

THE

Scroll.

MAGAZINE



SHORT

STORY

SPECIAL



ISSUE 9



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INTRODUCTION

WHAT IS SCROLL?

Scroll Magazine is an online and print magazine.

The magazine aims to repetitive a variety of small local artists in the Hull area. Scroll is a platform that intends on helping smaller artists gain exposure and promote their own artwork. From writers, to photographers, to artists, the magazine is a collection of works from a large group of influences and backgrounds.

WHO?

Procured by a small group of 16-29 year olds with a passion for art, the magazine was founded on an ideal to incentivise creativity in Hull as well as showcasing what it has to offer. The city has a bubbling, artistic and cultural scene, and The Scroll is potential that lies beneath. With every issue included will be a feature artist who will have their work showcased on the cover of the magazine, as well as a short interview. We hope this will give artists further exposure.

WHY?

Scroll Magazine hopes to act as a platform for smaller artists to get their work published and to potentially form collaborations. As well as showcasing local artists, we also aim to support small, local businesses in Hull, by offering various advertising spaces in the print publication.

HOW OFTEN?

The Scroll Magazine will be published every two months for the moment, with possibilities in the future to become a monthly curated magazine of art.

To apply for future issues, email us your work at:

scrollhull@gmail.com

www.thescrollmag.co.uk

  | @TheScrollMagazineHull

WHAT IS YOUTH ARTS TAKEOVER

As one of the Youth Arts Takeover series of arts events in Hull, the Scroll is co-designed with a group of young creatives between the ages of 16-29, who influence the contents featured and overall look of the magazine. The Youth Arts Takeover is part of Goodwin's Development Trust family of projects and is funded by the Arts Council England. The project encourages young people to take initiative and contribute while gaining full control of their learning experience.

If you're wanting to get involved in Youth Arts Takeover please contact Andrew Harper

AHarper@goodwintrust.org

www.arttakeover.co.uk

 | @YouthArtsTakeover

**YOUTH
ARTS
TAKEOVER**



Supported using public funding by
**ARTS COUNCIL
ENGLAND**



EDITORIAL

Writing!

Welcome to the Scroll Issue 9 - our Short Story Special! In this issue - after a bit of a hiatus (yeah, sorry about that!) - we're all about writing, and it's one heck of a topic to be following, especially in the city of Hull!

Whether it's horror-romance, fun fantasy, or a sci-fi space battle (thanks Jed), we love writing and we love the work that's been submitted to the Scroll for this issue! There's a real variety and creativity to what's been submitted to us, which is what we love to see!

We've reached out this month to all sorts of people involved in writing in the city of Hull - be it the Goodwin Trust's own Jed T. E. Rhodes and his adventures in self-publishing, the amazing Julie Ellam of J.E. Books (check them out in the Hepworth Arcade!) or the incredible Freya Evans of PoolFrog Publishers! And the best part is, we know for a fact that this is only the tip of the writing iceberg in Hull, and that there's so many more writers (published and unpublished!) waiting out there for their time in the spotlight. We also know that you all deserve that time, so don't expect this to be our last Short Story Special. The words will return!

(And maybe this time we'll be able to keep Jed out of it.)

Cheers,

The Scroll Team

Want to be a part of

THE
Scroll. ?
MAGAZINE

We're always looking for creative content, be it:

- **Photography**
- **Writing**
- **Paintings or other art!**
- **Articles on any topic!**
- **Interviews!**

And even more besides!

**If you have something you want to share with us,
get in contact, and it might end up in
the next issue!!**

scrollhull@gmail.com

  | @TheScrollMagazineHull

THE LAY OF JORDIS OF DEIMOS

*For the long and bloody war of Heaven,
At last had come to the fields of Vana.
And the land of Deimos did burn and crack,
Splintering under the weight of Gods' feet.
And the Dæmons did emerge, and their wrath,
Was a storm, tearing the land asunder.
The mighty kings of Deimos, strong and true,
Fought bravely to hold back the foul Dæmons,
But though many held to the Great Virtues,
They fell, for what is a simple Mortal,
Even a truly Virtuous Mortal,
When compared to the will of Fallen Gods?*

*And thus did the children of Deimos cry,
Their screams echoed into the endless void,
As the fire burned around them, their cities,
Laid to ruin by the uncaring Gods.
Hope left them then, and they waited for Death,
Expecting His cold hand upon their backs.
Yet, a cry came back from that empty place,
"Hold fast! For deliverance is at hand!"*

*And thus, carried upon bright silver wings,
Did Jordis, shieldmaiden, Exemplar True,
Come down upon her blessed chariot,
And, upon it, bore Deimos' sons,
to the land of Avalon, the pinnacle,
From which all of the known world could be seen.*

*And to them she granted the honour,
And yet also the terrible burden,
Of becoming guardians of Vana,
Protectors of the peoples of the world:
Their place would be to defend all others.
For they were the heirs of the last shieldmaid,
The inheritors of Blood Exemplar,
The last example to a world gone mad.*

From The Lay of Jordis of Deimos.



BY JED T. E. RHODES

THE SAND WHALE

He lives in the desert and has done for as long as he's been alone. Every day he leaves for answers, and everyday returns with none. The wanderer does not know where he came from, who he will turn out to be, and who he is in the present. All he knows is that he lives in the desert and has done for as long as he's been alone.

Which feels like an eternity.

The sandy planes he now calls home are extraordinarily familiar. Not the comforting kind of familiar, but the sickening kind of familiar. From sunrise to sunset, not grain of sand will move; there hasn't been any wind in months.

Unfortunately, the wanderer has forgotten the length of a month, so he's not certain how long the lands have been without weather. But it also feels like an eternity.

Today he is in search of food. Dawning his wooden mask, and closing the door of his driftwood hut behind him, the wanderer attaches a feeble pouch to the side of his long robes. It's clearly rotting, and appears to have been patched up thousands of times. A shard of glass resides inside; it's kept safe. He likes to use it for protection, or hunting, whenever possible. Which is never, because he's alone. He is alone and has been for as long as he's lived in the desert.

The wanderer sets off north-west. Or what he believes to be north-west. His pace is steady, although the evening sun is grueling. Ascending doesn't help either, but there appears to be something glistening atop this dune.

A trifling puddle. An imperative puddle. A puddle to secure his health and his life. It's accompanied by a vein of wild berries shooting up from the sand. How did a puddle as delightful as this end up here? It's almost too perfect. However, the fluky vagabond always taught himself to never look a gift horse in the mouth, so he bottles the water and stoops to collect the vegetation, quelling his mind.

Under closer inspection, just behind the foliage, an object peeks out of the sand.

Has someone been here?

No. That's ridiculous.

It's cylindrical, bright olive; with small holes carved into it. They're overflowing with sand, but it should clean up easily. Placing it into his pouch, the wanderer, decides to head home. He can feel the bitter night creep on and up his back, sending his skin into a fit of shivers.

While travelling back, the wanderer thought he noticed a spot of sand moving in the distance, but quickly blamed it on an active imagination.

After a long escapade, the sleepy vagabond is overjoyed to see his hut again. He turns towards the horizon, and inhales. The auburn sunset echoes the smudged hue of sand, now darkening every second. Pinks and oranges swirl together in the dusks' sky, like a chalk painting. There hasn't been a sunset like this in a while. The wanderer enters his little home, faintly smiling at how nice it is to see something new.

Dumping his bag on the table (which is just a large rock), he reflects on the success of the day. Usually the berries are completely dried out, but these look fresh. It's somewhat odd. Less odd, but nonetheless strange, is the jade shaded cylinder. Removing it from the pouch with great care, he examines the devise. Blowing the sand away, he ponders its possible purpose. Could it be an eating utensil? Maybe it's used for carving. Well whatever the function, it makes a lovely ornament.

