ever return."

"You seem to know a great many things."

"Look at yourself, Margaret. The Worldish will never have you—why do you keep laughing?"

"I'm sorry, Herr Schrödinger—it's just, so much has changed since the last time you slept in the Boneless Emperor's Barracks for Belligerent Boys."



Maggie fell through the teacup and fell and fell, cushioned only by the dormant parachute properties of her skirt. When she landed she found herself surrounded by the little wrinkled men who she was beginning to doubt were men at all. She dusted a few blades of bluegrass from her skirt and looked around hoping someone might notice that it had started raining little girls.

"That's the last time I share a pot of tea with a vole."

One of the creatures waddled over to her, and presented a sucker from his bundle.

"Thank you," said Maggie.

The creature nodded and doddered back to his task.

"Excuse me," Maggie called after the little man. "Might I ask your name?"

"This one is Rumble Lumpkin," he answered, reaching for a yellow sucker at the top of a spindly vine.

"If it's not too much trouble, could you tell me where I've landed?"

Rumple sighed and stopped picking. "Much closer to the Dandelion Stream than you had probably hoped, but well beyond the prying eyes of the Boneless Emperor and his Band of Belligerent Boys."

More confused than illuminated by Rumple Lumpkin's explanation, Maggie shrugged and began to unfold the foil from the sucker's stem.

"What are you doing?" snapped Rumple, nearly dropping his bundle of crop.

"I was going to eat it, of course. I've never had an orange sucker fresh off the vine."

"The Pajama King's suckers are not for eating!"

"Oh, don't be ridiculous. All suckers are for eating." Maggie was cranky and feeling a bit peckish. Falling through teacups, as it turns out, is a rather draining affair.

"Not these," said Rumple Lumpkin. "You must carry this sucker over the Harrowdown Hills and through the Garden of Sweet Tea and Crisps. The sweet tea is there for your enjoyment, but whatever you do, *keep your hands off the crisps*. Beyond the garden, find the Porter of the Pollywog Prince and ask him for passage to the Dandelion Stream. If the Viscount of Clouds is of a mind to be helpful, you should have no problem navigating by swan. If not, you can always take the low road to Grindlehook and call on the Jolly Gopher at home. One way or another you should find your way to the Pajama King's court. Do you like picture books? I'm sure you do."

"That sounds awfully complicated and just a bit insane."

Rumple Lumpkin looked down at her with a star in his eye. "Would you really want The Worldish to be any other way?"

And so Maggie set out with the sweet in her hand, following the Lumpkin's instructions to a tee. She reached the Pajama King of Picture Books in record time and lived happily, temporarily after.



"Do I look like an amateur, Margaret? Do I seem like a man so easily thrown by wild conjecture?"

"I try not to judge on appearance, Herr Schrödinger."

"I had hoped you were going to cooperate, Margaret. I truly did. We aren't so different, you and I."

"I couldn't agree more."

"We were both forced by reality to let go of something dear."

"I'm sorry you felt forced."

"I don't need your sympathy. Do you know what this is?"

"It looks like a very merry scene."

"This photo was taken through a pinecone in Glastonbury, Somerset. Those figures right there are teddy bear dragoons and over there are their unicorn steeds. Pretty damning evidence, wouldn't you say?"

"Evidence of what, precisely?"



"You're raising an army in The Worldish for invasion."

"Sounds like a better theme for a tea party than an invasion."

"Don't be cute with me, Margaret. Act your damn age."

"What is it that you're trying to ask me, Herr Schrödinger?"

"I want to know where you're planning to strike. I want the names of the women that you're plotting to abduct. And I want to know why."

"I'm not sure I can answer that, at least not the first two questions."

"So you admit you have a plot."

"There is a convergence afoot, I admit, but I'd never be so arrogant as to claim credit."

"This is growing tiresome, Margaret."

"Perhaps you need a nap."

"Why are you taking the women, dammit?"

"Have you ever awakened from a dream in the night, so certain that it had been real... "



A stupid person once said: all good things must come to an end. For Maggie, it started with the Quarks. Then it spread to the Snickets and the gibbering gibbons, as The Worldish awkwardly suggested it needed space. The Lumpkins ejected her from their hopscotch league and the Jolly Gopher of Grindlehook actually looked at her and grouched. No longer welcome at the picture book court, Maggie set out to find some answers. She swam against the steady current of the Dandelion Stream without the aid of the viscount or his swans. She sprinted past the Garden of Sweet Tea and Crisps without stopping for a cup of the former. Alone, and on foot, she crested the Harrowdown Hills and arrived at the vineyard of suckers.

Rumple Lumpkin regarded Maggie coolly. He must've gotten the memo.

"Look at me, Rumple."

"This one is looking, Ms. Maggie."

"I want you to tell me what's going on."

"This one hasn't a clue what it is you might mean."

"Why is everyone acting so oddly around me?"

Twittering nervously, Rumple went back about his work. "This one really shouldn't say... "

"Rumple." Maggie grabbed the little Lumpkin by his tube sock ears and forced him to stop working and face her. "Why was I banished from the Pajama King's court?"

"Maybe it's time for you to go home."

"Maybe it's time for me to *what*?" Maggie bared her teeth.

Rumple's eyes flitted from side to side. "The Worldish has rules, Ms. Maggie. The Boneless Emperor enforces them with his Band of Belligerent Boys."

"Of all the ridiculous—" Maggie anchored her hands on her hips. "I haven't broken any rules."

"Oh yes you have," said Rumple, his eyes drifting down to her chest.

At first Maggie felt bashful, then she got *pissed*. "This will not stand, Rumpel Lumpkin."

"Lot of good you can do about it, Ms. Maggie."

"How long has this been going on?"

Rumpel Lumpkin shrugged. "At least a generation of generations."

"Heavens, think of all the poor young women. There must be thousands of them!"

"Yes, Ms. Maggie. Even more than you know."



"Herr Schrödinger. The women are coming of their own accord."

"But they're far too old. You're far too old."

"Too old to dream?"

"There's no place for you in The Worldish. It's obscene. These young women you're stealing need to find their way in our world."

"You mean your world."

"I mean the real world."

"That lie lost its power after the collapse. What's left for us here? Even the boxes you tried to keep us in have crumbled from lack of upkeep."

"But you have no choice. There's a way that things are done—a way that is proper."

"We will not willingly participate in a rigged game just because it's the only one in the house."

"You have to grow up, Margaret."

"That right there is the mother of all false equivalencies, pun intended. Dreams don't die of old age, Herr Schrödinger. If you don't give us the means to realize them here, then we're going to manufacture an alternative."

"So you admit it. You're doing this."

"I will not sit here and be blamed, Herr Schrödinger. We inherited this one-way world. We didn't make it."

"The Worldish didn't use to tolerate these wild flights of fancy. When the Boneless Emperor was in charge—"

"The Boneless Emperor is dead and gone. I turned his throne room into a composting latrine."

"But we all did it this way. You aren't special."

"Yes, we are."

"But I'm not!"

"What makes you say that?"

"When I jump into a pothole at 3:13 on a Sunday in autumn, all I get are muddy boots. I want to sail swans on the Dandelion Stream and pick suckers with Lumpkins and Quarks."

"It's never too late, Herr Schrödinger."

"For me it is. I stood with the Boneless Emperor and his Band of Belligerent Boys. I helped enforce his Worldish order. I can't ever return."

"Oh my, what nonsense. Haven't you heard? Or have you forgotten the peculiar language of mice? I issued a blanket amnesty to the Band of Belligerent Boys with the unanimous support of the Parliament of Rooks. You really are quite a silly man."

"Amnesty..."

"Are you all right? You're looking a bit pale."

"I'm fine. Just a little bit parched, maybe."

"Let me summon you a spot of tea."

"Yes. Yes, I think that a bit of tea would be quite nice right now. Earl Grey, if you can manage it."

"I can manage just about anything you can dream."



United under Maggie's banner, the Lumpkins, Snickets, and Quarks set aside their mutual mistrust (which any historian will tell you began with the Untimely Citrus Feud and was only *exacerbated* by the kerfuffle over waffles and winks, but there are two rational schools of thought).

After an epic battle (which has already been approximated in several oral traditions) Maggie defeated the Boneless Emperor and his Band of Belligerent Boys (most of them turned out to be more misguided than belligerent, but such is the fickle nature of alliterative names). The Snickets and Quarks carried her from the Emperor's castle on a palanquin of daffodil stems and gilt. They named her Magnanimous Ruler, a title she, at first, accepted, and then, politely declined. Instead, she dubbed herself the first President of The Land, and with the blessing of her newly appointed Parliament of Rooks, she went about enacting a series of controversial executive orders. After plenty of moaning from the curmudgeonly Lumpkins, and one particularly pointed letter writing campaign, the Snickets, Quarks, and gibbering gibbons all adjusted to the new status quo.



Herr Schrödinger fell through the bottom of his cup and landed upside down on top of one of the Pajama King's most well connected picture books.

"Excuse you," the book squawked as it flapped its cover and dropped the ruffled Schrödinger at the foot of the Pajama King's throne.

"Hermann!" the Pajama King greeted him wearing his finest banana cream onesie. "President Maggie told me you might be joining us. She also suggested I waive the sucker protocol as a show of good faith."

"Am I really here?"

The Pajama King chuckled. "That's a peculiar question."

"Is that a gaggle of Quarks massaging the walrus's back?"

"Ah, yes!" The Pajama King put an arm around Hermann and led him over to the window of his keep. "Poor fellow's been suffering from sciatica of late. I suspect lugging around that baritone sax takes its toll."

Hermann Schrödinger gazed out the Pajama King's window at the veritable menagerie gathering around the Garden of Sweet Tea and Crisps. He saw Snickets and Lumpkins engaged in casual conversation, while the orchid mages made loan statements disappear. The gibbering gibbons rolled out untapped kegs of candy corn beer with a little push from the viscount's gusty guards. Young men and young women gathered in all directions, flirting in color and cogitating on a range of sensible things.

"There have been a few changes since your day, Hermann."

Hermann Schrödinger rubbed his eyes, and though he half expected that the dream would disappear, it came back brighter and more real than before.

"It takes a little getting used to, I know. Believe me, I had my reservations. But look how happy they are. Every day is more exciting than the last and no one ever wants to sleep in. Even the weedy wizards from the Dandelion Sea come up for air just to join the revelry."

"But—but they're *women*. The Boneless Emperor said their tits and tampons would spoil The Worldish."

"Come now, Hermann, you don't really believe that nonsense."

"It worked for so long."

"No, Hermann. It really didn't."

"The Boneless Emperor's law kept The Worldish intact for a generation of generations."

"Ho ho, can you believe we listened to him as long as we did? Your lot can all be forgiven. You were only boys at the time. But you really shouldn't make a habit of listening to people without any bones."

"I think I need to sit down."

"You can't. It's starting. Look!"

"Those are teddy bears and unicorns! I was right. The world is under siege."

"Don't be ridiculous, Hermann. Who ever heard of a unicorn siege? The teddy bear dragoons volunteered to spearhead the president's welcoming committee. Come watch with me, Hermann! The reception's about to begin."



And all the young women left their cubicles and university desks to find the spaces in between. They rode unicorns on swan ships, buoyed by the Viscount of Clouds with the aid of his gusty guards. President Maggie greeted each and every one of her constituents with a participation trophy and a flexible career. Together they ushered in a golden age of peace, prosperity, and access to contraception.

"You don't have to stay," she told them. "But you'll never have to leave."

Her constituents cheered and toasted with the Pajama King:

"To us and to the land we've built, where our dreams all live in the light, where the pop-up books are rent controlled and every internship is paid."



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# Scents of Life

Robert Lowell Russell

**K**atie walked hand-in-hand with her grandfather along the forest path. Dappled light filtered through the trees. She liked the roughness of his hand in hers and the way his eyes always seemed to smile, even when it didn't show on his face. Whenever she stumbled over a stone or a root or her own feet, he steadied her with a grip that was still firm and strong.

He stopped along the trail and pointed to dandelions growing in a sunlit circle among the trees. Yellow petals crowned green stems ending in spiked leaves. Some flowers had already changed to puffs.

He bent to take a handful of stems, then held the flowers to her nose. "Their scent isn't as strong as some flowers," he said.

She grinned and then blew on them, sending a cloud of seeds into the air. Closing her eyes, she inhaled their aroma. They smelled faintly sweet, and there was something else, like the scent of cut grass. A noise like angry bees grew in her ears.

"Danny," she said.



The sound of the mower sputtering to a halt in the front yard made Katie's heart pound faster. Any moment now, her father would come to the backyard where she sat with Danny. High in the cloudless sky, the sun shone down, warming her face.

Smiling at the boy beside her, she held a dandelion to his face and said, "Make a wish before you blow."

He shut his green eyes and blew, sending puffs swirling.

Before he could get away, she leaned in and kissed him. He gasped, opening his eyes, and wiped his mouth with his sleeve.

"What did you do that for?" he asked.

"Because I felt like it."

Danny put his fingers to his lips. A smile crinkled his mouth.

Katie clenched her fists. What had she done? She felt her face grow warm. "Don't you dare laugh at me!" she said, slugging him in the gut.

Danny's mouth choked into an O, and he gripped his side. Only then did Katie hear her father's footsteps behind her. "Katie, honey," said her father, unlatching the fence gate. "Do we need to have another talk about beating up the neighbor's kid?"

She shook her head.

"You okay, Danny?" asked her father.

"I'm all right, Mr. Poulson."

"Katie," said her father, "take Ruffy for his walk, okay? I've got to finish the grass in the back."

"Dad..." A lump rose in her throat. "Ruffy died last year."

Her father stiffened and put his hand to his head. "Of course. Guess I'm a little tired."

Her parents spoke in hushed tones that evening, and she heard her mother cry. Katie slept fitfully. When she woke the next morning, she rubbed her eyes, then gasped. Hundreds of dandelions had been piled in the planter box outside her window.

"Danny," she said, smiling.



In the forest, her grandfather tugged her hand. "Let's keep going."

Katie wobbled as she walked. The path at her feet seemed strangely distant. Farther along the trail, they came to a clearing filled with white chrysanthemums. Leaning closer, she arched an eyebrow when she caught their scent—they smelled of paper. Nearby, a woodpecker went rat-a-tat-tat against a tree.



Katie opened the door at the knock. Danny stood on her porch wearing a rented tux with a crooked tie.

"These are for you!" he blurted and stepped forward to jab a bouquet of chrysanthemums into her arms. "You look... beautiful."

Blushing, she smoothed her taffeta dress.

Danny waved. "Hello, Mrs. Poulson, Mr. Poulson."

Behind her in the living room, Katie's mother held her father's arm as she led him toward an easy chair.

"I'm not a damn child!" said her father, wrenching his arm free. "I can do it myself!"

Shuffling to the chair, he collapsed into the worn brown leather. His body looked small and pale against it, and his hands shook as he gripped the armrests.

Katie's mother glanced her way with a tight-lipped smile.

"Danny," said Katie, turning back. "I..."

"You're staying home," he finished. "It's okay. Can I show you something? Just for a minute."

They stepped out into the warm night air and sat on the porch swing. Pulling an envelope from his jacket, he handed it to her.

"You got into MIT!" she said, scanning the letter. "I'm so proud of you!" She hugged him close, letting the embrace linger. "Danny..."

"You got into Stanford. I know. Your mom Tweeted everyone." Squeezing her hand, he looked away. "That's great." When he turned back, his eyes glistened in the dim light. "I know how hard you worked for it."

He was silent for several seconds. "Hey, do you want to dance? I've been practicing."

"I'd love to."

They rose, and she placed her arms on his shoulders while he rested his hands at the small of her back. In the night air, they danced to a cricket's song.



Katie jolted when her grandfather touched her arm.

"You okay?" he asked.

Turning slowly in place, she nodded.

When they continued down the trail, they wound their way past a clump of trees, and when they'd moved beyond them, they startled birds splashing in a bath surrounded by red and white begonias. An unpleasant musk lingered around the flowers; Katie wrinkled her nose.



Kate passed the Stanford "S" emblazoned on a bed of red and white begonias.

The lecture hall was filled with students texting and playing games. She sat in the front row, opened her notebook, and clicked a pen.

Projected on a screen were the images of two brains, side by side, shown as a cross-section. One was full of white-and-gray gyri pressed firmly together, the sulci a lattice of pencil-thin fissures. It was easy for her to imagine the brain floating inside the skull on a fluid cushion. The other brain looked like dried fruit, its cortex shrunken, its ventricles gaping with literal holes in the mind.

"Alzheimer's destroys the brain," said her professor. The woman adjusted her glasses. "We're just now discovering how to slow the disease," she continued. "We can use antibody drugs to attack plaques as they form, and we've learned, counter-intuitively, to slow the regions of excessive neuronal activity that are not symptoms of structural damage but rather the cause."

The screen shifted to an image of a magnified cell.

"Further, there have been promising developments with combination therapies: treatments to accelerate neurogenesis in adults, creating new neurons, and at the same time, the use of mesenchymal stem cells to repair older neurons." The professor frowned. "But if we halt or even reverse the damage, then what? The architecture unique to every person's brain is critical to who they are. Their experiences, everything they remember, isn't stored inside their



neurons, but rather within the myriad connections formed *among* their neurons as they live and grow."

Shrugging, she asked, "If we save the brain, can we save the person, too?"



Back at her dorm, Kate's roommate teetered on a pair of platform pumps. "Kate, throw on your red dress! A bunch of us are meeting at the Saddle Room." Batting her eyes, she said, "Mike's going to be there."

Kate blushed. "Can't. I've got to study."

"Come on! We'll bang out Chem and Calc tomorrow, promise. Have a couple beers."

Kate glanced to her laptop. "Meet you there, okay?"

She turned on the computer as her roommate left. Daniel's image waited onscreen. Smiling, he said, "Hi, Kate."

"Sorry I'm late."

"Chatting with your profs again?"

"Some days I think they're going to run for it when they see me waiting."

He laughed. "How are your studies going?"

"Good. It's a lot of work. And yours?"

"The same. So... are you seeing anyone?"

She paused. "I am."

His face blanked, then he smiled. "That's great!"

"He's somebody I've been working with. It just kind of happened." She leaned over to the cage sitting on her desk and pulled out a white rat, then held it for him to see. "But we're going to have to talk about hygiene," she said, wrinkling her nose. "He stinks."

Her phone chimed. "Daniel, I've got to go. My mom's calling."



In the forest, Katie tripped over a root and nearly fell, but her grandfather caught her and led her to a stone bench. They sat together in front of a small pool surrounded by white lilies. The flowers' perfume carried something more—the scent of Old Spice.



Kate stood with her mother and grandfather in front of an open grave. Her mom held a lily in her hand.

"What am I supposed to do now, Dad?" asked her mother.

"I don't know, honey," the old man replied. "I'm so sorry."

Kate wiped tears from her face.

"He was a fighter," said her grandfather. "He lasted ten years. Most don't make it five."

Her mom shook her head and dropped the lily onto the casket. "He was gone long before that."

At the wake, people spoke in quiet voices and ate casseroles with forced smiles. Kate's grandfather sat with her, the scent of his aftershave wafting around him.

"Will you be in town long, Katie?"

"I'm flying to Baltimore tomorrow to tour Johns Hopkins."

He nodded. "Good school."



In the forest, a tree covered with white flowers grew in a spot by itself. Katie stopped before it. Heavy petals lay strewn around its roots.

"What kind of tree is this?" she asked.

"*Magnolia grandiflora*."

Beneath the tree, the sky peeked through its branches. The smell of its flowers was overwhelming, but it could not completely mask the odor of antiseptic soap.



Kate shielded her face from the sun. Johns Hopkins' campus was filled with red brick buildings adorned with white columns and steeples. Magnolia trees bloomed outside the library walls. Stopping outside the neuropathology building, she admired the silver dome and spire crowning the building. Her heels clattered as she moved through its polished halls, the sound of her shoes mixing with hushed conversations. Hints of antiseptic wafted from rooms as doctors and students moved about.

In a conference room, the first slide of her presentation was already on the screen. Nodding to the assembled faculty, she began.

"Our memories make us who we are, especially our emotional memories: love, hate, fear, grief. These feelings, and the memories associated with them, are what's important, not the ability to remember the capitals of states."

"The limbic system," she said, moving ahead. "Areas of the brain so vital to memory and emotion that we've dubbed their combined parts the 'emotional brain.'"

The next slide depicted a neuron and what resembled a tumbleweed at its base.

"When Alzheimer's strikes, plaques and protein tangles destroy healthy tissues and disrupt the synapses, blocking the linkages that allow the brain to function, like a storm bringing down power lines. But sometimes electric companies can reroute their grid and maintain the flow of power."

She aimed a pointer to the screen. "The amygdala, hippocampus, cingulate gyrus, and other areas of the limbic system. Even while we work to slow the disease and repair and replace damaged neurons, we keep these regions communicating with each other, rewriting existing memories, the emotionally *significant* memories that are so fundamental to who we are."

"How do we do that?" asked a man in a white coat.

"I'm not sure." She smiled. "But if you'll give me the opportunity, I'd like to find out."



In the forest, a rosebush lay just off the path. The flowers were a deep, vibrant red. Katie bent to smell them, then jerked back.

"What is it?" asked her grandfather.

"They smell like bacon!"



"Dr. Poulson," said her lab assistant. "It's not working."

Kate slammed her fists against the imager display. "I can damn well see that, Kent."

Her assistant fled the small equipment room with a hasty promise of fresh coffee. Hands shaking, Kate gulped down what was left in her mug even though the brew had gone bitter and cold hours earlier.

In the imaging room beyond the glass, a man in a hospital gown lay on a plastic slab buried deep in an fMRI scanner. The man watched a video feed, which also played on the panel before Kate. In the video, the same man, years younger, walked on a beach hand-in-hand with a beautiful woman. Kate hoped the sound of the surf would soothe her headache. It didn't.

Jamming her thumb on an intercom, she said, "Liz, I'm switching Mr. Ignatius to the birthday feed, and let's try script four this time."

The young woman sitting in the room with Mr. Ignatius gave a thumbs up and flipped through the pages of her clipboard.

The feed shifted to a video of the same couple sitting at a table in front of a birthday cake covered with candles. In scrawled purple frosting, the cake read, "Happy 39<sup>th</sup>, Mary... again."

"It's your wife's, Mary's, fortieth birthday, Mr. Ignatius," said Liz, reading from the script. "You bought her a gold bracelet and took her for dinner and dancing at Antonio's. You had spaghetti and meatballs. Mary tried the calamari, but she sent it back."

Kate studied the display, hoping to see parts of Mr. Ignatius's brain brighten. The memories were there, she knew it, or the fragments were, at least. If she could just find the right combination of stimuli, find a way to link the pieces together, the healing brain might connect them again, like stars forming constellations in the night sky.

"I don't... remember," said Mr. Ignatius on the slab. "I'm sorry."

Kent returned with two cups. "Dr. Poulson, there's someone here to see you. I told him I didn't think you had the time."

Taking another look at the display, she pushed herself from the controls. "It's okay. Like you said, it's not working." She rested her hand on her assistant's arm. "Sorry for snapping at you."

Running her fingers through her hair, she pushed past the hospital security doors, then stopped cold. Daniel waited in the lobby with a rose in his hand.

"My God, Daniel, what's it been, three years?"

"Five," he said, smiling, as he handed her the rose. His hair was grayed at the temples.

"I heard you got married."

Shaking his head, he said, "I thought getting married made sense, but she made a persuasive counter argument. And you? How's the rat?"

"I'm a widow," she said with a dramatic sigh.

He smiled again. "Hey, smell my rose."

Narrowing her eyes, she held the flower to her nose and breathed deeply. "Is that... bacon?"

"Sure is," he said, laughing. "If you fiddle with the right genes, you can alter a flower's oils and volatiles to make them smell like almost anything."

"Are you here in town?"

"I'm in DC for a conference, but I thought I'd stop by and see you before heading back to Boston."

"I wish you'd called first. We could have caught up."

"I left messages."

"Dr. Poulson," Liz said behind her, "we only have Mr. Ignatius for a few more minutes."

Daniel smiled, his green eyes twinkling. "Busy busy. You look good, Kate," he said, kissing her on the cheek.

"You, too. I'm so glad I got to see you. Next time you're in—"

"Dr. Paulson," said her assistant.

"Be right there," she said to the young woman. When she turned back, Daniel was already walking away.

Kate sighed. She made her way to the imaging room and went to her patient. Leaning into the machine, she set the rose next to his head. "I wanted to introduce myself, Mr. Ignatius. I'm Dr. Poulson. I'm the one using you as a guinea pig, and I'd like to thank you for your patience today."

"Smells like breakfast," said Mr. Ignatius, turning his head to the flower. His eyes widened. "That's the damndest thing."

"Dr. Poulson!" said Kent on the intercom. "You've got to see this!"

In the control room, Kent pointed to the display. "First the olfactory bulb lit up, then the amygdala and hippocampus. And now look!"

The image of Mr. Ignatius's brain was splashed with color.

"I made her breakfast in bed," he said on the audio feed. "A rose in a vase and a tray with cheesy eggs, and bacon, and..." Mr. Ingatius laughed. "Toast. I burned the bejeezus outta the first batch. Stank up the house for days."

Kate touched her fingers to the display.

"I miss her smile most," he said on the feed. "It filled her whole face."

Heart pounding, she said, "Kent, I've got to go."

Kate's credit card and an enthusiastic cabbie got her to DC from Baltimore in forty minutes flat. She flipped through an inbox full of unheard voicemail to find the hotel. Moving quickly down a hall filled with identical doors, she checked the numbers of each before finally finding Daniel's room at the end. She stopped to bang on the door. When there was no answer, her heart sank.

"Kate?" Daniel stepped from the elevator. "How in the world did you—?" His eyes widened as she rushed him.

When she finally broke the kiss, he stepped back. "You're not going to hit me, are you?"



In the forest, Katie swayed in place. "Not going to hit me." Laughing, she put her fingers to her lips. "What's happening?" she asked her grandfather. "Where are you taking me?"

"Just a little farther."

Along the path, they stopped to smell a bed of white tulips scented like pizza. Kate remembered her impromptu wedding with Daniel before a quiet judge: the silent room, the loud beating of her heart. The pizza they ate afterward in their hotel room. The scent of orchids and the smell of latex paint brought back memories of a big house and a man with a toupee handing them a set of keys. The white flowers—*jasminum sambac* said her grandfather—reminded her of leis and salt air and walking with Daniel on black sand beaches.

The forest trail ended in a clearing filled with lavender. Katie bent to smell the purple flowers. "What *is* that?" she asked.

"Laundry starch."



In the utility closet, Kate rehooked her bra while Daniel buttoned his dress shirt. His hair was streaked with gray.

"Help me," she said, shimmying into her dress.

Zippering her up, he rested his hands on her shoulders and nuzzled her neck. "Not that I mind," he said into her ear, "but I think it's the audience you're supposed to imagine naked."

A frantic host found them soon after they left the closet and practically shoved them onto the stage. Daniel escorted her to the podium and stepped back as the auditorium filled with applause.

"But we did it together," she said.

"You have more letters after your name than I do."

She placed a set of note cards on the podium. A vase with lavender rested next to a pitcher of water.

The first card read: *Memory Mapping and Reconstruction through Conditioned Responses to Olfactory, Auditory, and Visual Stimulation*, by Dr. Katherine Poulson MD. Ph.D. and Dr. Daniel Jenkins Ph.D.

"They call Alzheimer's disease 'the long goodbye,'" she began. "Well before the heart beats its last beat, the person whom we knew and loved is lost, their mind, their memories, their emotional connections stripped away."

Taking a breath, she said, "No more. We haven't beaten the disease, not yet, but we damn sure won a battle."

Kate smiled and shuffled to the next card, waiting for the applause to fade, then she frowned. Her hands were wrong. Too small, like those of a child. A buzzing filled her ears, and she pressed her fingers against her head. When she looked up again, she flinched. The auditorium was silent except for a few nervous coughs. Hundreds of eyes bore into her. Then Daniel was beside her, his eyes bright and green, his face pale.



In the forest, Kate's ears roared, as if she were going through a tunnel. She took a long, deep breath. "Daniel," she said. "Have I ever told you how much you remind me of my grandfather?"

"You've mentioned it once or twice," said the old man with green eyes. "Welcome back, Kate."

"Do you happen to have...?"

He pulled a mirror from a pocket, and she gazed into the glass, moving her hand to her wrinkled face. "How many years since the diagnosis?" she asked.

"Twenty-seven."

"That long?" She stared back at the trail. "The reconstruction sequence has to be very precise, the stimuli exact." Blanching, she said, "Oh my God, Daniel, those flowers, they can't possibly bloom at the same time for very long."

"Only a week or two if the weather cooperates."

Tears welled in her eyes. "Thirty years, and I only get to be with you for a few days?"

He shook his head. "Most husbands don't get to watch their wives fall in love with them all over again even for a single day."

Smiling, he held a dandelion puff to her lips. "When you *wish* upon a *dandelion* and blow all the spores away..."