Brushing the sand off himself, and off his leafy pillow, the tiresome traveler steps into bed. Closing his eyes like he's done countless times before. It's silent. It's ominous. *No*, he tells himself. *It's relaxing. It's nice being solitary. It's calm and nobody can hurt you out here.* Repeating these thoughts, the wanderer feels himself dipping into a state of unconsciousness.

Sleep now within arm's reach; he hears a knock at his door.



Sitting straight. Shaking severely. He can hear the sound of restless feet shuffling just out of view. Heart beating, this is what he's been waiting for. This is the reason he never gave up hope, everything he longs for a doorway away. So why now is he so anxious? Why now can he not find the strength to stand. Or breathe. Or think. What should he do?

Just open it.

Following his mind, the vagabond lifts himself out of the security of the bed sheets. Floundering like a tumbleweed, clinging to the door handle. *What if they're not friendly?* He scrambles for his glass shard, just in case. *This could be it.* He ruminates. *This could be the end of my life.*

"Or it could be the start of it."

A soft, yet stern voice echoes through the cracks in the driftwood. It's been so long since the wanderer has heard another voice, he falls over backwards from utter shock.

Did they just read his mind? Is that normal? These are the questions only the voice on the other side of the door can answer. So desperately wanting to turn the handle, the wanderer hesitates. He longs for excitement and aches for company. He wants to discover himself, yearning to feel alive again. And finally, he wants to open the door.

And so, he does.

The first thing he notices is the moon. It's bright and full, illuminating the sandy horizon; coercing the plains into a scenic shade of silver. The second thing he notices is the wind. Milky dunes have been whipped up by the midnight breeze, swirling in a tornado fashion. The final thing is her. Clad in confidence and radiating irritation. Platted olive hair flutters in the storm. A sense of familiarity washes over the wanderer. Her name, her story all resides on the tip of his tongue. But it's like his mouth is stitched shut, for he cannot even say hello.

She reaches out a hand, which has an abnormal symbol painted on it.

"I have come to retrieve my whistle" striding forward "The one you stole?"

The girl is half in, and half out the house at this point; the wanderer has never been more confused or afraid in his life. *Whistle?* What on earth is a whistle? He desires to ask more than anything, although after years of solitude it's not easy to speak on command.

"Don't act innocent." The girl scoffs, pushing past her baffled host. "It's right there on that rock! Are you eyeless or just an idiot?"

Flinching, the vagabond reminisces on the delicacy he bestowed upon the object, watching helplessly as the intruder grabs it with such disregard. She storms out again, as the blustering wind drops.

Raising the instrument to her lips, the stranger begins to play. Each note is mesmerizing; a soothing melody that even the moon looks satisfied by. As the tune's speed increases, the ground twitches. Quivering and quaking. The wanderer fears for his life, now gipping to the floor in attempt to prevent it from ripping apart under his feet. Remaining unfazed, the girl shoots him a look as if to say 'it's okay'.

In his books; however, it's everything but okay, as a mustard colored fin arises from the floor.

A fin, then a tail. An eye and a mouth. The sand rises below the pair until they sway proud and disorderly on a dune created by a large fish creature.

"A whale." The girl sighs, as her last note finishes its reverberation amongst the stars. "And a sand whale if you wanna be really precise. You should be thankful I didn't play my whistle inside your weird shack thing!"

The wanderer doesn't know what to do, or how to feel. He dusts away the sand coating the beasts back, revealing golden colored blubber beneath. Gazing towards his new companion, who is kneeling gently stroking the whale, the vagabond feels an odd sensation raising in his throat.



“C-can we,” stuttering immensely “Go somewhere?” he splutters “Other than d-desert.”

The vagabond's face turns scarlet beneath his mask “If t-there is such a place!” he stammers, regretting forgetting a please.

“Of course there's such a place.” The stranger glares “You ready to set off?”

“Yes!” he replies immediately.

“Alright then. To the sky, Saguaro!” the girl exclaims, patting the whale, and raising her whistle once again.

As a more energetic and lighthearted song fills the twilight air, the creature clicks and croaks. A low, but powerful rumble emerges from its belly. Flapping its fins raising its head, sand cascades from the whale's body as it surfaces from the gritty dunes. It begins to glide above the wasteland, swimming towards the moon.

“Are we flying?!” the wanderer cries, gawking at the ground far below.

“Obviously. You're gonna wanna hang on tight sandman.” the girl replies “It's a long way to the town.”

“Did you say t-town?” He swallows hard.

“You ask far too many questions, it's rather annoying.”

A town. With people. A town full of people and life. Bustling streets and creaking buildings- with fields of crops that stretch beyond what the naked eye can comprehend. Recollecting the smell of wheat and the whinnying of horses, the wanderer is hit with nostalgia. A family? A *childhood*.

Then he remembers.

He lives in the desert and has done ever since he ran away from home.

WRITTEN BY RACHEL HARDY



SPACE...

Joe Streames

'Space - the final frontier'

What a load of bollocks that was.

As we now all know there is so much much more beyond that veil.

The very fabric of our existence was ripped out from under us not two weeks ago, which very may well have been five minutes for you, depends how often you venture into our realm.

Our scientists, as im sure all scientists and philosophers and all normal folk in the shower do, wondered whether our reality was real. Were we brains in a jar, was everyone else a figment of my imagination, that sort of thing.

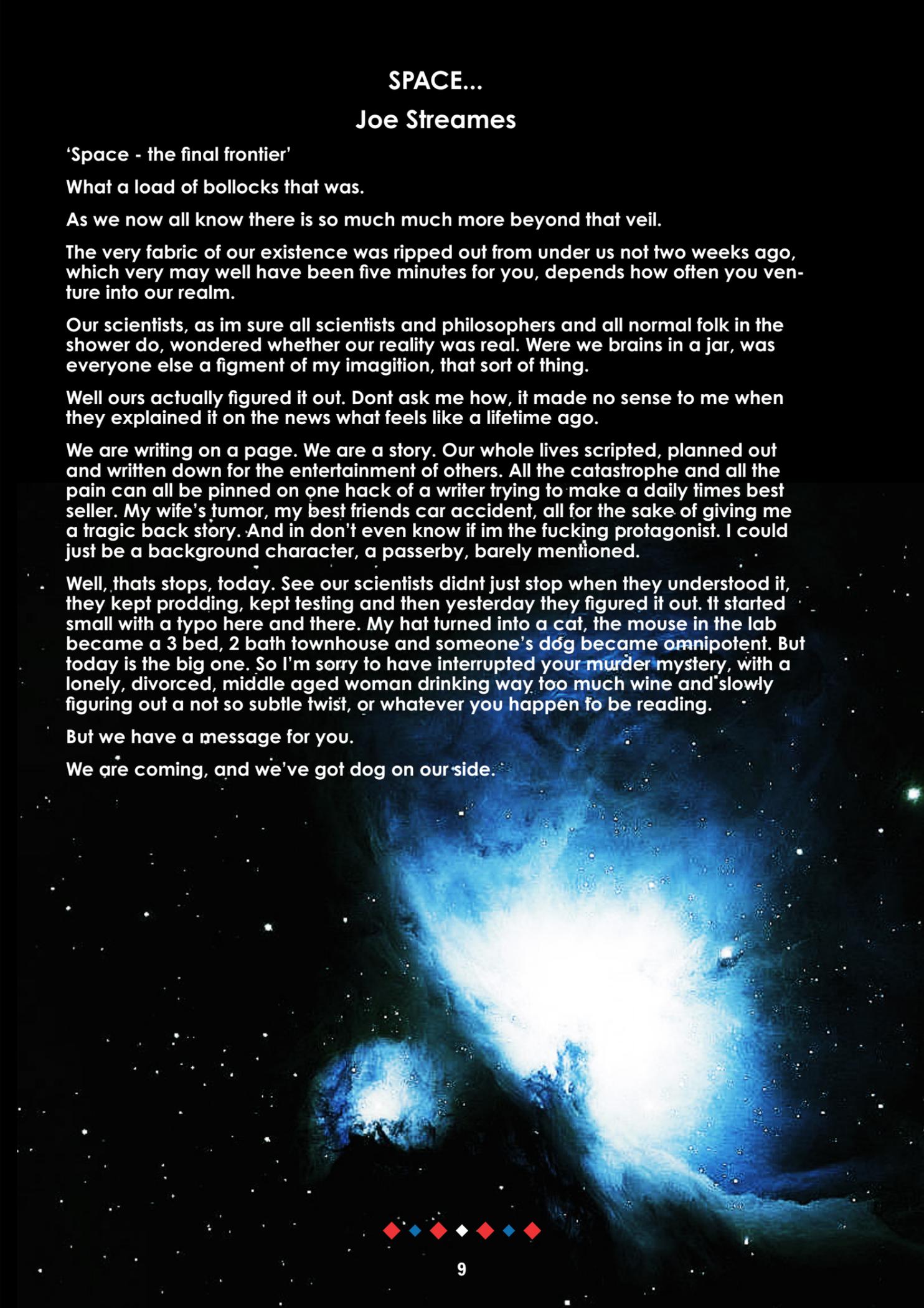
Well ours actually figured it out. Dont ask me how, it made no sense to me when they explained it on the news what feels like a lifetime ago.

We are writing on a page. We are a story. Our whole lives scripted, planned out and written down for the entertainment of others. All the catastrophe and all the pain can all be pinned on one hack of a writer trying to make a daily times best seller. My wife's tumor, my best friends car accident, all for the sake of giving me a tragic back story. And in don't even know if im the fucking protagonist. I could just be a background character, a passerby, barely mentioned.

Well, thats stops, today. See our scientists didnt just stop when they understood it, they kept prodding, kept testing and then yesterday they figured it out. It started small with a typo here and there. My hat turned into a cat, the mouse in the lab became a 3 bed, 2 bath townhouse and someone's dog became omnipotent. But today is the big one. So I'm sorry to have interrupted your murder mystery, with a lonely, divorced, middle aged woman drinking way too much wine and slowly figuring out a not so subtle twist, or whatever you happen fo be reading.

But we have a message for you.

We are coming, and we've got dog on our side.



FOLLOWING PHILIP

By Clint Wastling

The mobile rang insistently. Stephen looked at the number, for once it wasn't the letting agent but an elderly neighbour. He answered with a neutral, "Hello."

"Oh! Stephen, you know I wouldn't ask but George is so weak today I think it might be..."

"Have you rung the doctor?"

"I think he needs more help than that." Audrey's voice tightened with emotion and Stephen found himself staring at the ceiling.

"Would you be able to visit, Stephen?"

"I'm in the middle of packing up. You know I'm moving into Hull. It's a lot cheaper to rent there."

"Compared to Beverley, yes I'm sure that's right but George, this is going to sound melodramatic but I'm sure you can prolong his life."

Stephen was silent. He looked around the room at the chaos.

"It need only be a few minutes, perhaps a cup of tea? I think Philip would have helped, if he could..." Audrey gave a little sob over the phone.

Stephen felt the urge to punch his sainted predecessor and grimaced at the thought of Audrey's tea. He loved Ceylon and hated the tarry odour and taste of whatever brewed in her Victorian teapot. It was bitter.

"I really can only do a brief visit. I have to have the place spic and span by the time I leave tomorrow." He almost heard Audrey's sigh of relief.

"I'll let George know, he'll be so happy."

Stephen ended the call. He wrapped the last few items from the kitchen and sealed the box. In every respect he appeared to have filled the niche left by Philip. He'd only met the guy once before he disappeared. He was a thin, erudite young man with a Roman nose.

Everything was labelled and packed, all that remained... all... it sounded such a small word to encompass three months of accumulated dust and detritus of a bachelor's life. He looked round the cottage. It was a luxury too far and stretched his meagre salary too thin.

The mobile rang again. He looked at the number. Caroline. He reached out. "Hi."

"Stephen, can we meet tonight? I've found something out about Philip, something you had in common."

"Apart from finding the same girl beautiful?"

"Stephen..."

He could almost imagine her blushing. "I think I'll be finished cleaning by nine, is that ok?"

"Perfect, I'll tell you everything then."

"And I'll tell you how George is faring."

Caroline was silent then in a serious tone said, "What I want to tell you is about Audrey and George. Be careful."

"Careful? They've got to be about eighty."

"That's the point Stephen. That's the whole point, their ages."

"Sounds intriguing. I'll see you later." He blew a kiss down the phone.

It was three o'clock and June's long afternoon made him aware of his dry throat and need for clean air. He closed the windows and locked the door before deciding to walk down the lane to visit George.

He looked back at the cottage, framed by roses and hollyhocks. It seemed such a shame but he only had bad luck to blame. A lavish lifestyle, those few days in Oporto with Caroline, the car break down on the way back from the airport. Suddenly his savings had vanished and a loan was required.

The perfume of wayside flowers and buzz of insects lifted Stephen's spirits. It was a shame all this was going to become a big housing estate.

Audrey was waving from the gate. She looked up and down the street and ushered him round the house and onto the sunny patio. He was surprised to see George sat bolt upright in a chair, sipping what looked like a Bloody Mary.

"Your promised visit revived George, that and the last of his current medication. Besides," Audrey said, "he wouldn't dream of receiving you from his bed."

"You shouldn't have got up George."

George smiled then sucked his drink noisily through a straw, savouring the taste of the red cocktail.

George pulled himself up in his chair. He pointed at the view across the fields. In the distance Victorian terraces lined streets pointing towards the twin towers of the minster. "They're going to build on all this green. We'll be one old house in the midst of an estate."

Stephen thought about how terrible it would be growing old but feared the alternative was far worse. He looked at the old man with a profusion of nose and ear hair, liver spots mottling his skin and blue veins threading across a once handsome face, if the photos inside were to be believed.

"I'll make tea." Audrey announced and pushing herself up using the chair arms. She made for the kitchen.

"Do you feel any better out here in the sunshine?" Stephen asked.

George's voice cracked, oscillating between pitches. "When I was young those terraces were being built."

Stephen thought the old man had misremembered. "The Victorian terraces?"

"Yes, though some were finished in 1903." He was specific on the date. George sighed and his head lolled. With effort he looked forward. "Your visit is a welcome relief. Audrey and I have lived together a long time."

"How did you meet?"

"At the assembly rooms. There was a dance in honour of an M.P. I forget whom."

"I met Caroline at The Adelphi in Hull. She was just getting over Philip's disappearance."

"Philip? He used to visit. Nice man, Roman nose." George's eyes closed just as the rattle of china cups grew louder.

"Do you need a hand?" Stephen asked jumping up.

"Why thank you. I poured the tea inside, a teapot is too heavy for me now."

Stephen placed the tray on the table and distributed cups and saucers. The smell of strong tea made him shudder. Audrey placed the cups in a different order. He picked up the nearest, sipped and found the brew bitter as expected.

George looked at Audrey as Stephen sipped trying to disguise his dislike of the tarry brew.

"I must leave you now, I've the cleaning to do at the cottage. Everything is packed but if I'm to get the deposit back..."

"Are you alright Stephen? Only you look a little pale."

Stephen felt his forehead. He was suddenly sweating profusely. "Do you mind if I use your bathroom?"

"Not at all. It's straight at the top of the stairs."

Stephen stood. He felt woozy. He had an idea, looked at the half-finished cup of tea then dismissed it. George's eyes were bright and for once he wore an undisguised smile which perfectly complimented his wife's.