"Close your eyes, make a *wish*, and may they all come true some day," she finished. Closing her eyes, she blew.

"Keep them closed," he said, taking her hand.

They hadn't walked far when she felt the air pressure shift and warm, the moist air brush across her skin.

"Now open them."

They stood in an alcove of glass ringed by trees. A door rested in a transparent wall before them. Beyond the wall were rows upon rows of flowers protected inside a vast greenhouse. Displays in the alcove gave detailed temperature and humidity readings.

"I make roses smell like bacon," he said. "You think I can't get flowers to grow when I want them to?" He cupped her face and kissed her. "I've never lost you for a single day."

Warmth spread through her, and her smile stretched her face until it ached. "Why can't I remember this place?" she asked.

"New memories don't stick as well as the old. And I know it's a bit selfish of me, but I hope they never do."

"Why?"

"Because watching your face, seeing the exact moment when you realize we'll never be apart." His eyes gleamed. "That's something I never want to forget."



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# The Parting Gift

Hall Jameson

I lay face down in the middle of Cobalt Lake, arms and legs splayed in the dead man's float, waiting for my sister to die.

Annie hadn't stirred when my father tried to rouse her this morning. My mother had hovered near her bedside, and the hospice nurse had lingered in the doorway, trying to be invisible but accessible. Annie had asked to die at home, near the lake.

*Everything is as it should be*, my parents had whispered to one another. I'd wanted to steamroll through the house, smash all their precious things, and scream, "How can you say everything's as it should be? Annie's *dying*!"

Rolling onto my back, I spit a plume of water at the sky. The clouds were thin and wispy. I searched for Annie's face in the swirls. Had it happened? Was she up there? Was she watching me now?

Annie wasn't afraid to die. Annie wasn't afraid of anything. She wasn't putting on a brave face either—I knew her better than anyone. She was *positively not afraid*. But the thought of her dying terrified me, the idea of being without her unfathomable. (A word she'd taught me.)

"Don't be afraid," she once told me. "I'll mess up your hair when there's no wind. Cast a shadow when you're trying to lounge in the sun. Knock things off the counter. You just have to pay attention. You miss so much when you don't pay attention, Ben."

This was true; I had trouble focusing. I was the complete opposite of Annie, who was calm and open. She attracted things to her, weird, exotic, and often creepy things.

*Cryptids*, she called them.

"Look past the water's reflection, beyond the blue in the sky, between the trees," she'd say, "that's where the cool stuff hides, the things that watch without you knowing. Sometimes they're even right out in the open."

I recalled our last conversation three nights ago before her health had turned. We sat together on the front porch overlooking the lake, Annie wrapped in a blanket leaning next to me on the porch swing. It was a warm night with a full moon. The mournful voices of coyotes filled the air.

"Werewolves don't exist, right?" I said, trying to mask the tremor in my voice.

"Not anymore, but *bear-wolves* do," she said. "They're an entirely different creature, though."

I'd heard this story many times. Annie had spotted a creature three years ago on the southern ridge of Mount Ascension with a thick black coat, bulky, bristled shoulders, and a flattened skull like a hyena. It had lifted its nose to the sky and released a cry—half growl, half scream—that made her drop to her knees, trembling.

The *Shunka Warakin*, she'd called it, and that night she'd made me repeat the name over and over again until I had it memorized. "Knowing its true name will protect you if you run into it in the wild."



"Okay. Shun-ka War-a-kin," I repeated, emphasizing each syllable. I didn't understand how this would protect me, but I wasn't taking any chances. We sat in silence for a few minutes, listening to the howls. I recalled a troubling dream from the night before, full of pale, fanged creatures. "Hey, are a vampire and a succubus the same thing?"

She rolled her eyes. "Come on! You know neither one is real."

"I know. I just like to say succubus. *Succubus*," I drawled, and Annie giggled.

"You're such a weirdo," she said. "Hey, did you know in Australia they call their version of the Yeti a Yowie?"

"Nope, but those are fake, too, right?" I held back a smile.

"No! Yowies and Yetis are real." She sighed and rubbed her bald head. In the soft glow of the porch light I saw the skin on the back of her hand was papery thin, the network of blue veins visible. "They've just got a different name because they're from a different country."

I laughed. "I know. I was just kidding. They're related to your beloved Sasquatch."

"Correct!" She smiled at me. "The Sasquatch is an amazing creature."

Of her stories, my favorite was when she'd seen a Sasquatch hunkered at the edge of the lake eating a fish.

"Are you sure it wasn't just a moose?" I teased, and she punched me in the arm.

"Of course not. It stood upright, and there was no dewlap!"

The creature had been female, seven feet tall, mammary glands bloated, which grossed me out but excited Annie.

"I wondered where her babies were. How many were there? One? Two? More? That would be something to see!" she said. As if seeing the adult Sasquatch wasn't enough.

The Sasquatch had regarded her with the cool, disconnected gaze of a mule deer as it munched on the Kokanee salmon it had pulled from the lake. It appeared neither frightened nor intrigued by Annie as she watched from her bright red kayak. The creature's fur was sable tipped in dark chocolate, eyes round and amber with black flecks, the snout protruding and pale. Its nostrils had flared as it'd lifted its nose to the sky to sample Annie's scent. It lingered on the shoreline for an hour before it sauntered up the hillside and disappeared into the brush.

"I wanted her to turn and look back at me, but I was a non-issue, an ordinary thing, like a cricket or a chickadee. That's the trick to attracting the Cryptids, Ben. Act aloof. That puts them at ease. You can't come off as a threat or be afraid. If you are afraid, the good creatures will steer clear and more sinister ones will find you."

I had laughed (albeit nervously) at that, but Annie hadn't cracked a smile.

"Seeing the Sasquatch was cool, but not a big deal," she continued. "After all, in Montana we see wild animals every day, animals that a regular person won't see in their whole lifetime: grizzlies, wolverines, and mountain lions. It didn't surprise me to see a Sasquatch; the wilderness surrounding the lake is the ideal habitat for them." Her eyes were dreamy at first, but then she stopped and looked at me. "It's best we keep the Cryptids secret anyway. People will just kill them. Seems like the majority prefers to kill what they don't understand. Kill first and ask questions later. It's pathetic."

I nodded as she spoke. I wanted to believe she had seen these incredible things: the Sasquatch, the *Shunka Warakin*, and the countless other finned and furry anomalies she had described over the years, but it was hard for me. Annie was a credible source, but I needed

proof before I believed in something. She had the ability to trust her instincts without definitive evidence, and displayed a pure confidence in her views that swayed others to believe rather than question the most mysterious ideas. This ability attracted not only the unusual creatures, but humans, as well.

She was special. She made everyone around her feel special.

*So why is she dying?* I swiped a tear from my cheek and boosted myself up into the kayak, sliding into the seat. I refused to believe it. Just like I didn't really believe in the Sasquatch and the *Shunka Warakin*. It was all... *bullshit!* I slapped the water and my reflection broke into squiggly lines.

From the corner of my eye I saw a dark shape zip past, followed by a loud splash. I whirled around in the kayak. Had someone thrown something at me? I was far from shore and there were no other boats on this part of the lake. A bird may have landed in the water, but the thing I'd seen hadn't been the gawky shape of a pelican coming in for a landing.

I scanned the rippled surface of the water until I spotted something bobbing about fifty yards away. The sun drifted out from behind the clouds, setting the water ablaze in blinding white diamonds. I slipped on my sunglasses and paddled over to the object.

It was too round to be a bird. I looked up, scanning the sky for raptors; perhaps one had dropped its prey, a rabbit or a squirrel. Stranger things had happened out here. But other than the clouds, the sky was spotless.

The object nodded on the surface of the water, the sun glinting off its pock-marked, metallic surface in brilliant arrays. As I pulled up next to it, I saw a jagged scorch mark on the surface. I reached for it and it sank, slipping through my fingers. I peered into the water, trying to locate it below the surface, but the sun's reflection was dazzling. The object popped up a second later an arm's length away.

"Annie?" I said. A combination of sadness and shame washed over me. It was a piece of junk that had fallen from a plane or satellite or something. It wasn't alive! It certainly wasn't Annie.

I reached over and pulled it from the water before it could sink again. The weight of it surprised me, and the kayak nearly tipped sideways as I hauled it into my lap. Steam rose from the orb's rough surface as I inspected it, the exterior warm against my palms.

I eased it into the netted storage hammock slung across the front compartment of the kayak, watching it rock back and forth as I paddled home, praying it wasn't a parting gift from my sister.



Annie was hanging in there. I could tell because the nurse still lingered and my mother still hovered at the bedside, straightening the covers, plumping the pillows. They didn't even notice as I passed by her room.

My father sat in the den staring at the television, a zombie. Yet another creature my sister insisted was fiction. But if she could have seen our father sprawled in the recliner, eyes

glazed, not really watching the rerun of *Cheers* on the television, she would have agreed that zombies *did* exist and lived under our very roof. I didn't hold the zombie thing against our parents. I didn't want to process what was happening to my sister, either, but Annie had made me promise not to disappear. I couldn't turn into the undead, no matter how tempting it was.

"Listen to me, Benjamin. When it happens, I'll be standing right next to you, even when it doesn't feel like it," she had said, squeezing my hand. "If you start to get sad, remember that. I'm right here."

I placed the orb on my bureau. The surface had dulled as it dried and the scorch mark appeared more pronounced. There was a deep ding in the middle of the burn—a *wound*—that I hadn't noticed before, as if it had been struck by something hard.

"Space traffic," I mumbled. Then I remembered a story Miss Jacobson had told us in English class about the man who had flown too close to the sun. The wax holding his feathers to his manmade wings had melted, causing him to fall from the sky. The story of Icarus.

The orb, *my* orb, didn't have wings or wax that would melt, but I wondered if it had tried to take a short cut and had flown off course, ending up in Cobalt Lake.

Feeling suddenly exhausted, I sunk back onto my bed and pulled the purple afghan my grandmother had crocheted for Annie over me. I had taken it last night, wanting something of hers in my room. Maybe that's why she hadn't woken up this morning, because I'd stolen her afghan. I pressed it to my face; it smelled faintly medicinal, but I could also detect the sage incense that Annie burned to welcome the friendly spirits.

My head throbbed and a dull pain gnawed at my ribs. It was dinner time, but the pain wasn't from hunger. I longed to sleep, and I realized then that *I* was now a *we*, and *we* must rest in order to heal.

"Icarus," I murmured, as I closed my eyes.



I woke in my darkened room, hours later, with an intense urge to collect things. Images clicked through my mind, random objects with no commonalities: a kitchen sponge, a sprig of basil, a candle, copper wires, pine needles, matches, honey, a nickel, toenail clippings, a potato, and a feather.

I rose from bed and peeked out my door, then tiptoed down the hall. I could hear snoring through the open door of my parents' bedroom. Annie's door was cracked, and I could see my mother slumped in the chair next to her bed. In the dim glow of the nightlight, I couldn't tell if she was sleeping. I wondered if the nurse had gone home.

I paused outside Annie's room for a moment. *Please wake up!* I thought. *I have something to show you. Something amazing! I know you'd want to see it. Don't you want to see it, Annie?*

The silence of her room answered me.



I returned to my room a short time later, cradling the items I had collected. An image popped up in my mind and using this to guide me, I arranged them in a circle around Icarus: the candle next to the feather; the basil leaves torn and fragrant, placed next to a dollop of honey; curls of copper wire next to matches torn from the book; the other items placed in thoughtful juxtaposition. This was how Icarus wanted them. When I stepped back, a voice echoed in my head:

*Rest*, it said.

I sprawled on the bed and closed my eyes, visualizing the border I had constructed around Icarus, wondering if it would save him.

I dreamed of paddling on Cobalt Lake, but the water had become shallow, polluted with fetid algae. Carp slurped at the foam-slicked surface of the water and bumped the bottom of my kayak, trying to flip it over. An osprey watched me from a nest lodged in a skeletal tree at the water's edge. The vast wilderness that had once surrounded the lake was gone, replaced by an arid plain.

Terror washed over me. Something bumped the kayak again and I looked into the water. A woman stared at me from below the surface, a swirl of dark hair around her face. She grinned, revealing needle-sharp incisors.

"No!" I said, jumping back. "Annie says you're not real!" The kayak tipped as my weight shifted, dumping me overboard. The carp swarmed as I entered the water, eager to adhere to my skin, and the succubus grabbed my bare wrist and pulled it toward her jagged, gaping mouth.

I woke with a start, bolting upright, clutching my right wrist to my chest. Beyond my bedroom window, the world was still dark, yet my room was bathed in warm light. I looked at my bureau and gasped.

Icarus was no longer a dull, dead ball. It had cracked into two halves and now sat shrouded in an opulent golden light. The light sparkled in one of its halves, and my skin rippled with gooseflesh, the sensation not entirely unpleasant. Its other half lay face-down on the bureau, scorch mark exposed.

A form took shape from the light—a creature with a single emerald eye. At least, I think it was an eye. A spray of feathery antennae sprouted from the crown of its head and the wedge-shaped torso coursed with hundreds of short, tube-like appendages, like those of a sea anemone. They fluttered and vibrated with a soft hum, as if the creature floated inside the vessel.

Then, as quickly as the form materialized, it dissolved into a quivering weave of shifting jeweled dots—more shadow than substance, more light than body. I rubbed my face with my hands. Was I still caught up in dreams? I smacked my cheeks with my palms, the sound loud in the quiet room. I pinched my forearm and winced. I was definitely awake.

"Annie?" I whispered. It would be so like her to come to me as something like this, to freak out her nervous brother. Yet there had been no commotion by my parents—no zombie awakening—so I assumed she was still alive in the next room. So what was it, then? What

had I brought home? I fought back the twinge of fear that cropped up in my chest, the cry that rose in my throat.

Annie's voice rang out in my head. *Don't be scared, Ben.*

"Annie! Where are you? Are you... okay?" I whispered. The halo of light around Icarus's halves brightened at the sound of my voice, but Annie did not answer.

"I'm not scared, Annie," I said, crawling to the edge of my bed, closer to Icarus. "I'm not."

Tendrils of light swirled around the two pieces of its ship, circling the items I had collected. They inspected and sorted my careful arrangements, weaving the copper wire into a thick braid that melted, the liquid absorbed by the kitchen sponge, which tripled in size so it touched the nickel. The nickel softened and mixed with the honey, pine needles, and toenail clippings, creating a brilliant silver balm that tracked around the ring, intertwining with the remaining objects until each one transformed into molten light connected in a seamless border around Icarus. The air above my bureau glowed turquoise, gold, and sapphire as the tendrils smoothed the extracted compounds from the radiant perimeter over the damaged half of the ship, concentrating on the scorched gouge.