Stephen moved in ungainly fashion. His head swam. He propped himself up by the door then made it inside. He almost crawled up the stairs. At the top, he sat and took deep breaths before attempting to stand. He leant against a door which opened, and he fell. The white ceiling regained focus. He sat up, staring at white tiles and looking at a steel trolley. Stephen's head pounded. A pale body lay naked on the trolley with a pair of blue eyes watching his. Even restrained and gagged and there was no disguising the terror in those eyes above a Roman nose.

"Philip?" Stephen asked. The man turned to face Stephen. The man was alive but body parts were missing and blood was draining slowly in to a flask. Stephen pulled himself up but his legs gave way once more. He realised everything in that moment as the drug coursed through him. It appeared in every respect he would be following Philip.

THE END

ORACLE: Battle Over Gotha

Solarin Colonial Starship *Gant*, outer Gotha system, Mye 19th, 4236.

There was a particular word that Commodore Keira Murphy loved: before she had joined the navy, some twenty nine years ago, she had been an aspiring poet, always scribbling down little ideas in a notebook she had carried on her person. One word that had always caught her eye, from a literary perspective, was the word 'pandemonium'. It had a beautiful resonance for her, even if the meaning was simply a more specific synonym of 'chaos'.

Pandemonium, she thought wryly as she sat in her command chair. If nothing else, it was certainly an accurate word for what was currently happening aboard the Starship *Gant*.

"Defence shields buckling, we're not going to last much longer!"

"Particle cannons running hot, we've got multiple fused circuits!"

"We're down to our last ten concussion missiles, Commodore!"

"Commodore, what do we do?"

"Hull breaches on multiple decks!"

"Commodore, we're running out of time, what do we do?!"

Murphy gripped the armrests of her chair and stared at the observation screen with a scowl. All around her, her crew – clad in forest green double-breasted jackets or similarly-coloured utility jumpsuits – ran around like headless Daks, panicking as the SCS *Gant* took hit after hit. On her screen, she could see it: the Enae ramship that was firing its plasma cannons at her ship, the bright blue flashes looking like miniature fireworks on its hull.

Wide eyes from a dozen officers and crewmen no older than twenty looked at her, and for a moment, she wondered when she had gotten so old. At forty seven, she was nowhere near the oldest person in the service – she remembered one of her instructors at the Academy had been seventy when he had taught her, with rejuvenat-treatments having made him look younger than fifty. Still, right now, she felt ancient. Worn out.

Too old, too slow, some part of her thought.

"Commodore!" one of her crew pleaded – she didn't know the woman's name, why did she never remember the names? "Commodore, they're right on top of us!"

"Alright!" she snapped, pushing off the chair. At only five foot two, it didn't make the dramatic entrance she would have hoped, but she was trying, at least. "Status of particle cannons?"

"Circuits on relays three through five fused," her weapons officer reported from his station. He isn't even eighteen yet. "Attempting to bypass."

"Save it," Murphy said, pursing her lips. "Shunt power from the fused relays to the remaining ones. Stand by to

overcharge them – wait for my signal!"

"Overcharge, ma'am?" the officer said, eyes widening in shock. "That -"

"I'm not in the habit of repeating myself, Mister!" she snapped at him. Got to learn the names, Keira! "How many concussion missiles have we got left?"

"Ten, ma'am," the weapons officer said.

Murphy nodded. "Alright, then. On my signal, overcharge particle cannons and stand by on those ten. Find optimum targets."

"Running systems now, ma'am," the weapons officer said, inputting the command. "Standing by."

Another hit shook the ship, and sparks flew from a nearby console as one of the power couplings overheated. Murphy scowled, watching the observation screen carefully.

"Right," she said, turning to her chair's armrest interface, "helm and weapons, I'm sending you target details. On my mark, I want you to fire at these points. Helm, get us into position for optimum firing solution."

"Aye aye, Ma'am!" the helm officer said. The weapons officer only nodded, checking his console.

She checked her chair's computer readout, and then sent the coordinates to fire at. She looked up at the observation window as the helm officer began inputting commands into his station.

"Bringing us about!" he yelled. "Stand by, weapons!"

"Finger's on the trigger, Delane!" the weapons officer replied.

Delane, first shift helm, Murphy thought to herself, closing her eyes. Try to remember that.

Even as she thought it, though, another hit impacted the ship, and she heard the sound of another console exploding. She didn't even turn: they could deal with whatever damage the ship had taken if they survived the encounter at all.

"In position!" Delane called.

"Now!" Murphy yelled, gripping the armrests of her chair and leaning forward.

In space, it looked something like this.

There was the *Gant*, and there was the Enae ramship. The *Gant* was thin, long, with red-illuminated particle cannons laid all about her steel-grey body, complete with a series of four long engine nacelles perched at her rear. The ramship, meanwhile, was an ugly off-green colour, with giant plasma cannons and a series of particle turrets of her own along her sharp, jutting prow.

First, the *Gant* began turning, bringing her forward strip of particle cannons online. There was a momentary pause, and then she fired: streaks of bright red particle-fire shot across the blackness of space, illuminating the nothingness

for a moment with their somethingness, before striking the Enae's vessel, smashing into the defence fields and breaking through to the Enae ship's hull. Great scorch marks were gouged into the enemy's hull.

A moment later, ten missiles launched from the *Gant*, streaking through space and smashing into the Enae ramship like bolts of lightning. The vessel's sickly grey-green hull splinter and cracked, jets of fire – burning atmosphere and burning hull alike – streaking into the blackness of space.

The ship listed to her side, her thrusters and stabilisers knocked out by the *Gant's* assault.

There was a moment of absolute silence in space, the *Gant* hanging in wait, as if expecting the Enae vessel to recover.

On the bridge, everyone was holding their breath.

"Status of enemy weapons?" Murphy asked.

"Plasma cannons inactive," the comscan officer reported. "So is their defence field. Looks like they're venting atmosphere as well." He grinned. "They're dead in the water."

Murphy let out a breath. "Alright. Can we signal Gotha Command?"

"Yes, ma'am," the officer replied.

"Do so, then," Murphy ordered, nodding once. "I want more ships out here. We can't let that ship repair and get away."

"No, ma'am," the officer agreed. "Signalling now."

"In the meantime," Murphy continued, "signal damage control teams to get to work. I want us ready to return to the Gotha shipyards for repairs as soon as possible."

At once, her too-young crew got to work. Murphy slumped slightly in her chair, thanking Soleil, the star-gods, the Vydallik pantheon, and whatever other deities were listening for their survival.

Still... this wasn't going to be the last time. The last time she had read a report from Gotha Command, the tactical projections had estimated that there was a definite upward trend in the number of Enae attacks projected to happen.

We've a long way to go, she thought, closing her eyes. *A long way*.

But as she watched her crew work, she couldn't help but smile. A long way or not – any day where you flew away in one piece with most of your crew still breathing was a good day. Today was a good day.

Here's to more to come, she thought.

BY JED T. E. RHODES

Dead Happy Endings

by Laura Nolan

I hadn't felt this alive since before I died. The breeze rustled the leaves on the fake trees as I watched Ari work. He ran the ice and drinks machines next to my boating lake at Happy Endings, the theme park where I lived. Well, where I resided. I watched him every day. He was so beautiful and so alive. I adored the way he would bump his fist on top of the machine when the ice got stuck. The way he would toss his dark brown hair around like a shampoo commercial. The way he happily chatted to people as he worked. Every customer went away with a smile as well as an icy cold beverage.

He had no idea I existed. How could he? I never left my island during the day. Only at night, to hunt and feed. I didn't eat the brains of humans, even though they smelled so damned *tasty!* The more intelligent they were, the tastier they smelled. Sadly, Ari must be the dumbest human being ever. I didn't even feel a speck of desire to make *his* brain my dinner. I ate duck brains instead. Have you ever eaten fresh duck brain? You should, they're delicious!

Sorry, I haven't introduced myself. I'm Margaret and it's been six years since I died. I don't remember life before my death. I know I worked on the pedal boats at Happy Endings and according to my name badge I'm "happy to help!" I do remember my death. There was a green, smelly homeless-looking guy who bit me as I tried to help him into a swan boat. Not my finest moment, or best judgement of character. I fell, unconscious, into the boat. He fell into the lake. Did you know the dead can't swim? Once their non-breathing lungs are full of water, that's it, game over. Second and final death. I awoke in darkness. Feeling fuzzy, I pedaled to the floating island and made it my home. It seems I used it to hide out even while living. The trees all around hid me from view and there was an old sofa inside. The floor was covered in empty beer bottles and scattered chocolate wrappers. I might have been lazy in life.

I had looked after myself since my death. Of course, the first signs of decay had set in, I couldn't stop it. My skin was only a *little* green though, and I know I didn't smell like roses, but nothing had fallen off or rotted away. I was proud of that.

Anyway, back to Ari. Oh, look at him fanning himself with his Happy Endings work shirt. I needed to meet him properly. Just watching every day was torture.

I spent the next few days and nights planning to meet him. I visited the gift shop at night and found some cute jeans and a SuperDuperCoaster t-shirt. I selected green to distract from my skin a little. I should probably have done this sooner. My work clothes had six years of dirt and duck blood on. I'm definitely still lazy in death. I found sandals, a wide-brimmed hat, dark sunglasses and chose a fruity perfume in a pretty red bottle.

It was a cool Friday morning. The Park was quiet. Ari leaned against the ice machine, smiling, and staring into the distance. I felt nervous but excited as I dressed and rubbed perfume all over. If my heart could still beat, I think it would have skipped one. I climbed into my boat and pedaled over to where the others were moored. As I climbed out, I checked myself. Clothes looked fresh. I smelled of perfume and my skin looked more pale than green. I looked almost alive. Perfect.

I walked slowly along the edge of the lake towards Ari and his ice machine. There was no one else around. I held my breath. Well, I didn't have breath to hold, but I would have. As I approached, he looked up and smiled. His blue eyes, shining. "Hello, what can I get you? Plain ice for your water?" He looked at my empty hands. I should have brought a bottle. "Or a fresh drink from my super cool fridge?"

For a moment I couldn't speak. Only stare. He was lovely, he smelled of the living and he was talking to *me!* I still couldn't smell his brain, but I didn't care. "A f-f-f-fresh w-w-water please." I sounded such an idiot. In my defense, I hadn't spoken to anyone in six years.

Ari didn't seem to notice. He reached into his fridge and pulled out a cold water. He held it towards me and said, "that will be three tokens, please."

I had forgotten about payment. I felt so stupid. "I'm so sorry." I put down the hand that had started to reach for the bottle.

"Have you run out of tokens already, Doll?"

He called me Doll; he must like me!

I nodded.

"Well, shhhh, don't tell anyone but you can have this one for free. My treat." Ari stepped closer, put the bottle into my hand and gently patted my shoulder.

I couldn't move. What should I do? Talk to him? Walk away? It felt like he liked me. Was this the start of something? Could we overcome the small issue of life and death? I removed my sunglasses to get a better look at him, forgetting how black my decaying eyes were.

"Oh my God! Eeeuuuughhhh! It's a zombie!" Ari screamed, as he pushed me away. I fell backwards, directly into the lake. Did I say the dead can't swim? As my body sank and my mind grew dark, I felt happy. Ari had smiled at *me*. He had given *me* the water. Talked to *me*. Touched *my* shoulder.

I hadn't felt this alive since before I died. I headed into my second and final death, contented. If Ari and I couldn't be together, this was the best way to be apart.





A1

Having traveled through miles of the Yorkshire Dales, you exit your car and leave it by the side of the road. What should have been a beautiful drive through the glorious countryside has been obscured by a thick and pungent fog that appeared on no prior forecast. No time for sight-seeing though, you think to yourself. You came here with a job to do.

You look down at the piece of paper in your hand and, comparing it with the address, you see that you've certainly come to the right place. That said, on first appearances, the house that lies before you makes you question whether you made the right choice in coming. You gaze around the outside of the decrepit property. What once may have been a quaint little bungalow in the woods has clearly deteriorated severely over the years. Its weatherworn exterior and wind-battered thatch roof hardly give off the most welcoming of vibes, but still. A job's a job, you think.

You ponder back to the time you heard the details of this situation. Sadly a story as old as time around these parts. A missing persons report, a cry for help and a police department that's far too busy to dedicate time to a proper investigation. Normally an event like this would just drift into obscurity around here. However, those other times, you weren't around, were you?

As you prepare to knock on the door, you notice there are others who have gathered nearby, appearing to also be here to help. Perhaps it would be best for introductions before you continue further.

Introduce yourself to the other members of your group!

How did you find out about the report?

What sort of personality does your character have?

Do they get on well with others?

Why are they doing this?

Once everyone's introduced themselves, knock on the front door and continue the adventure!

ENCOUNTER END



POOL FROG PUBLISHERS



Poolfrog Publishers Logo - designed by Felicity Tattersall



As part of the Scroll's Short Story Special, we reached out to Freya Evans, from local publishing company Pool Frog Publishers, to tell us a little about her company, her thoughts on writing and on the importance of local writers.

Tell us a little bit about your company.

Pool Frog Publishers is an independent company focusing on 'Green' stories; anything that is related to nature or the natural world, including stories about climate change, the environment, ecology. We also publish a wide range of mediums, including but not limited to: poetry, short stories, novels, children's books, and non-fiction.

What inspired you to start a publishing company?

The publishing industry is very hard to break into, and once you're in it's difficult to stay there. Big companies are very good at marketing to mass audiences but it means they have to vet authors works based on whether the work is going to sell and make a lot of money. Grass roots and indie publishers tend to be able to focus more on the real art and artistry of story telling. Yes, we have to turn a profit to keep going, but our profits go towards being able to exhibit more artists to the public.

What sort of books are you most interested in publishing, and why those books in particular?

Green stories have been given a very niche and narrow section of the market by the bigger companies, and tend to fall into the camp of apocalypse/doom fiction, or non-fiction about a particular area of ecology (such as Merlin Sheldrake's book about fungi 'Entangled Life'). But art bridges the gap between science and the non-scientists, we need a multitude of different stories so that we can understand the whole story of the environment: past, present, and future. We also need hope, and hopeful stories are just as important as ones that are catastrophic – though there is merit in the catharsis of catastrophe stories too.

What would you say it takes to be a writer?

Practise. A writer must always learn to improve their craft. You also need a community, and if you can get it – a mentor. A writer is a perpetual student; you cannot only sit in a room alone and write, even if you were the best writer in the world. You must build a community of your peers to converse and learn from, a group of diverse individuals from a multitude of backgrounds and levels of success. Artists from different forms help too; filmmakers, painters, actors, photographers, journalists, philosophers – storytelling happens everywhere, all of the time.



What do you think it is that people want from books?

I want to widen this question to include all types of art. All art is an expression of the human condition, an exploration of all the why's and how's and what's that we don't know the answers to, and that science alone cannot answer. We turn to art in times of crisis, either as a form of escapism, or as a form of catharsis. Every piece of art we witness, says something to us, involves our participation in some way or another. A book is just a format in which an individual chooses to perceive art, in the same way that some people want to watch certain films alone. I like books because they are immersive.

In what way do you think writing books is important for the younger generation?

You have to start somewhere. Your writing will be technically awful when you start, but it will be something you improve on. Starting young gives you a head start. I wrote my first novel when I was twelve, it was terribly written, but it taught me invaluable lessons, not only in the technical sense, but in an emotional one. It was about an evacuee in WW2 whilst I was in the middle of a move across the country. I processed what was happening in my own life by imagining the life of someone else, someone who was nothing like me and who grew up in a totally different environment. It was a catharsis, it was like therapy, and most importantly it helped me learn to be brave. I grew up in the 1990's in a time of peace and prosperity – I think young people today have it so much worse, and they need art to express themselves and process what is happening in a world more likely to end in their lifetime than to survive.