I sat at the edge of the bed, transfixed. While Icarus worked, I told it about Annie. I doubt it understood me, but it felt good to talk about her.

"She's in the room next to us, she's really sick. I sure wish she could see you!" I said, smiling. "You're better than Sasquatch and the *Shunka Warakin* combined. And the coolest part? I found you first!"

It did not acknowledge me as I spoke. Like Annie with the Sasquatch, I was a non-issue. No threat.

Until I tried to touch it.

I hopped off the bed and went to the bureau, reaching for the sparkling edge of the vessel—I couldn't help it, it was so beautiful!—but as soon as my fingers made contact with the surface, intense pain shot through my hand. I cried out just as tentacles of amber light burst from the center of one of the halves and curled around my fingers. The pain evaporated, and I froze, feeling the creature's attention upon me.

*Don't touch*, it said.

"Sorry," I croaked, blinking back tears and cradling my hand. I sank back on the bed and watched it work, telling no more stories.



When I woke it was barely light outside. Icarus was a whole orb again, now with no imperfections. Its surface glowed dimly gold and thrumming filled the room. It sounded like it was... purring.

And I knew it was time for it to go.

*But Annie hasn't seen you yet.*

It didn't matter. I would tell her when she woke up. She would believe me.

I reached for Icarus but paused, remembering the pain from the night before. "Is it okay to touch you?"

Its surface brightened, then dimmed, which I hoped was a yes. I lifted it from the bureau and moved to listen at my bedroom door. My father was still sawing logs across the hall; my sister's room was quiet.

I hugged Icarus to my chest and left the house.



I stood on the dock and watched Icarus float upward into the weak light of early morning. Just like that, its golden glow faded and it was gone. I heard a noise from the house, somewhere between a shriek and a shout. The zombies had awoken.

My sister was dead. Just like Icarus. Gone.

I looked up at the sky, too numb for tears just yet, searching for signs of Icarus. It had tricked me and stolen my sister. I knotted my hands into fists and paced the dock. How could I have been so stupid? Perhaps if I hadn't helped it heal, it wouldn't have taken Annie with it. I crouched at the end of the dock and considered hurling myself into the cool water, so I could sink to the bottom like a stone.

I decided at that moment that I would no longer believe in anything.

The screen door banged against the house. My father called to me. "Ben? Hey, buddy."

"Down here, Dad."

"Can you come up to the house? It's important," he said.

*Go away!* I wanted to scream. *I already know! I already know she's gone!*

But my dad didn't go away; he walked down the gentle slope of our front lawn and sat next to me on the dock. He pulled off his shoes and socks, slipped his feet into the water, and sighed. Then he put a hand on my shoulder and squeezed.

I refused to look at him. Then I heard a strange noise, a raspy, hitching sound, and I turned toward him. His shoulders were quaking, his other hand pressed to his face. I'd never seen my father cry.

"It's okay, Dad," I said. "She's right here with us. She promised. And you know she *never* lied."

"Ben..."

"And I know everything is true about the Sasquatch and the *Shunka Warakin*, and did you know they call the Yeti a Yowie in Australia?" I took a quick, hitching breath.

"Son..."

"I know it's all true because I found Icarus in the lake and I helped him heal, then he took Annie into space with him, but that's okay, because she always wanted to go to the moon. That's how I know she's sitting right here with us. You just have to pay attention. Pay attention and you'll be able to tell too..."

I couldn't keep my voice down. "And she wasn't afraid, so we can't be afraid either. So I'm not. I'm not afraid! Do you hear me, Annie? I'm not afraid!"

I was standing now, crying, stomping my feet on the deck, flailing my arms. "You had no right to take her, Icarus! No right! I fixed you!" I yelled at the sky. "I helped you heal! Why did you take her from me? I hope you fall! I hope you crash again and smash to pieces!"

My dad jumped to his feet and caught me in a bear hug. "Ben, Bennie... stop. Listen to me now." He stepped back, put his hands on my shoulders, and looked into my eyes, his expression fierce, all traces of zombie evaporated. "Annie's awake."

I stared at him.

"Did you hear what I said? Annie's awake," he repeated. "She shouldn't be, but she is."

"Annie's awake," I parroted back.

Yes," he said, "and as soon as she woke, she asked for you." When I didn't respond, he squeezed my shoulder. "Ben? You okay?"

"I thought she had..." I looked up at the brightening sky, then back at my dad. His brows were knitted together, his lips pressed in a firm line. I nodded. "Yeah, Dad. I'm okay."

I did not need to throw myself into the lake. I *was* okay. Icarus had given Annie back to me, the ultimate reward for allowing myself to feel one simple thing.

Belief.

As we walked back to the house, an animal shrieked somewhere in the woods, shredding the quiet air.

I think it was a coyote, but it could have been anything.



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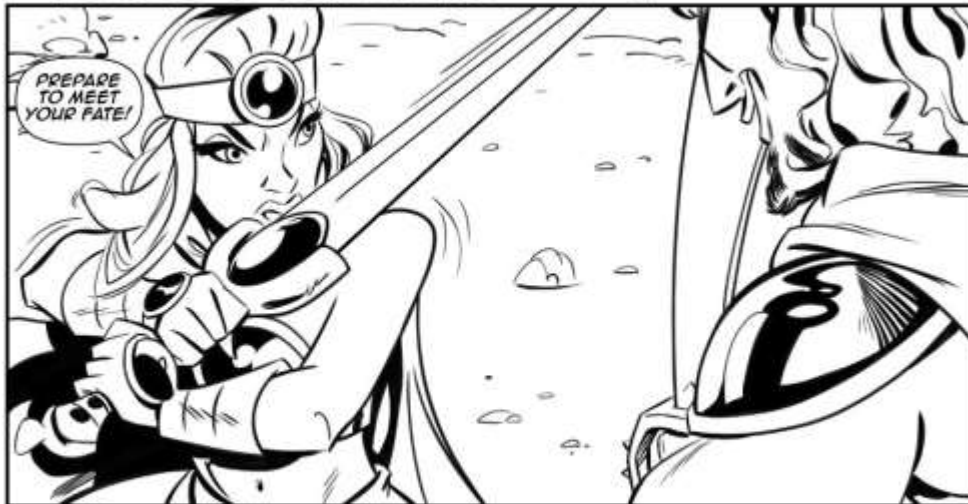
**Hall Jameson** is a writer and artist who lives in Montana with her husband and an assortment of other furry and feathered critters. Her work has appeared in over seventy print and online publications. When she's not writing stories or taking photographs, Hall spends her time kayaking, hiking, and cat wrangling.

# Graphic Story: Shamrock #4 - Hero's Scream

Josh Brown & Alberto Hernandez

## Shamrock, part 4 HERO'S SCREAM

Josh Brown    Alberto Hernandez  
Story                      Art

















## Interview with Author L R Hieber

**A**ctress, playwright, and author Leanna Renee Hieber is the award-winning, bestselling author of Gothic Victorian Fantasy novels for adults and teens. Her Strangely Beautiful saga, beginning with *The Strangely Beautiful Tale of Miss Percy Parker*, hit Barnes & Noble and Borders Bestseller lists and garnered numerous regional genre awards. This currently out-of-print series will reissue in revised editions from Tor/Forge in 2016 and is currently being adapted into a musical theatre production. Leanna's Magic Most Foul saga began with *Darker Still*, an American Bookseller's Association "Indie Next List" pick and a Scholastic Book Club "Highly Recommended" title. Her new Gaslamp Fantasy saga, *The Eterna Files*, begins early 2015 from Tor/Forge. Her short fiction has appeared in numerous anthologies such as *Queen Victoria's Book of Spells*, *Willful Impropriety*, *The Mammoth Book of Gaslamp Romance* and featured on Tor.com. She is a four time Prism Award winner for excellence in the genre of Fantasy Romance. Her books have been selected for national book club editions and translated into many languages. A proud member of performer unions Actors Equity and SAG-AFTRA, she lives in New York City and works in film and television on shows like *Boardwalk Empire*. She is also a ghost tour guide for *Boroughs of the Dead*, NYC.

### Q&A

**Julian: Dear Leanna, I am really glad for the opportunity to chat with you today! To start, tell us a little bit about your life and upbringing: where/how did you grow up, who/what influenced you the most? Did you have a yearbook quote and if yes, did you live up to it?**

Leanna: Hello Julian, I'm so thrilled to be here! I grew up in rural Southern Ohio, the daughter of two incredible parents, both diligent and hard-working teachers, and I was given free rein to follow whatever interested me provided I worked hard, and the arts called to me as soon as I could hold a pen, pencil or paintbrush. When I was exposed to Edgar Allan Poe in grade school I fell in love with his style, poetry, melancholy, and transcendent beauty. I don't think I've ever encountered another author more influential to my mind, soul and style than Poe, and every year I can read more layers and nuance in his genre-innovating work, and through him work out my own relationship to my intense and creative 'dark side'. I fell in love with all the 19th Century Gothic novels, but I wanted in my own work to transcend the Gothic stereotypes of women as plot devices or victims only. That's been a mission in my work since I first started tinkering with story-telling as a child, even if my mission at that time was hardly clear. I have been a writer and artist by Calling from an early age, I've lived fully into this as a mission and identity.

I indeed had a bunch of yearbook quotes as voted "Most Musical, Dramatic," etc, and I've certainly followed those quotes with a full career in drama and the arts. My books are as theatrical in their scope as my time as a classical and Shakespearean actress. I don't think anything about my quirky, dramatic, intense and hard-working self, young or adult, surprises anyone from any of my associations in the arts.

**Your first novel, *The Strangely Beautiful Tale of Miss Percy Parker*, was published in 2009 and it became an instant hit. I'm always curious to learn how that first novel came to be. When did you get involved with writing and how did it feel to see your first work turn bestseller overnight?**

I started my first novel around the age of eleven, (it was embarrassingly God-awful, essentially Phantom of the Opera fan-fic) and while that was not a legitimate work to polish and sell, it did train me to consistently be a writer, and I have been writing novels ever since. I started taking my books seriously while working at the Cincinnati Shakespeare Company, after having traveled to England my senior year of college. I was SO inspired by London, I had to write about it. The timing couldn't have been worse to become overwhelmed with the need to write, however, as I was working very long hours, six days a week, on five plays at once. But sometimes in that crucible is precisely when you have to put pen to paper, and I obsessively did so. It took me the next several years whilst traveling around the country as a professional actress to finish the draft, and after that, more years to get it agented and sold.

My work was (and sometimes still is) so hard to place, as it was/is so cross-genre. I write with elements of traditional Gothic novels at the fore, then I mix in Fantasy/Paranormal, Mystery, Horror, Suspense, Young Adult, Romance. Thankfully the industry has opened up to cross-genre titles more in the last eight years or so, but placing *Strangely Beautiful* was so tough, we received lots of responses of "we love this but we don't know where to shelve it" and so it took a long time (approximately nine years and over twenty two full revisions via critiques from industry professionals, including the man who would become my agent as well as who would become my editor) to finally sell to a small genre New York house called Dorchester which focused on mass-market paperbacks. Because they paid small advances they were willing to take chances on new authors and my heady cross-genre mix really appealed to my first editor, Chris Keeslar. With a launch at the sadly no longer extant Lincoln Center Barnes & Noble, the book did indeed do extremely well, hit Barnes & Noble's and Borders Bestseller lists, garnered a lot of critical acclaim and awards, went into four printings and sold to several foreign countries all rather quickly. Similar situation with book two. That felt amazing, and I was really proud and grateful for all the fellow genre authors who had given me advice and connections along the way.

But before I could release the fourth and final book in the *Strangely Beautiful* saga, in a devastating turn, Dorchester went bankrupt and closed its doors, leaving us authors without rights or funds. I was able to work on another series while fighting to get rights back, *The Magic Most Foul* saga, but having my first three novels out of print and not generating royalties when I felt I'd just gotten started has been really rough and I've battled the emotional and financial fallout ever since. But things happen, the wonderful and the horrible, and one cannot let a difficult business dictate one's work, you have to write anyway, and keep writing the next book no matter what happens. The industry is hardly fair or kind, it is wildly unpredictable, so one has to exist with that fear and frustration at an arm's length. At the end of the day, one writes out of love for writing, pure and simple, everything else is just trappings and logistics. And on a joyful note, *Strangely Beautiful* is far from dead, it will

resurrect like the Phoenix featured in its storyline next April, more about that later in the interview!

**A lot of your work is inspired from the Victorian Era—what is your connection with that period? What draws you to it and how do you build your characters to fit?**

Ever since I was a child I wanted to go "home" to the 19th century. I can't explain it other than a past life/past lives. I turned that sense of familiarity and connection into direct fuel for my books. I garnered what amounted to a minor in the Victorian Era from college, (I graduated with a BFA in theatrical performance from Miami University) and spent a lot of my theatrical career working in period drama, living in history as best I could. My characters came from a swirling mix of literary and dramatic inspiration, with my desperate need to place women with more agency and determination to be their own people despite the repressive, limiting era, into these often harrowing Gothic circumstances. The Victorian Era was such a difficult, hypocritical and bipolar era, best exemplified by Jekyll and Hyde, and that tension within the Victorian psyche is rife and rich, a consciousness so fascinated by new machines and innovations and yet also terrified. Terrified about God as they "knew" God being called into question via Evolution, and misunderstandings of natural processes and physical phenomena. Their constant quest to understand life after death, in a rich death culture, is the perfect setting for ghost stories. For all the advances the society saw, there were still mass diseases and epidemics. The dichotomy of the age provides rich conflict in which to place my characters, none of whom are progressive beyond their time or anachronistic, but exemplars of the forward thinking men and women who did exist in this restrictive yet grand era. The era holds a complex, intricate fascination for me that has yet to exhaust itself (which is very good considering the next many books contracted in the era!).

**You've been involved in theater for quite some time; you started with the Cincinnati Shakespeare Company. How was that period for you and what did it mean? Did it have an influence on your writing and how you developed as an author?**

Theatre and storytelling, on page or stage, has always been entwined in my experience, as I was always doing both with about the same amount of passion and focus. My work is very character and setting driven, and I'm sure that comes from my actor's viewpoint; from living in and with the stories night after night on stage, especially classical theatre, it's very all-encompassing and was such a rich creative environment. Due to the commitments of auditioning and stage work, that part of my life has now taken a back seat to my novels, however I remain a proud AEA and SAG-AFTRA member and do the occasional featured bit in a show or film. I am an author who relies heavily on my editor, who I consider the director of my book. I like the 'team' aspect of traditional publishing, working with the cast that puts together the show that is your book. I teach a very popular workshop called "Direct Your Book: Theatrical Techniques to a Blockbuster Novel" that breaks down the different viewpoints used in theatre and film that can be of huge benefit to fiction writers of any genre. I think every writer should try to have at least one other art or form of storytelling in which they dabble. With more than one way to consider storytelling, writers' blocks and manuscript



issues can benefit from different insights and perspectives. When writers can look at their stories in the most rich, multifaceted and problem-solving of ways, the story always benefits from more tools in one's tool kit.