In what way do you think it's important to support local authors?

To become a published author, you need to get published. It's a catch 22 that a lot of people struggle to break through, especially if you don't live in London. Starting small with local companies and publications is a good way into the industry, especially with networking. When you're young you can look at the big names on the shelves of Waterstones and dream of being up there alongside them, but you don't wake up one day with a deal from one of The Big Five publishers. You have to look at success as a series of stepping stones. I started out in Cornwall on the slam poetry scene; now I am nationally published and have my own company with authors from all over the country. It took a decade to get here though. Being able to support local authors is my way of paying it forward. My biggest advice to writers looking to make it big is that luck doesn't exist, look for opportunities, spread your work as far and wide as you can, like seeds on the wind. At some point, something will start to grow.

Poolfrog Publishers is a local publishing company - we highly encourage you to support them and follow them on instagram at:

@poolfrog.publishers

Lucky Penny

Dan Rowe

When thrown in the deep end, do you sink or swim? I sink. Down at the bottom of this puddle, I lay amongst the dirt and depression. I should be so lucky to meet new friends, a soggy sandwich and a forgotten sock.

"Who forgets a sock?" I wonder. Is there someone running around with a sock missing? Did they walk home barefoot? His tale is a mystery. A curious wonder of human society. It certainly is interesting how, despite never seeing anyone with obviously missing clothes, you see an awful lot of abandoned garments.

The sandwich is more predictable. It seems obvious that someone has dropped it, though the details are as murky as the water that seeps into his integrity. Why was he dropped? Was the eater pushed? Or did they trip? Maybe my dear friend sandwich simply fell from the clutch of mankind. I will never know the full story. But I do know one thing.

They will remain forgotten. Their fate is sealed within this dreary prison. Sandwich will slowly fade into nothing, disintegrated by the vultures of nature. Sock will hold it together a little longer, but he is equally doomed. A lifetime of stagnation and disgust awaits him. I expect he even envies the sandwich. To be destroyed physically is surely better than being destroyed by soul-sucking desolation.

I should be so lucky, for I await a different destiny. I may have been thrown carelessly across this gritty abyss, I may be dull and worn, but I am not worthless. I just need someone to see that. Sure enough, she came.

Determined she was, her hands taking a desperate plunge into icy water. I could see the wisdom in the folds of fingers as they approached. She was not a first time spotter. Soon I would be sat amongst thousands of my fellows, displayed proudly in a jar on a shelf. I would be gazing down upon a new kingdom. This woman was surely no fool. She saw my value more than most. Perhaps even too much.

Was it worth getting her hand wet and cold to gain a penny? Someone clearly thought I was so worthless that they put effort into launching me from their being. Such a forceful ejection for something that only adds value. And here someone was, putting in just as much effort, and even more in discomfort, to own me. Yet my value has not changed. I never change. Only my people do.

People are funny beings. I never grow weary of them. You may even say I depend on them, though they will tell you it's the other way around. They could tell you a lot about me actually. How useful I am, how I solve so many problems, you'd think they were obsessed with me. I control their happiness, their sadness, their stress and security. I can do it all with the clink of my cold, unfeeling metal.

I should be so lucky really. I do not feel the spark of her excitement as she wins me. Nor do I feel the radiation of anger with her daughters as they waste me. The knives of emotion cannot change me. They do not cut me as they can cut her.

It was a Wednesday when she broke. A pleasant ray of sunlight swelled within me, fed through the crack in the curtains. But the morning glow just bounced off her. She had no substance to absorb the light. For once, her core was colder than mine. Just like that, the magic of my control had gone. Money had no hold on her. There was nothing left of her to grip. What did money matter, when her husband's life cannot be re-bought?



The Game

M. R. Mills

Those words echoed in Michael's mind as he stood in the cold.

'Just go down to the pub and drink away your friend.'

What kind of officer says this to someone? Michael had done everything in his power to get Nathan back. The utter despair in Harvey's voice put doubt in his mind. He no longer felt sure that he could do anything to help Nathan, that was even if he was still alive.

The walk home was a silent judgement. Each person to pass by had the same cold expression sculpted onto their face. Michael thought 'It's Hull, people tend to be like that. Don't let it get you down.' As he dragged himself through the crowds he couldn't help but feel incomplete. Every so often he would turn around, looking for the friend he knew wouldn't be there.

He felt the stares weighing him down until he arrived at his house. As he approached to unlock his door, his pace slowed. The door was already ajar. There was no damage on the lock and peering inside, the lights of the house were all still off. A strange smell came from the living room down the corridor. A violin sang down the hall. Just turned to run, his hands hovering over the phone in his pocket, the door opened more.

Harvey's gangly partner greeted him at the door, watching Michael's eyes widen as he spoke. 'Michael Pratchett, my name is Detective Inspector Clark Wayne. We met briefly at the station.

'I remember. What are you doing here?'

'The police are unable to help you but I know of someone who can. He's waiting to meet you.'

This close, the young man realised just how tall the officer was. His face was long, appearing stretched and rigid for someone so near to Michael's age. His suit was ill fitting for him, too small for his lanky limbs.

Michael followed Clark to the front room, shrinking when he passed a picture of Nathan smiling on the wall. The room was always more bare than the rest of the house. Both of them had always kept their respective games or DVDs in their rooms so not much was left for the front room itself. In front of the tv was a small table with a few scattered menus on it. Each wall was completely vacant, not even spiderwebs calling them their home. A stool in the corner held a retro stereo on top of it, violin strings radiating from it. Amidst all this, a man lost in thought sat thoughtfully on a homey sofa in the centre of the room.

'You're in quite the pickle, Mr Pratchett,' he said without turning.

Michael examined the man's features. Not someone from the station. From his face to his suit, everything about the man stood out sharply. The short hair neatly sitting on his head looked painted on. His right hand swayed with the music. Clark gestured towards the sofa until Michael took a seat. 'How did you get into my house?'

'With the right key.'

'Meaning you broke in.' Michael readied to walk out but Clark blocked the door. Nodding at the newcomer on the sofa.

'Tell me, what do you know of a young lady called Matilda Mallard?'

Michael's fist clenched. 'Not much.'

'Your friend is alive, he wasn't the target.' Resting on the arm of the sofa was a notebook. The man grabbed the notebook and opened it, finding the page he needed automatically. 'You told officers that she approached you first while you and Nathaniel were in the street, correct?'

Michael nodded. The man hadn't so much as glanced at him. He remained fixed on the book.

'Thought so, this isn't the first time that Matilda has selected someone.'

'Selected?' Michael peered over the man's shoulder at the notebook. The handwriting was immaculate, impossibly so for anyone. Written in the book was everything that he had told Harvey back at the station, down to the body language in the notes.

'Yes. Matilda has selected you for a game of hers. "Find the friend" is one of her favourites.' In an almost robot motion, he looked at Michael, flashed a smile, and then went back to his writings.

'Where has she taken him?' Michael asked.

'That's part of the game, I'm afraid. She'll give you a tip later on as to where your friend is.'

'How many times has she done this?'

'Often enough that the police have given up on trying to catch her, in hopes that she will stop on her own. Sadly, that day will never come. I, on the other hand, will never stop. You see, you have presented the perfect opportunity to beat Matilda at her own game. No one else will have to deal with her again.'

Michael relaxed his grip. His nails had left a series of marks on his palm.

'I want to help you but it would mean you following what I say down to the letter. Do you understand this?'

'Yes,' Michael declared. 'Just point me in the direction I need to go. I may need a boat though.'

'How so?'

'Her question involved Atlantis and Port Royal; two places that reportedly sank, though only one was real. Plus, her note looked water damaged. If this is a game, maybe that is her clue.'

The man began to clap slowly. 'You are an observant one, I'll give you that.' He turned to finally look Michael in the eyes, though it felt like he was looking straight through him instead. 'You can call me "Mr Grey". I will provide you with everything you need to know about Matilda so you can get your friend back.'

Michael outstretched a hand. 'Nice to meet you.'

At first, Mr Grey didn't see the hand, or he just ignored it. His gaze fixed on the hopeful Michael in front of him. With a weak smile, he shook Michael's hand quickly before gesturing for Clark to come forward.

The officer put a few files on the small table, they were marked "Jester Case".

Mr Grey sighed. 'You'll have to forgive the case name. Most police stations have come up with that nickname for her so most of her files have it. Frankly I don't care for it, just gives her the attention that she craves.'

Michael opened up one file and began to read through it. With missing person after missing person, every new piece of mangled flesh in a some sort of torture device, and each new riddle that Matilda had sent, his fingers turned the pages slower. A single shinning jester's cap sat on each body in the book.

Clark stood by Michael and rubbed his chin. Every few minutes he would glance at Mr Grey but get no reply back. As Michael's hand quivered, reaching for the next page, he finally spoke up.

'Would you like a cup of tea? I know this is a lot to take in.'

Michael tossed the file back onto the table. 'Why hasn't she been caught?'

'She's not like other serial killers. Her victims are scattered around the world and even her appearance changes from time to time. The only thing we know for sure is her name.'

'What can I do to help?'

'Find her,' said Mr Grey. 'We'll play her riddle game and catch her.'

Michael looked over to Clark. 'Are there any more officers with us?'

'No. All have given up finding Matilda. Mr Wayne is here in as an exception.'

'How could they just give up?'

Mr Grey stood up and walked towards the stereo. 'Because Mr Pratchett, they don't mind if chaos rules. She hasn't killed anyone high-class yet so there's no one to threaten them with a budget cut. You saw the amount of bodies that have been discovered. They don't know what to do.'

'How did you know her name?' Michael asked. 'There's no mention of it in the files.'

Mr Grey rubbed his chin. 'Tell me, do you recognise this music?'

'It's "A Slow Death" by Adrian Von Ziegler.'

'Yes. I find his violin work to be underrated.'

Michael shook his head. 'What does that have to do with her name?'

Mr Grey chuckled. 'You and I both notice things the police would overlook. They would find the music unimportant. I, on the other hand, know that everything has its place. The tiniest detail can lead to the most useful knowledge. I looked back on each victim and saw that they each had an encounter with a strange woman called Matilda Mallard. Short meetings, like bumping into someone on the street.' He turned off the music, gesturing to the files. 'You can see how important that fleeting moment ended up being.'

Michael could do nothing but sit there staring at the man who then knelt down beside him.

'Take your time.' He went into the kitchen. 'I believe I know just the drink to help in this situation.'

Clark put a hand on Michael's shoulder. 'Trust him, he may be a little unorthodox but he can help you.'

'Who is he?'

The officer leaned back on the sofa as he sat down. 'He's Mr Grey, simple as that.'

Too many questions. Every answer that Michael got just gave him more to worry about. Now wasn't the time for worry though. Nathan needed him to focus. He needed himself to focus. Michael cast his mind back to the card. Was it an island? If Matilda was going to send him another clue, when?

Mr Grey walked back in with two cups of tea, handing one of them to Clark and the other to Michael. 'You lack tea in this house.'

'That and beer,' Michael joked.

'Actually I found that behind the vegetables in the fridge.'

Classic Nathan. He could almost hear him now. *'They were in the vegetable draw so they count as my five a day.'*

'So, do we have a plan?'

'I will look into this island lead of yours, it might be something at least. In the meantime, Mr Wayne has something to help you prepare for Matilda. If you want your friend back alive, you'll need to be fully aware of all her games.'

Michael looked to the files again, opening another up and reading carefully. How long it took the victims to be discovered kept changing. In one case, it only took a week for the body to be found but another took three years for the corpse to show up at a police station, wrapped in a bow with a note; You're not very good at this.

The sound of the door creaking shut brought Michael back to reality. Mr Grey had left.

Clark straightened his collar pulled out a USB from the inside of his jacket. 'Do you have a laptop and a strong stomach?'

Michael nodded. 'I'll grab it quickly.'

The problem was that his laptop was still in Nathan's room from their Warcraft night two days ago. It was unnaturally quiet in the room as Michael entered. As quick as he could, he grabbed his own laptop from the floor and shut the door behind him. He stood outside the room for a moment just listening. Michael still had the file in his hand.

'Please don't end up in one of these, Nathan,' he muttered.

Back downstairs, he set the laptop up on the table before Clark handed the USB over.

'I am sorry about this,' he said.

There was only one thing on the USB, a video file. 'Is this the next clue?' Michael asked.

Clark shook his head. 'This is experience.'

When Michael selected the footage, a short, shabby woman appeared on screen. Behind her was a rusted boiler tank. Either she was in the corner of a room or the room itself was just very small. At first she just sat there breathing heavily, eyes staring into a space off screen. Sweat rolled down her forehead, passed a red dot that didn't move even as the person began to shiver. She looked at the camera with bloodshot eyes. Michael flinched.

'My name is Janet Davison, I don't know where I am or how long I have been here. I've not seen natural light for so long.' She paused, taking in more deep breaths. *'I've been kidnapped by...'* Janet looked off screen again before back at Michael and Clark, *'someone so that I can play "games" with them for a while.'* She quivered as she spoke. *'We are having so much fun. I wouldn't have ever gotten the chance to swim through a pitch black pool to get a key for food, or even kill a bear with a cattle prod just so my host would turn the oxygen back on, if I'd never been invited to play.'* Her attempt at a smile made tears stream down her face. *'Tegan, if you are seeing this, I miss you. Please find me. I know you are smart enough to get me. Mum and Dad can help you too. I've been told the police won't. That has to be a lie. You can tell me it is when you find me, I guess.'*

Clark downed his mug of beer in an instant, letting out a satisfied sigh after. Michael couldn't take his eyes away from the woman.

'Every time I fall asleep, I wake up to some new game that she has in mind,' she continued. *'I try not to sleep but I think she puts something in my food. Starve and die, or get some sleep only to keep playing until you find me. It's getting harder to choose now.'* Janet burst into tears, her words hidden under sobs. The red dot on her head moved away, resting on the tank. She rubbed her eyes and composed herself, though only barely as tears still streamed down. *'Don't trust anyone new you meet. For your sake, I don't want you to end up like me. This isn't a game. I'm not sure how much longer I can last.'* She spat on whoever was off screen. *'Frankly I don't care anymore. Her name is Ma-'* Before she could finish, steaming water from the tank poured out onto Janet, causing her to drop to the ground in screams. The red dot on the tank was gone, replaced by a bullethole. For a few seconds, nothing was on screen but Janet's cries. The video stopped, turning the screen black with Michael's reflection now staring back at him.

Michael began to sip his beer, making it last so he could feel the coolness of it longer. Janet's screams still played in his head.

The echo made him miss the fact that he had ran out of beer and was now just holding an empty mug to his lips.

'Need a refill?' asked Clark.

'Why did I need to see that?'

Clark sighed. 'Mr Grey wanted you to see just how dangerous her games can really get.'

'Does he think I'm an idiot?'

'No, just ignorant.'

'Ignorant!'

Clark put up his hands defensively. 'I didn't mean it like that. You didn't know what Matilda was like until today. He's chucking you in the deep end so you know how far down it goes.'

'Didn't he think I would get it from the files?'

The officer shrugged. 'Maybe he thought this would be a better experience for you.'

Michael said nothing in return. He stared into the mug still gripped tightly in his hand. Bone dry. Despite what Clark said, Michael felt like he was drowning in shallow water. Seeing one of her games in action was going to be the deep end.