**What are the best and worst parts of being an actor? How about a writer?**

Acting best: Getting the chance to time travel and channel another soul by harnessing the timeless, raw power that is the artistic experience, and in doing so, help an audience feel deeply and transcend themselves and their limitations.

Acting worst: Opening yourself up to being vulnerable, exhausted, insecure and overwhelmed by the work and the task of doing the above as brilliantly as possible.

Writing: The exact same.

**You come up with really cool, long, and complicated book titles. Is this something that just happened and then you went with it, or is there a specific formula behind it?**

Well for that you can credit my agent, Nicholas R. Lewis, who felt that the long descriptive titles, of which I was in the forefront in the genre in 2008 when it sold, helped to mitigate the cross-genre issue by being more descriptive of the kind of book I write, more illustrative of the kind of lush storytelling I'm known for. Since then, my titles have been all over the map, many dictated by the publisher, but it was a distinctive way to start out a career and caught my first editor's eye.

**Let's talk about *The Eterna Files* for a bit—your first publication with *Tor Books*. Give our readers a little hook about the universe here and what are your plans for it going forward.**

Imagine two X-files like offices, one in New York, one in London, in the year 1882 and imagine them both tasked by the respective grieving widows at the head of each government, to be the first to find the cure for death. This proves to be as disastrous in body count as the bodies it is trying to protect. I've two rival teams, the American office headed by an enigmatic young sensitive named Clara Templeton, the British by stalwart, dogged detective and skeptic Harold Spire. Playing these teams against each other is an insidious third party tied to demonic entities. The series is a setting-rich and character-driven trilogy that will focus on the importance of personal fortitude and imaginative magic to fight truly horrific dark forces, all amidst a repressive society awakening to the 'modern' world.

**The *Strangely Beautiful* saga is getting a makeover from *Tor.com*. How cool is that you were able to do that? Can you give us an idea as to where the series is going? As I understand, you are planning at least two more books to continue the story.**

Yes! I'm so very blessed by this! *Strangely Beautiful* is the title for the omnibus edition containing books one and two in the series, in new editions, freshly edited, with brand new scenes and bonus content. These books are the 'books of my heart' and their being out of print has been devastating for me, so this second chance at their life, with the skilled hand of senior

editor Melissa Singer at the helm, is a real dream come true. It's a huge, rare opportunity for an author to "fix" a few things about their first works. These books are a whole new treat for new readers and old fans and I'm so thrilled to introduce and reintroduce these beloved characters. Book three in the series was published just before Dorchester's collapse but will be reissued in 2017, with the fourth and final book in the saga which was never released to finally come out the following year, this has been a long awaited tale from a very loyal readership. I do hope everyone here will join me for this sweeping, lyrical saga about Victorian Ghost-busters infused with Greek Mythology in a rich Gothic setting.

**Do you envision any of your books being made into a movie? If yes, which one and who would play your main characters?**

Oh, goodness, that would be a dream come true. I've thoughts on all of them, and I've large casts so I'll stick to the main few characters. I think Tom Hiddleston or Richard Armitage would be a magnificent Professor Rychman in *Strangely Beautiful*, and I've envisioned Martin Freeman as my stalwart and long-suffering Harold Spire in *Eterna Files*. For my female leads I see Eva Green (*Penny Dreadful*) as secondary lead Rebecca Thompson in *Strangely Beautiful* (she could also play several supporting roles in *Eterna Files*), but for both *Strangely Beautiful* and *Eterna Files* heroines, between Miss Percy Parker and Miss Clara Templeton, it's so hard for me to pick an actress as I've always dreamed of playing them myself. \*Grin\*

**In our issue #10, we're including your story "Sea Found." What's the story behind the story?**

This story was actually my first piece of published fiction, published by a boutique small press in 2008. I'd written several short tales trying to get a publishing credit, this was the first to gain any traction. I'm not a prolific short story writer, so I don't have as many of them to my name as I'd like, but I'm thrilled this Twilight-Zone sort of tale is finding its way into the world again. I love nothing more than good ghost stories, especially those with twists or inversions of power dynamics. I'd been reading Lovecraft and Poe a lot before writing this story, (I hope that is evident) and this remains my only contemporary-set story to date. I've found I'm more comfortable writing in the past or future, but this one contemporary tale had to be told and I'm glad it slipped through my Victorian filters to icily creep its way into your world.

**You are a young author who reached success pretty fast and I can see your career continuing on this upward path. What is your advice for the young writers of today who aspire to follow your steps?**

Thank you for those kind words, and I'm always happy to offer encouragement as I received a lot of encouragement along my path. I had a dream of seeing my first New York-published book in my hand by age 30 and I was able to do just that, the Advanced Reader Copies arrived on my birthday, but that came after nearly ten years of revising and learning the industry. The key is to write, keep writing, write more, revise, and keep a close small circle of trusted critique partners who "get you" but won't automatically praise everything you do.

Don't rush to self publish. If you can't take criticism and revisions, get out of the business now as you are not a writer. Writers revise and are edited. Your desire to see your book or story out in the world has to be greater than your fear of rejection or a bad review. Embrace whatever your writing process is, as everyone's process is as unique as a fingerprint, but do learn what your process is specifically so you can tend to it and write with regularity. More direct industry advice is on my website under the "Free Reads and Extras" page. Keep the faith, don't be discouraged, write the stories only you can write, as there can never be enough stories in the world; it's one of the primary reasons we have language.

**What else can we expect from you over the next year and is there anything else you'd like to add?  
Can we find you at any conventions in the near future?**

I'll be hard at work on the next Eterna Files novels, book 2, titled Eterna and Omega, launches next fall, and I'll be developing some additional tie-in material that will complement the saga, and I'll be working hard on promoting the Strangely Beautiful reissue (April 2016, I hope you all will pre-order this dear work that's been through so much, thanks! [Http://tinyurl.com/strangely2bn](http://tinyurl.com/strangely2bn) ), as well as tending to my Etsy shop of Steampunk, Gothic and Neo-Victorian accessories which keeps me sane between book deadlines: [Https://www.etsy.com/shop/torchandarow](https://www.etsy.com/shop/torchandarow)

I attend lots of Northeast Steampunk Conventions, and I know for sure I'll be a featured Guest at Anachrocon in Atlanta, at International Steam Symposium in Cincinnati, at Authors After Dark in Savannah, at Motor City Steam Con in Detroit, at DragonCon, and I hope to be at Steampunk World's Fair and TempleCon in Rhode Island. Hope to see your readership there!

Please follow me on Twitter @Leannarenee, at [facebook.com/lrhieber](https://www.facebook.com/lrhieber) and of course all information about my books, art and appearances is at <http://leannareneehieber.com>

Cheers!

**Leanna, thank you so much for this interview and all the best from FSM!**

Thanks, FSM! I dearly appreciate this opportunity and I look forward to sharing more tales with you in the future!



# Interview with Author Michael Underwood

**M**ike R. Underwood is a writer from Baltimore, MD. A graduate of Clarion West in 2007, he published his first book, *Geekomancy*, in 2012. He followed with five other novels, including his most recent installment in the Ree Reyes series, *Hexomancy*. I was lucky enough to meet Mike a few years back at one of the meetings organized by the Science Fiction Association of Bergen County. Today, I am interviewing Mike to find out how his career has unfolded since, and share some insights into his overall path as a writer.

You can learn more about Mike on his website, <http://michaelrunderwood.com/>, or on Twitter @MikeRUnderwood.

## Q&A

**Julian: Mike, I'm eager to talk about the books and about the present and future, but I'd like to start with a lookback: how and where did you grow up, who and what influenced your life? Give us a gist...**

Michael: I moved around a lot as a kid—I went to six different schools by the time I was in eighth grade, which meant I had to make friends over and over. But one constant in my world was books. I was originally a bit of a reluctant reader, but then I took to it with a vengeance, reading fantasy, SF, and comics voraciously as we moved around. Living in NYC (Brooklyn to be precise) informed my view of the world in terms of diversity and de-centering my own white experience as universal, as well as providing my mental archetype of what a city meant.

**You attended Clarion West in 2007 and then it took about 5 years for your first book to see the light of day. Tell me a little bit about you before Clarion, and after Clarion. What happened and how did your writing life evolved?**

I took creative writing classes in undergrad, having already done a bit of fiction writing, mostly character backstory pieces for RPG characters. I wrote two novels before attending Clarion West, one each during the summers before starting my MA and then between year one and two of that degree. I attended Clarion West right after graduating (I literally packed my bags for Clarion West the last day of finals and drove up the next morning to start the workshop).

One of my short stories at Clarion West would turn into the seed of my novel *Shield and Crocus*, which my classmates and teachers were eager to see me expand into a novel. I sold a couple of my CW shorts after the workshop, but mostly focused on *Shield and Crocus*. I spent a year and a querying and revising the novel, then eventually started writing other books.

**I remember you telling the story of putting a part (or whole?) of *Geekomancy* on Book Country and getting a publisher's offer from there. You went on and got an agent, even though you had a publisher behind the book. Tell us about that. And, by the way, Sara Megibow is a wonderful agent and someone I happily follow on the interwebs...**

I started writing *Geekomancy* over a Thanksgiving break - initially as a distraction from another project. *Geekomancy* took precedence, and I finished it in the fall of 2011. Then I put up a still-messy first draft on the community critique site Book Country, where an editor found it and asked to see the whole manuscript. A week or so later, I had an offer. I knew that I wanted a literary agent, so I took the offer and went on a lightning round of agent queries. Sara and one other agent offered, but I got along best with Sara, and we partnered up for the deal, and have worked together since.

**For those who are not familiar with your work, give us a brief overview of the Ree Reyes' universe. What's the premise, where is it now, where is it going? How fun was writing these books?**

*Geekomancy* and the books that follow are my multi-volume love letter to Fandom and SF/F pop culture. In this world, there are a variety of magic systems, and one of them is called Geekomancy—where a magician can take their love of SF/F pop culture and use it to do incredible things. The lead, Ree Reyes, can watch a favorite movie and then emulate a character or power from the story—watch *The Matrix*, do Wire-Fu, watch *Die Hard* and emulate John McClane's indomitable willpower. Geekomancers can also use geek culture ephemera as one-shot magical items, and can take props/artifacts and bring them to life by tapping into the collective nostalgia that flows into them from fans around the world - the end result is that Ree goes into battle with a Lightsaber, a sideboard of CCG cards, and empowered by a specially-chosen clip for a contextually-appropriate super-power.

The Ree Reyes series are astonishingly, almost embarrassingly fun to write. I get to share my thoughts about not only some of my favorite SF/F properties, but also what I think about fan culture in general. I basically got to write the topic for my proposed PhD dissertation into my fiction and get a much larger readership for it, on top of getting paid.

*Geekomancy* was the start of the series, and there are now four books - *Celebromancy*, *Attack the Geek* (a novella), and *Hexomancy*, which just came out in September. *Hexomancy* concludes the first major arc of the series, though I have ideas for another 5 or so novella-to-novel-length stories in that universe.

**You clearly love Urban Fantasy, and so do I, even though it is not my absolute favorite when it comes to fantasy sub-genres. What attracts you to this sub-genre? I know you also wrote an epic fantasy (*Shield and Crocus*)-how different was writing that?**

I came to my love of Urban Fantasy through the *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* TV series alongside the World of Darkness RPGs (especially *Mage: the Ascension* and *Changeling: the Dreaming*). I love the way that urban fantasy allows writers to juxtapose the fantastic with the

mundane, the impossible with the every day. Especially when the city itself is also interesting and vibrant, and where fantasy can be used to reexamine familiar elements of society (like fandom, celebrity, etc.) by literalizing metaphors or estranging the familiar. Also, urban fantasy stories tend to be action-packed and call for witty dialogue, two of my favorite ways of writing.

*Shield and Crocus* is quite different, though it is both fantasy and set in a city, therefore technically urban. But *Shield and Crocus* is more properly described as Weird Superheroes, drawing on the New Weird as well as the supers genre. While both *Shield and Crocus* and the Ree Reyes books are action-oriented, the ensemble in *Shield and Crocus* is much larger, the city is more dangerous and nuanced as a setting, and the scale is equally larger - the heroes fight for the fate of an entire city.

**Tell us a bit about Ree Reyes. How would her eHarmony profile look like?**

Ree would probably not ever sign up for eHarmony. OK Cupid, maybe.

Ree is stubborn but loyal to her friends, she's sarcastic and often snarky, but snarks because she cares, and she's deeply passionate about her SF/F loves. She's the kind of person that grew up on hero stories, and as a result, quickly embraced the chance to be a hero, to change the world by stepping up to fight on behalf of something bigger than herself. Ree values her friendships and nurses her grudges. She'll bite off more than she can chew and then knuckle through to win in the end.

**What is new and different about *Hexomancy* in the context of the series? Give us a hint about the story line.**

*Hexomancy* is a departure for me and for the series, because it covers an entire year in Ree's life, told in four sections - one each for a season as threats roll in to town in sync with equinoxes and solstices (magic stuff, natch), requiring Ree to load up and do battle several times over the course of the year. This let me decompress the storytelling, and to show more character growth for the leads as time passes and their relationships shift.

Old enemies return, slow-burn relationships flare up, and no fewer than two of the major relationships in Ree's life change in a big way.

**Are you going to continue the series? You already made a side-story (*Attack the Geeks*); will there be others, or was that just a one-off, spur of the moment kind of thing?**

As above, I have ideas for several more stories in the setting. I'm also considering some short fiction (much shorter than the novella) in the world, since readers really like the characters, and I like writing them.

I wrote *Attack the Geek* as a side-quest kind of story, but it has turned out to be really central to the plot line of *Hexomancy* - I couldn't resist the chance to take the novella's ending and use it as the rocket fuel it really was to propel the story forward.

**What about science-fiction and other sub-genres of fantasy? Will we see something along those lines from you in the future?**

We're just a month away from the debut of *Genrenauts*, my new series in novellas - and not only is *Genrenauts* overall a science fiction series, each episode also delves into a sub-genre.

Here's the premise—*Genrneauts* is set in a multi-verse, and every other dimension besides our Earth Prime is the home of a narrative genre - Western, Fantasy, Romance, Action, and so on. These worlds play out their traditional tale types *ad infinitum*, but when entropy sets in and a story goes off-track, the broken stories ripple over to damage Earth. So when a story breaks, the *Genrenauts* deploy to find, evaluate, and fix the broken story. Think *Leverage*, but for stories.

The first *Genrenauts* novella—*The Shootout Solution*, comes out November 17<sup>th</sup> in ebook, paperback, and audiobook from *Tor.com Publishing*.

I'm also working on a space opera project and some comics pitches. I like to keep busy.

**Who are some of your favorite authors and some of the books that left a mark on you in a way that only a good book can?**

Ursula K. LeGuin's *A Wizard of Earthsea* was one of the first fantasy novels I read, and it taught me from a very early age that fantasy could have rich worlds, intriguing societies, and beautiful language. I have to give props to Chris Claremont and other writers of *Marvel* and *DC comics* in the late 80s and early 90s, who comprised a bulk of my comics reading. I got back into comics in college, reading Warren Ellis and John Cassaday's *Planetary* alongside other independent series that helped me appreciate non-superhero comics. I've also learned a lot from the beautiful and brutal work of Octavia Butler, the brilliance of Samuel R. Delany, and the challenging conceptual boldness of China Mieville.

More recently, I've been blown away by the rallying cry of an epic fantasy that is Kameron Hurley's *The Mirror Empire*, as well as other weird fantasy novels like Robert Jackson Bennett's *City of Stairs*. I get to read amazing, inspiring work for my job with *Angry Robot*, from Wesley Chu's delightful *Lives of Tao* and sequels to Ramez Naam's mind-melting *Nexus* series and Lauren Beukes's revelatory gut-punches like *Zoo City*. I loved Saladin Ahmed's 21<sup>st</sup>-C update of sword & sorcery in *Throne of the Crescent Moon*, as well as Seanan McGuire's endlessly readable *InCryptid* series.

My recent comics loves include Kelly Sue DeConnick and Valentine DeLandro's *Bitch Planet*, Corinna Bechko and Gabriel Hardman's *Invisible Republic*, Kieron Gillen and Jamie McKelvie's *The Wicked + the Divine*, younger reader books like *Lumberjanes*, as well as Big Two books like *The Unbeatable Squirrel-Girl*, *Ms. Marvel*, *Batgirl*, and *Grayson*.

**What do you do in your free time (e.g. when you are not writing)? And sorry for implying that a writer has free time...**

In my vanishing free time, I try to keep up on geek culture stuff like comics, books, movies and TV, as well as making homemade pizzas - cooking/baking is like meditation for me, it's a great way to calm down after a long day of work.

**What can we expect from you over the next year or so? Will you be attending and conventions? Is there anything else you'd like to add?**

I've got the two Genrenauts novellas out in November and next February, and after that, it all depends on what happens with the projects I have out there on submission. I've committed to releasing all 6 of the Season One episodes of Genrenauts, so they'll be out over the course of the next year, circumstances permitting.

I attend a lot of cons. You'll be able to see me at ConFusion in January, and then I'm likely to attend some of the comic-cons (Emerald City or Phoenix), as well as BaltiCon, GenCon, WorldCon, and so on.

**Mike, thank you so much for this interview!**

Thanks for having me!





# Science Corner: Black Holes and Academic Walls

Sabine Hossenfelder

**A**ccording to Einstein you wouldn't notice crossing a black hole horizon. But now researchers argue that a firewall or brickwall would be in your way. Have they entirely lost their collective minds?



Image credits: Paul Terry Sutton <https://paulterrysutton.wordpress.com/>.

Tl;dr: Yes.

It is hard, sometimes, to understand why anyone would waste time on a problem as academic as black hole information loss. And I say that as someone who has spent a significant part of the last decade pushing black holes around in my head. Don't physicists have anything better to do, in a world that is suffering from war and disease, bad grammar even? What drives these researchers, other than the hope to make headlines for solving a 40 years old conundrum?

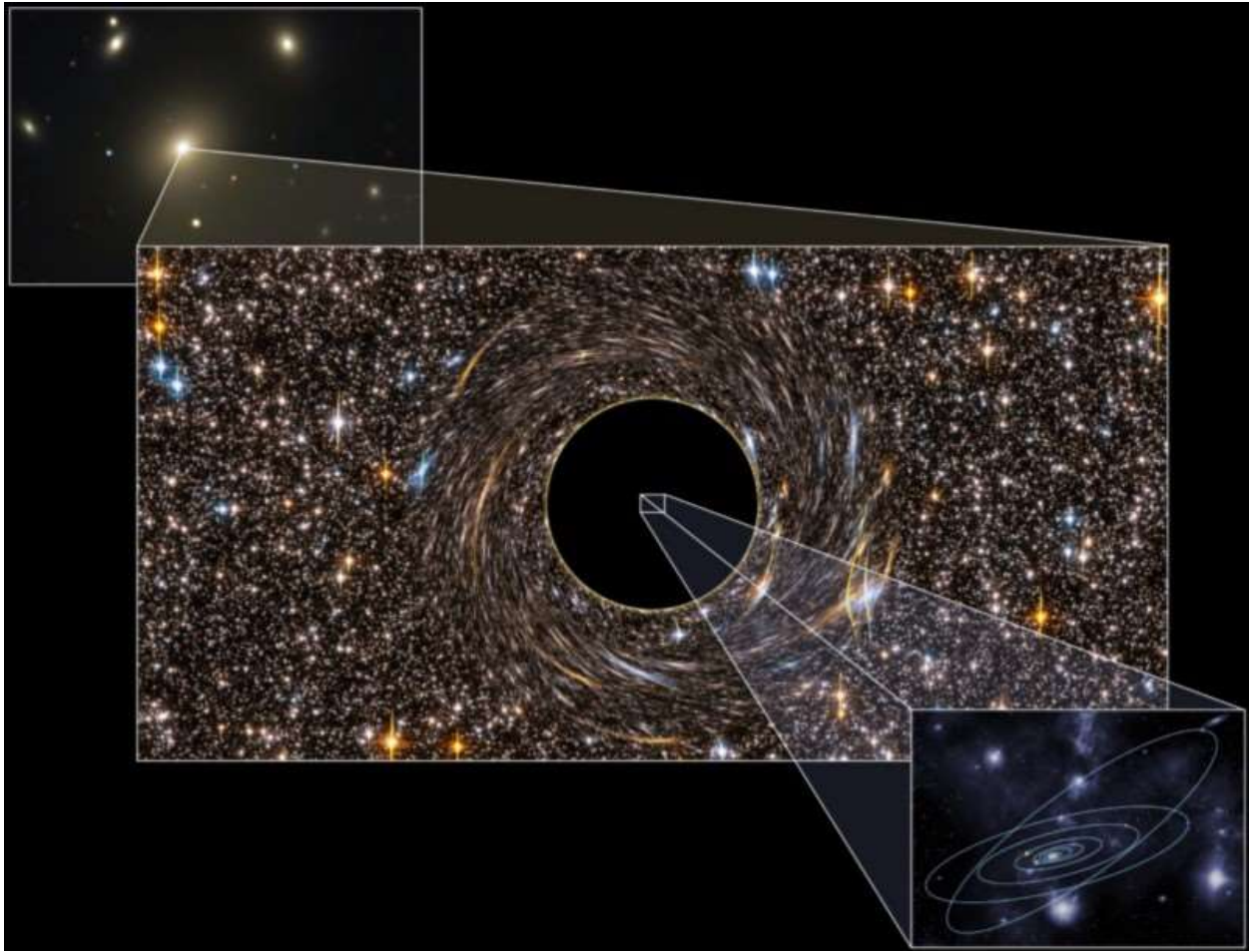


Image credit: P. Marenfeld/NOAO/AURA/NSF, via Gemini Observatory at <http://www.gemini.edu/node/11703>.

Many physicists today work on topics that, like black hole information loss, seem entirely detached from reality. Black holes only succeed in destroying information once they entirely evaporate, and that won't happen for the next 100 billion years or so. It is not tangible use of their insights that motivates these scientists, but the recognition that someone today has to pave way for the science that will become relevant in a hundred, a thousand, or ten thousand years from now. And as I scan the human mess in my news feed, the unearthly cleanliness of the argument and the seemingly inescapable logic leading to a paradox admittedly only adds to its appeal.

You can also trap me with wire puzzles.



*Image credit: Wikimedia Commons user [Matěj Bařha](#).*

If black hole information loss was a cosmic whodunit, then quantum theory would be the victim. Stephen Hawking demonstrated in the early 1970s that when one combines quantum theory with gravity, one finds that black holes must emit thermal radiation. This "Hawking radiation" is composed of particles that besides their temperature do not contain any information. And so, when a black hole entirely evaporates all the information about what fell inside must ultimately be destroyed. But such destruction of information is incompatible with the very quantum theory one used to arrive at this conclusion. In quantum theory all processes can happen both forward and backward in time, but black hole evaporation, it seems, cannot be reversed.

This presented physicists with a major conundrum because it demonstrated that gravity and quantum theory refused to combine. It didn't help either to try to explain away the problem alluding to the unknown theory of quantum gravity. Hawking radiation is not a quantum gravitational process, and while quantum gravity does eventually become important in the very late stages of a black hole's evaporation, the argument goes that by this time, it is too late to get all the information out.



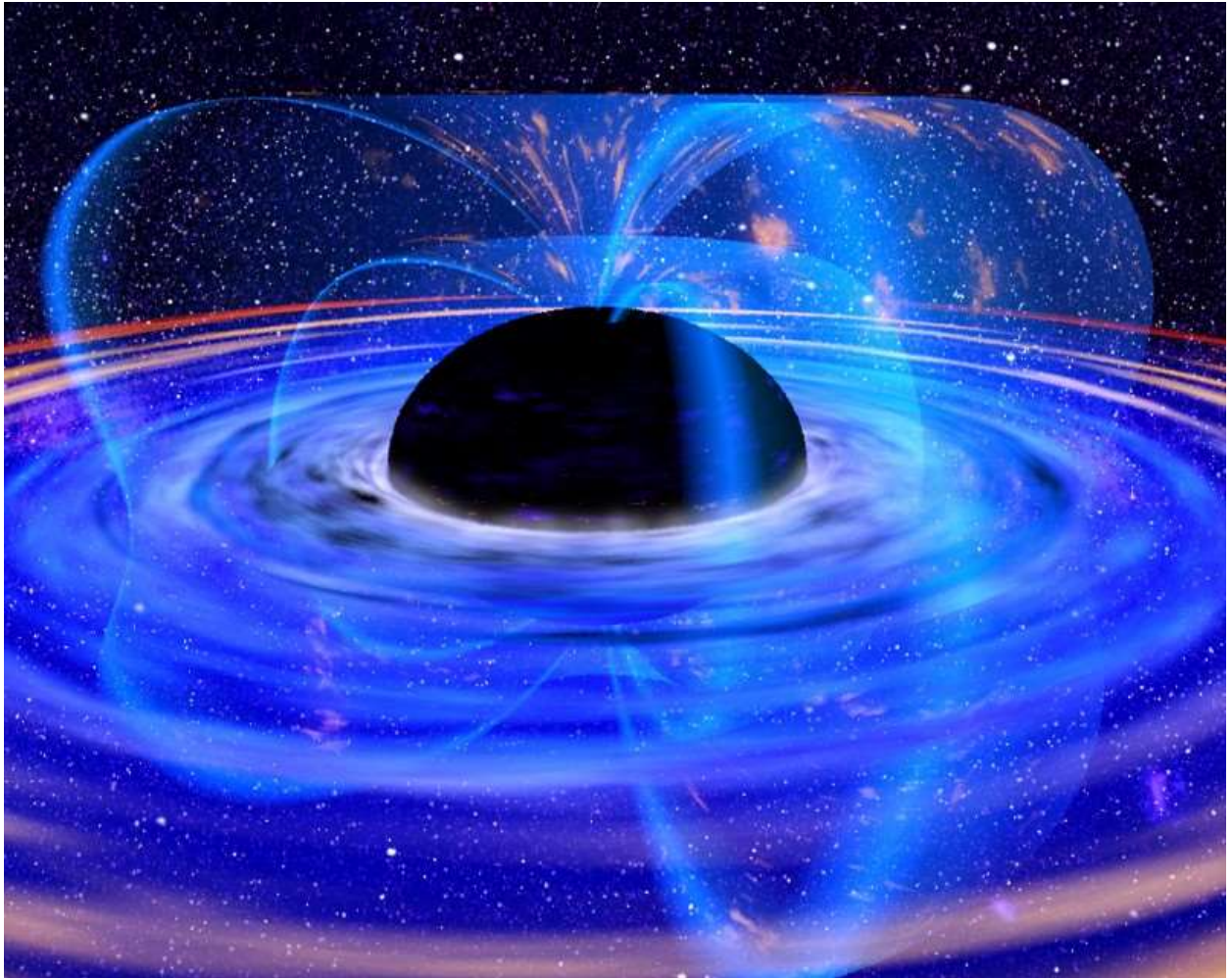


Image credit: XMM-Newton, ESA, NASA.

The situation changed dramatically in the late 1990s, when Maldacena proposed that certain gravitational theories are equivalent to gauge theories. Discovered in string theory, this famed "gauge-gravity correspondence," though still mathematically unproven, does away with the black hole information problem because whatever happens when a black hole evaporates is equivalently described in the gauge theory. And the gauge theory is known to not be capable of murdering information, thereby implying that the problem doesn't exist.

While the gauge-gravity correspondence convinced many physicists, including Stephen Hawking himself, that black holes do not destroy information, it did not shed much light on just exactly how the information escapes the black hole. Research continued, but complacency spread through the ranks of theoretical physicists. String theory, it seemed, had resolved the paradox, and it was only a matter of time until details would be understood.

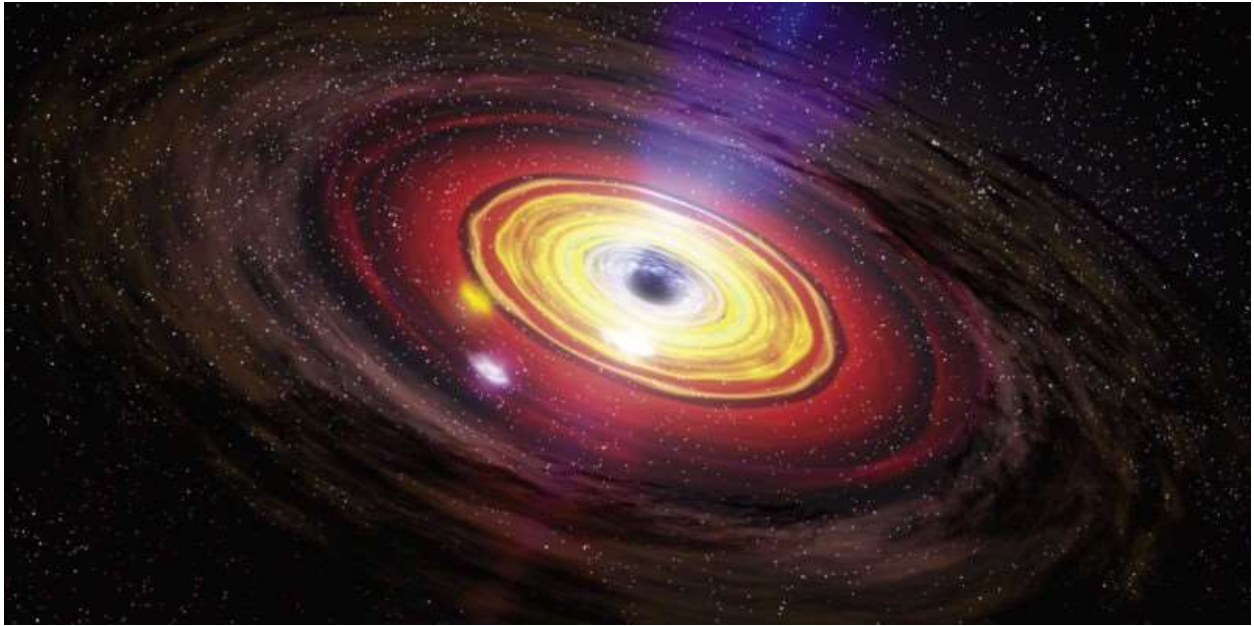


Image credit: NASA / Dana Berry / Skyworks Digital.

But that wasn't how things panned out. [Instead, in 2012, a group of four physicist, Almheiri, Marolf, Polchinski, and Sully \(AMPS\) demonstrated that what was thought to be a solution was actually itself inconsistent](#) . They showed that four assumptions, all generally believed by most string theorists to be correct, cannot in fact be simultaneously true. These four assumptions are that:

- 1.) Black holes don't destroy information.
- 2.) The Standard Model of particle physics and General Relativity remain valid close by the black hole horizon.
- 3.) The amount of information stored inside a black hole is proportional to its surface area.
- 4.) An observer crossing the black hole horizon will not notice it.

The second assumption rephrases the statement that Hawking radiation is not a quantum gravitational effect. The third assumption is a conclusion drawn from calculations of the black hole microstates in string theory. The fourth assumption is Einstein's equivalence principle. In a nutshell, AMPS say that at least one of these assumptions must be wrong. One of the witnesses is lying, but which?

In their paper, AMPS suggested, maybe not quite seriously, giving up on the least contested of these assumptions: the fourth one. Giving up on 4.), the other three assumptions then imply that an observer falling into the black hole would encounter a "firewall" and be burnt to ashes. The equivalence principle however is the central tenet of general relativity and giving it up really is the last resort.

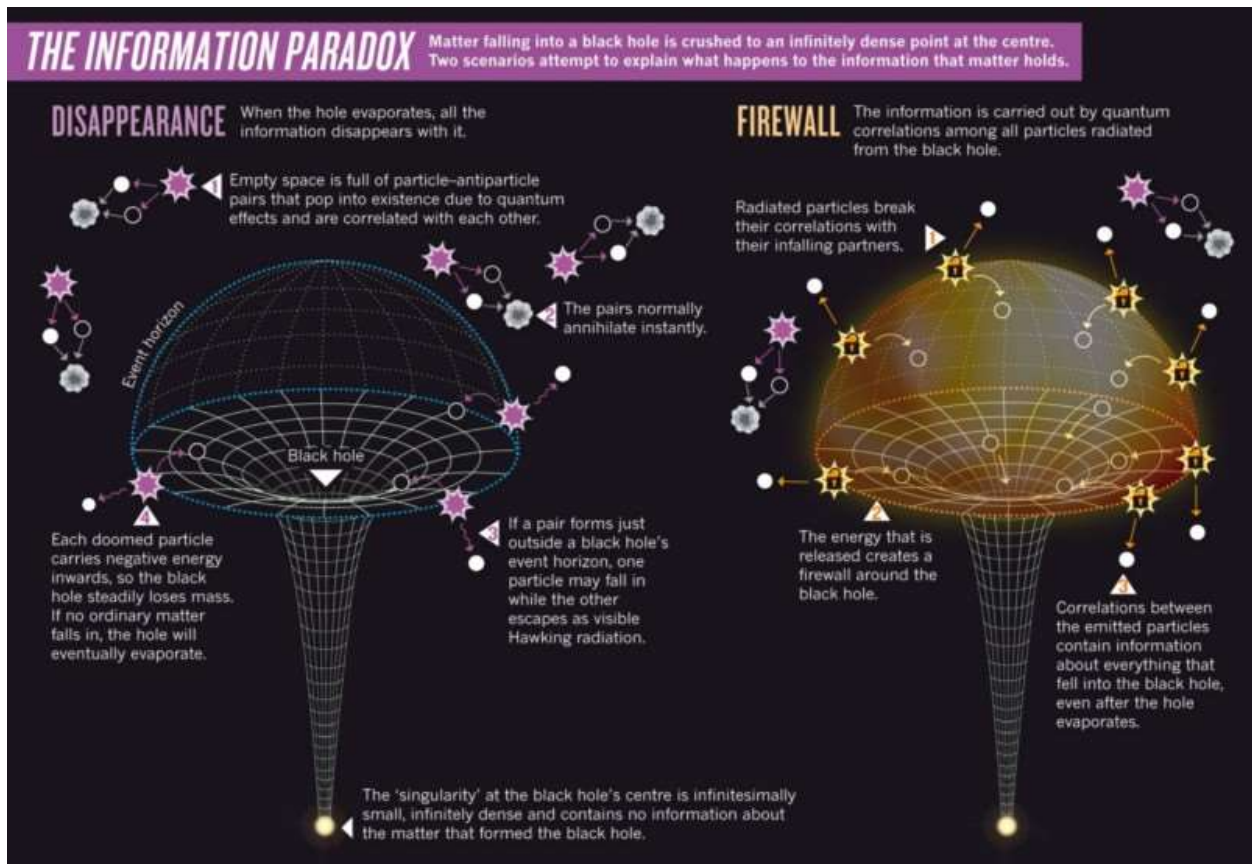


Image credit: Nature, via <http://www.nature.com/news/astrophysics-fire-in-the-hole-1.12726>.

For the uninitiated observer, the lying witness seems obviously 3). In contrast to the other assumptions, which are consequences of theories we already know and have tested to high precision, number 3 comes from a so-far untested theory. So if one assumption has to be dropped, then maybe it is the assumption that string theory is right about the information content of black holes. Needless to say, that option isn't very popular with string theorists.

And so within a matter of months the hep-th category of the arxiv was cluttered with attempts to reconcile the disagreeable assumptions with one another. Proposed solutions included everything from just accepting the black hole firewall, to the multiverse, to elaborated thought-experiments meant to demonstrate that an observer wouldn't actually notice being burnt. Yes, that's modern physics for you.

I too of course have [an egg in the basket](#). I found the witnesses were all convincing, and none of them seemed to be lying. Taking them at face value it finally occurred to me that what made the assumptions seemingly incompatible was an unstated fifth assumption that was used in the proof. Like seemingly incompatible testimonies might suddenly all make sense once you realize the victim wasn't killed at the same place the body was found, the four assumptions suddenly all make sense when you do not require the information to be saved in a particular way (that the final state is "typical" state). Instead, the requirement that energy must be locally conserved near the horizon makes the firewall impossible, and at the same time also reveals exactly how the black hole evaporation remains compatible with quantum theory.





Image credit: Cosmos: A space-time odyssey; © 1996-2015 National Geographic Channel.

I think nobody really liked my paper. That might be because it has an admittedly rather incomprehensible figure. Or maybe it's because the conclusion is that somewhere near the horizon there must be a boundary which alters quantum theory, yet does so in a way that isn't noticeable for any observer nearby the black hole. It is possible to measure the boundary's effects, but only in the far distance.

While my proposal did resolve the firewall conundrum, it didn't do anything about the black hole information loss problem. I mentioned in a side-note that in principle one could use this boundary to hand information into the outgoing radiation, but that would still not explain how the information would get into the boundary to begin with.

After publishing this paper, I vowed once again to never think about black hole evaporation again. But then last week, [an arxiv preprint appeared by 't Hooft](#). One of the first to dabble in black hole thermodynamics, in his new paper 't Hooft proposes that the black hole horizon acts like a boundary that reflects information, [a "brick wall" as New Scientist wants it](#) . This new idea has been inspired by Stephen Hawking's recent suggestion that much of the information falling into black holes continues to be stored on the horizon. If that is so, then giving the horizon a chance to act can allow the information to leave again.

Needless to say, I don't think that bricks are much of an improvement over fire, and I'm pretty sure that this idea won't hold up. But after all the confusion, it might eventually allow us to better understand just exactly how the horizon interacts with the Hawking radiation and how it might manage to encode information in it.

Fast forward a thousand years. At the end of the road there is a theory of quantum gravity that will allow us to understand the behavior of space and time on shortest distances and, so many hope, the origin of quantum theory itself, possible even that of matter too. Progress might seem incremental, and sometimes history leads us in circles, but what keeps physicists going is the knowledge that there must be a solution and that the murderer of information will eventually be identified. There's no cheating by checking the last page of the book - it has yet to be written.



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Originally published at Medium.com: [Black holes and academic walls](#) (September 2016)



## Artist Spotlight: Jessica TC Lee

**J**essica TC Lee is a concept artist and illustrator, born and raised in Taiwan. She later came to San Francisco to obtain her MFA degree in illustration. She is a winner of both national and international awards, and plays a critical role on her project team. She also gives back to her art community by writing tutorials for 3DTotal. She is constantly seeking inspiration in life, and motivated to put out more engaging art works.

### Q&A

**Iulian: Tell us a little bit about yourself: where did you grow up and how did your early life influence your future as an artist?**

Jessica: I grew up in Taipei, Taiwan. Immersed in such big a city as Taipei, I was constantly inspired by all the modern architecture and cityscape. My father is a civil engineer, and when I was a little girl, he often took me to his office. I had such a rare chance, which people usually don't have, to observe the view of construction sites and all the cool machines in close look and without being blocked outside of fences. My love toward mechanical and environment design and illustration sprouted back then, and has since constantly influenced my passion toward the subjects of my art.

As a kid, I used to play with my cousins a special game in which we all took a paper and started to draw out our "army". We would constantly chat with each other what kind of soldiers and vehicles we were putting out. The design was usually very science fiction with a lot of laser power involved. If we were fighting against each other, we would need to constantly draw and erase our army. Now looking back at that, it was really amazing how limitless imagination could be, and how design and play could merge together. This game had a great influence on me becoming a science fiction and fantasy artist now for sure.

When I was in middle school, I also started getting into writing and inventing my own stories. I would design all the characters myself.

In addition to life experience, I am very into many science fiction and fantasy themed things; games, novels and movies play a huge role in shaping me becoming an artist.

**What are your favorite design tools and how did you get to learn them?**

My favorite technical tools include pen and paper, Photoshop, Maya, and SketchUp. I used to use Illustrator and Flash too.

I learnt Photoshop, Illustrator and Flash back in college, but it was not until I finished my MFA program in the Academy of Art that I could really say I knew how to use pen and paper. After I started working professionally, I had the great opportunity of learning Maya and SketchUp as assisting tools for my designs. It greatly helped speed up the entire production pipeline.

In addition to adding to the team work flow, 3D programs also help me with my personal projects too. Some tricky scenes with difficult perspective can easily be figured out with 3D programs.

**Are there any other artists out there that you admire and whose work has helped shape your work?**

Although I no longer follow the styles of Feng Zhu and Scott Robertson, these two artists' tutorials and books greatly shape my design logic and thinking process. Illustrators and concept artists who I admire and influenced my work in different styles include Ruan Jia, Kekai Kotaki, Dylan Cole, John Wallin Liberato, Fausto De Martini, Emmanuel Shiu, Karla Ortiz, Dice Tsutsumi; just to name a few.

**Where do you find inspiration?**

As briefly mentioned in the first question, I have been constantly inspired by daily life objects and as well as novels, movies, and games. It was such an impact to my art each time I saw or read about a design that I wouldn't think of by myself normally. Imagination can get much wilder and more interesting with external impact.

However, I will say that life is the biggest inspiration. Sometimes when I was doing something, and my mind would wonder if there were such a machine, this thing could be done much more efficiently. I love astronomy too, and I love to imagine what and how it would look and be like if we had colony or residence in space or on other planets. What equipment and technology we would need and how they would look like, thoughts like that really excite me.

Same situation with fantasy designs too. Although there is magic involved, I still like to reference cultural facts and think about how the people would dress, and what their equipment would be like, since I don't like magic that can pop a chair from nothing.

How to make the viewers believe the world is usually the drive and inspiration behind my work.

**How would you break down your work flow in steps?**

I always start with researching. I look into the objects that I will need to design first. I find the closest things in reality and study the references. After I have a good idea about how the objects will look, I start doing thumbnails. Thumbnails are essential for both good designs and illustrations. They help me figure out the big shapes, which will determine almost 80% of how the final designs or illustrations will look. At this stage, if it's for concept design, I try to figure out the most interesting silhouette while making the design functional. If it's for an illustration, I try to figure out the best lighting, value, and story-telling composition. After I come up with a good silhouette/thumbnaill for the design or illustration, I will finally start adding smaller decoration to the designs or illustration and bring them to completion.

**Your work is very science-fiction driven. What drives you to that subject?**

Partially it was attributed to my childhood as I mentioned in the first question. However, the main reason was because I am really excited by the idea how technology can mold our daily life, and where it can bring us to. All the fascinating machine parts we send to other planets not only look extremely cool, but also are preparing for our space odyssey. The ideas of space mining, moon colonies, extraterrestrial beings, outside of our solar system are like a wonderland for me to explore.

**If there was one piece of advice you could give other beginning artists, what would that be?**

Don't be shy. I was very shy when I was a newbie, and didn't network as much as I could. Although artists do need a lot of private/alone time to grow and polish our skills, peers and the business side of our career are essential for us to really make a successful living as artists. We have to understand the importance of keeping good contact with our clients, audience, and artist friends, and also explore and expand them when we have the ability to. By saying that, I mean when times like our skills reach the next level, and when our work is recognized by new people, and when there are any related conventions we can go to. We need to be proactive about the business side of our career.

And the second piece of advice is always be nice. The industry is a very small world.

**We selected one of your pieces for the cover of our magazine. Tell us a few words about how that piece came to be.**

"The Critical Moment" was a commission. I first received the script of the short story by Martin L. Shoemaker, and I read the story like two or three times. During reading, I marked down several scenes which I had good ideas of engaging and eye-catching compositions. When I was reading a script, there usually was a mini-movie going on in my head. Even though it might not be exactly clear, I could still have a good idea about how the scenes look like in a blurry-image way.

After reading, I started digging into the objects in the scenes as related to the closest things in reality, such as the interior of a space station, space suit, important equipment, etc. After I had a good grasp of the objects I would need to design, I sketched out several small thumbnails. They were around 2" by 3". After I found three thumbnails that had the greatest potential, I did three much more detailed sketches of them. It was when I dug into researching what details all the objects had. It was also when I decided what the lighting was like for each piece. Lighting is an extremely important element of a good composition.

After the final sketch was selected by the art director, I brought the sketch to the final completion. During coloring, I started to think about what kind of colors would bring out the tension the scene had. I discussed a little with the art director, and settled on a strong contrast between blue primary color and red secondary color. The final illustration was a

demonstration of all the work and love put into it. This piece was definitely a huge breakthrough for me.

**Where can we find you on the web?**

I am very active on my facebook profile, under Jessica TC Lee; I often post news and updates there. My portfolio website is also a good place to visit and shoot me an email. I maintain a blog in my portfolio website about my latest exhibitions, awards, projects, etc. I can also be found on Twitter too. My Artstation keeps all my best works. I also have portfolio on CGCookie. It is a very nice place for artists, especially beginners, to get involved in art community and have well-organized resources. InfectedByArt is a great place to see my work too. It is a great promotional platform, and cooperates with many famous conventions and contests. Digital Artlords is a fast surging platform and has helped gain me much new audience already. It also works with well-known art groups. Many other internationally acclaimed artists have portfolios there too.

Portfolio: <http://www.jessicatcl.com/>

ArtStation: <https://www.artstation.com/artist/j03150315>

Twitter: <https://twitter.com/JessicaTCLee>

CGCookie: <https://cgcookie.com/u/jessicalee/#gallery>

InfectedByArt: [http://www.infectedbyart.com/Jessica\\_Tung\\_Chi\\_Lee](http://www.infectedbyart.com/Jessica_Tung_Chi_Lee)

Digital Artlords: <https://artlords.com/u/j03150315>



# Book Review: Half a War (Joe Abercrombie)

Jeremy Szal

## Half a War

by Joe Abercrombie

Del Rey (July 28, 2015)

Abercrombie is a rare beast of a writer. Having penned half a dozen massive, rather unapologetically adult fantasy novels, his latest endeavour has swerved across to the young-adult genre, aiming for a much tighter, less jagged, and more accessible experience. He essentially performed a complete pivot, swivelling around to the total opposite of what made him famous. And he's done it with that supreme style we've come to expect from his work.

The last two books in the *Shattered Seas* trilogy have been excellent; *Half the World* (2015) in particular being quite possibly my favorite young-adult book of all time. While *Half a War* (2015) is still excellent, it doesn't *quite* match up to the lofty work of its predecessors. It differs quite vastly from the previous two novels, since they've been building up the momentum, stacking the stakes higher and higher until this point. Now it's all-out war with no holds barred and no limits. Catching up on where the last novel abandoned us, the Shattered Seas are in a state of war, Grandmother Wexen seeking to burn all the traitors to ashes and raising a large enough army to do it. And spearheading this campaign is Bright Yilling, a man worshipping only Death.

Here we have a whole, fresh cast of point-of-view characters. The princess Skara, the soon-to-be minister Koll, and the harsh warrior Raith. The first novel had Yarvi as the only point-of-view, and the second one hopped between Brand and Thorn. While all of these characters show up in future installments, we never see through their perspectives again. I'd grown attached to Brand and Thorn throughout *Half the World*, so severing my strings from them was a disappointment, albeit a necessary one. Abercrombie didn't have much time to sculpt these characters to a fine hone, but he does it well in the limited space he has. The characters, most notably Princess Skara—having lost her home and family to the ferocious warrior Bright Yilling and Raith, who is assigned to protect her, grow and adapt to the conditions throughout the course of the novel.

Seeing as this is the ultimate endgame, a good slice of the novel involves battle sequences, or at least raids and storm operations. And much to no one's surprise, they are nothing short of phenomenal. The action scenes are fluid and rip-roaring, sharpened to a cutting-edge. It's easy to get caught up in a repetition with fight scenes, and although the phrase "they were

close enough to kiss” popped up more than twice, every battle scene is a new experience, teetering on the edge of a knife point.

A diverse range of weapons are employed here, and Abercrombie always uses the terrain to his advantage, be it in a bucketing storm or on the edge of the crumbling battlements, chopping away at those who inch their way upward in the midst of a tempest. Motion is always in play, and your heart’s racing away alongside the characters without fail, with every swoop, slash, and tumble.

There’s no overwrought, pseudo-complicated language to bog down the pace—just the raw heat of the battle. If there’s one thing Abercrombie knows how to do, it’s ratchet up the tension to eleven and beyond. The momentum is constantly at breaking point, and the numerous brutal fight scenes never become boring or blunted. Metal clashes and splinters fly, arms are sheared off and taut flatbows groan, and a hail of arrows fills the air to bolt out the sun.

Abercrombie has absolutely blown his competitors out of the water here—you won’t find better actions sequences anywhere else, not by a mile. Whatever Abercrombie touches turns to action-packed gold, and if there’s one thing you can guarantee from his work, it’ll be unparalleled action sequences and blood-pumping battles.

Of course, it’s not all pointy swords and roaring curses. There are also numerous scenes where diplomacy and political machinations come into play, as Princess Skara learns to adapt to the court and grow accustomed to sitting on the throne. The dialogue is sharp and crisp, filled with double entendre and thinly-veiled threats. Occasionally it does come across as slightly flowery, but never unrealistically so. These conversations are packed with tension and have impact both on characters and the plot.

As with the last two books in the series, space is somewhat limited. Gone is the sprawling quarter of a million word epic that Abercrombie is accustomed to churning out, otherwise known as the BFF (big fat fantasy), jostling the smaller books out of the way and dominating the shelves. *Half a War* sits smugly at 130,000 or so, and it shows.

So while the significance of these aforementioned political scenarios is indisputable, they do take up a rather large part of the novel, and considering Abercrombie’s limited playing field, their presence isn’t always as welcome as it should be. Not that they must be replaced with action sequences, but I found myself itching to get out and explore the world and the castle grounds, not cooped up in a single room.

In general the novel is much more concentrated this time, grounded to a smattering of key areas, where the previous installments, particularly the aptly named *Half the World* saw us travelling (would you have guessed it?) across half of the known world and back. It was a much more traditional, yet reinvigorated adventure, putting on a fresh spin without reinventing the wheel. And although we visit entirely new locations, a large part of the world is still shrouded in mystery. I’d never want to read a book where every nook and cranny of

the universe is explored and fleshed out, but I did wish to venture out a little more into the unknown and see the sights.

Speaking of which, attention must be given to the rather nuanced and minimalist world-building that Abercrombie employs. Theories have been floating around since *Half the World*'s release about the world of the Shattered Seas and the origin of the elves, and it comes as a surprise to discover that our kingdom actually takes place in a post-apocalyptic world, and these elves were in fact humans. It's never explicitly stated and the exact details are only ever hinted at, but this slow drip of a genre-bending reveal builds up to have a colossal impact on the kinetic ending. It's also invigorating to see Abercrombie work outside of straight-forward secondary world fantasy and add a dash of science-fiction to his repertoire. In addition, this feat is performed with nuance and subtlety with lots of questions still remaining unanswered.

The series maintains a strong sense of moral ambiguity, even more so than the previous two books, and while Abercrombie always manages to portray the multi-faceted dimensions of war, conflict, morality and people, he never stoops down to being didactic or judgemental in doing so. He just displays the raw conflict—both within the human heart and on the battlefield—in an open and honest way. A lesser writer would avoid this level of complexity, or even worse, fall into the trap of talking down to their readers and forcing a certain standpoint. Abercrombie avoids these pitfalls with grace, leaving the readers to mull over the events and their impact at their own space.

Bringing the trilogy to a close, Abercrombie has painted a rich, detailed kingdom packed full of compelling characters inhabiting a morally-ambiguous world and struggling to navigate the dangerous waters of both the seas and the battlefield. Sometimes they don't always make it, and sometimes they don't escape unscathed. The slightly less compelling cast of characters and extra time spent discussing politics causes the final installment to miss the mark by a hair. *Half the World* set the bar so high that topping it would have been a tremendous feat, and it *just* manages to not pass that mark.

Nevertheless, *Half a War* is a rip-roaring, jaw-dropping rollercoaster of a novel, brimming with heart-thumping action, witty dialogue and a climax that flips the genre on its head. Abercrombie is a priceless asset for both young adult and adult fantasy, bridging the gap between the two genres and managing to look damn good while he does it. The Shattered Seas, and *Half a War*, is utterly unmissable. Pick up your bearded blade and raise your shield and get ready for an adventure you won't soon forget. That is, if you manage to live through it.



# Book Review: Updraft (Fran Wilde)

Julie Novakova

## Updraft

by Fran Wilde

Tor Books (September 1, 2015)

The subgenre of young adult speculative fiction is on the rise, and one of its new interesting elements is Fran Wilde's debut novel *Updraft*. Wilde presents an original secondary world of a city of rising bone towers, connected, less commonly, by bridges, and more frequently by fliers. Those who do not possess their wingmarks, allowing them to travel unaccompanied between towers, might just as well not exist. The “unlucky” have no place in the towers' life.

Kirit of the tower Densira knows this all too well and yearns to earn her marks in the upcoming tests to become her mother's apprentice. Becoming a trader as well would mean a life of interesting bargains, adventure, connecting the people and helping the city in times of dire need. However, when Kirit ignores the law and stays outside to watch her mother's departure to another mission, even though dangerous predator skymouths may be nearby, her life takes a sideways turn.

A skymouth attacks, and though Kirit manages to drive it away with her screams, she has broken the law and must be punished. Along with her, the entire household—her mother, best friend Nat, and his mother—would also receive their punishments and the law chips weighing them down. Kirit and Nat may miss the wingtests, and as if it weren't enough, the Singers—the city's highest authority and somewhat mysterious and feared figures, residing in the impenetrable Spire—have taken an interest in Kirit. Her dream of a trader's life seems to crumble down.

Although the exposition felt a little slow, the novel soon gained a great tempo, and after Kirit's wingtests and events following them, it was impossible to just set the novel aside for a moment. Wilde can write compelling characters deeply rooted in their world and set them on a path full of discovery, new friendships, and alliances but also treason, dilemmas, and disappointment as well. Kirit is a believable and quite sympathetic protagonist. We can understand why she breaks rules when she does, and wish her success. She is brave and competent, but not without fear or doubt. Especially her longtime friend Nat is very well depicted too, in his stubborn quest after the truth about the Spire.

In a sequel, I would love to see how Kirit and her sympathizers deal with those who had supported the main antagonist. Another feature I liked a lot about the novel was exactly the antagonist, whose reasons for doing what we can see as “evil” were quite pragmatic and aimed at the perceived good of the city, not purely selfish motives. The saying that the road



to hell is paved with good intentions is not far from this case, and we also cannot be sure whether Kirit's own actions don't plunge the city into a much worse state, even though we would support her decisions and probably act the same way in her place.

Reading Updraft, a series of questions started forming in my mind and intriguing me. How do the skymouths stay buoyant, and could it be mimicked by the people? What lies at the feet of the towers? Does anyone know? Has anyone ventured down there, if the winds enable it at all? Or does it become so deadly during the descent that the surface is inaccessible? How do the towerfolk acquire the substrate for plants to grow on? Though the worldbuilding was great throughout the whole novel, especially regarding the city's society and history, these questions were not answered, not even hinted. Yet they did not tie directly to the main plot and perhaps would slow it down instead of enriching it. However, I would love to see them addressed in a sequel. These mysteries would constitute a great fuel for a new story and the world of Updraft would certainly deserve more visits. Luckily for us, the second book titled Cloudbound is on its way to be published and Fran Wilde is working on the third part of the series, currently called Horizon. I'm looking forward to when she invites us into the future installments of this story.



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# Movie Review: Pay The Ghost (Uli Edel)

Mark Leeper

**APSULE:** One Halloween evening literature professor Mike Lawford loses his son at a Halloween carnival. The boy never shows up. For a year Mike looks for his son and tries to find the meaning of the boy's last words, "Pay the ghost." After a year of searching without a clue, horrifying images appear to Mike and his wife, but also patterns start to form in the evidence, just prior to the next Halloween. Mike is afraid that if he does not solve the mystery soon he will never see his son again. Uli Edel directs a screenplay by Dan Kay based on a story by Tim Lebbon. Rating: high +1 (-4 to +4) or 6/10

The film opens in New York of 1679 for a brief look at some terrified children. We see too little to know what is going on.

Next we flash forward, and it is last Halloween. Mike Lawford (played by Nicolas Cage) is having a great holiday. He is thrilled that he has just gotten academic tenure, he is teaching horror stories to his class at college, and he is going to take his son Charlie to see the parade of costumes at a carnival a block or so from their New York City home. Mike has a hard time holding on to Charlie. Then Charlie cryptically tells his father to "pay the ghost" and disappears into the crowd not to be seen again. With rising fear, Mike searches for his son but the boy has just vanished.

Now it is a year later. Mike is obsessed with finding Charlie. He is having what may be hallucinations. He starts seeing graffiti on walls and in tunnels, which says, "Pay the ghost." Is his son the victim of kidnappers or has he fallen prey to something evil and supernatural? Is it something that has its roots centuries in the past? For the first half of the film the pacing is a little slow, but it picks up in the second half. Still there is something lacking here to make the climactic scenes pack a sufficient scare. A final showdown--I will not say with what--is a little bland by today's standards.

Nicolas Cage can play an interesting range of emotions but fear just does not seem to be one. Placed in a terrifying position his ability to emote seems to shut down. And it is just where the viewer could use a little fear to be drawn into the film. We need to feel his danger, but even at the climax he has not won the viewer over to fear his peril. Perhaps he was the wrong actor for this role.

Once the premise is established there is not enough original idea here to sustain a feature film. The film may work for some if they are caught in the right mood and have not seen the films that it borrows from, but in general there is not enough here to excite enough real horror. I rate PAY THE GHOST a high +1 on the -4 to +4 scale or 6/10. The film opens September 25.



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Film Credits: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt3733778/combined>

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