Clark put his hands together. 'We know this is a lot to ask.'

'It's not,' Michael replied quickly. 'It's what I am meant to do. I just hope I can actually do it.'

Clark grabbed the mug from him before walking into the kitchen. Coming out again with two full mugs and placing them on the table.

'Should you really be having another?'

Clark smiled. 'Oh, they're both for you. After that scene, you are going to need them. Trust me on this.' He closed laptop and took his memory stick back.

'Where did Mr Grey find that footage?'

Clark frowned. 'You don't want to know. If he asks, I already told you.'

'What happened to experience?'

'That video was enough experience for one day.'

Part of Michael agreed, enough experience for a lifetime even, but another part of him strived for more. 'It can't be worse than having watched that.'

'I'll give you that.' He rested his head in his hands, his elbows on his knees, before going quiet.

'Are you really debating this?' asked Michael. 'Mr Grey wants me to know everything I can as soon as possible.'

'True.' Clark took a deep breath. 'The USB was found in the victim's skull after the body was mailed to the family.' The officer checked his watch. He bolted up out of the seat. 'I'll leave you to it.' He handed Michael a card. 'When you get the next clue, simply give me a call and Mr Grey and I will come running.'

'One more thing.'

Clark stopped, turn back, and raised an eyebrow.

'Could you tell me about Mr Grey? Who is he?'

Clark slowed down. His movements, like a toy running low on power, became caked in unease. He turned face Michael. With a deep sigh, he cleared his throat and put a hand on the back of the sofa, putting most of his weight on it.

'Mr Grey,' Clark began, 'is on your side during this whole thing. He is someone with more control of the situation than the police officers in this town and if I'm honest, that's all you need to know about him. If there's any man who can help you now, it's him.'

With that, he left.

INTERVIEW

JED

T. E.

RHODES



Jed T. E. Rhodes is a member of Goodwin's staff – when he's not leading on our Games Design sessions, he's a self-published novelist, and we asked him to tell us a little about his writing and what he's working on currently.

Is writing something you have always been interested or did it start at a certain age?

I've always been interested in *stories*, which is a tiny bit different from being interested in writing. Storytelling is one of those things that fascinated me since I was a child: the idea of creating worlds and stories that other people could read. My actual writing started probably when I was a teenager, when it first occurred to me that I could actually write my own stories. Never really looked back.

Was there a certain book you read that made you want to write yourself?

Funnily enough, it was my love of television and film franchises for the most part that inspired me to write, but a big influence as well growing up was the Lord of the Rings trilogy, which my mother bought me at age 11 after we saw the first movie in the cinema. I can recall my first, admittedly incredibly crude, attempt at a Lord-of-the-Rings style novel. All I ever wrote of it, beyond some character ideas and a few awful drawings, was a battle scene that was ripped heavily from the book version of the battle of Helms Deep – suffice to say my literary forays have remained rooted in my inspirations, though I'm a little less blatant about it these days.

A lot of your work takes place in a sci-fi/fantasy world, where do you take your inspiration from?

My primary inspirations are the two Stars (Wars and Trek) and the work of Tolkien but, honestly, I've consumed a great deal of both genres in my three decades of pottering about, so if you look hard enough you'd find a lot of that in my work. From Trek, generally speaking, I get a love of fleets, ships, uniforms and pseudo-navy hierarchy, from Star Wars I find a love of space battles and space knights (lots of "space" stuff, basically), and from Tolkien a love of world-building, kingdoms, and the scale of epic fantasy. Of course that's all the superficial stuff, and when one delves into what makes these series what they are – the themes that they were trying to convey – one finds different, yet equally interesting, things to pull out and learn from, be it my increasingly in-depth knowledge of the Campbellian archetypes, to my love of exploring the relationships of good, evil, and what makes them what they are. My inspirations broaden out as well – and an invaluable tool for any writer is the "tvtropes" website, which is a good way of finding out the broader ways the things you enjoy and take inspiration from work, and a great way of finding a way to make them different.

As a self-published author what tips would you have for people who wanted to just give writing a book a go?

Find an idea you love, doesn't matter if it's particularly original or even innovative, just find it. Run with it as far as it'll go. Run further. Take it to places you never expected. Accept that maybe you'll think it's awful. Maybe you'll think it's the worst thing in the world, to start with but once you've got it on the page you can make it better – either by rewriting it, or by honing it into something else and finding the thing it's meant to be. You'll discover a lot of stuff along the way – worlds and characters and people you never expected to meet. TL:DR – find a thing, do the thing, and don't be afraid to experiment with the thing along the way.

If you had to choose one book in the world you wish you had written what would it be?

Honestly, that's a difficult question. There are loads of book *series* I wish I'd have had the chance to write, but that's a little different to singular books. I've started getting into the Honor Harrington books by David Weber, and they're interesting as a sort of "female Hornblower in space" series (which is perhaps the most reductive description of them I could make) and I'd have really loved to write something of that sort – not super well known, but with a dedicated little fanbase of its own and still well-regarded for the most part. I feel like that's a really fun place to be as a writer, where you're popular enough that people care about your work and you get the chance to collaborate with really cool people, but not so popular as to be this monolith who lives away from the world and everyone knows who you are. I should be so lucky!

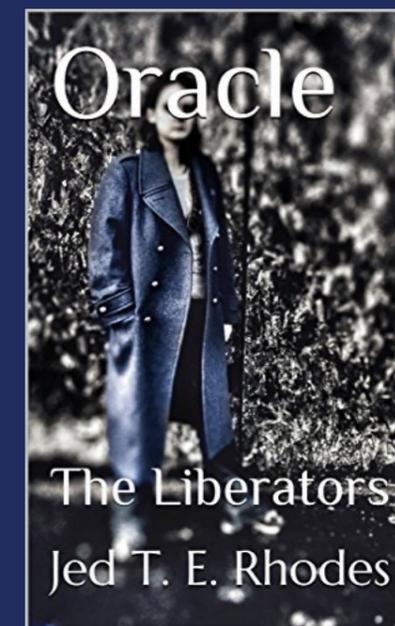
You work with film and videos games a lot (Jed is a film-maker and leads on Goodwin's Games Design sessions – Editor) to do any of your ideas cross over?

Yes and no. Sometimes ideas work better in one format than another. I wrote an entire 50,000 word novel in 2018 and it turned out to work better as a video game, but on the flipside things show up in The Malefest War that started out as film concepts but ended up working perfectly for this book series. I think it's just a case of being honest with every idea and being able to decide which ones fit which format.



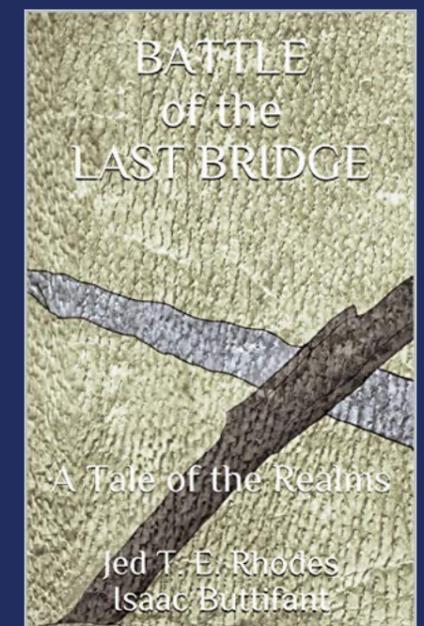
Oracle: The Waning Years

Cover by Jed T. E. Rhodes



Oracle: The Liberators

Cover by Jed T. E. Rhodes



Battle of the Last Bridge

Cover by Jed T. E. Rhodes



Cover of *Harbinger: Part One of The Malefest War*

Designed by Jed T. E. Rhodes

You have your new book (*Harbinger: Part One of The Malefest War*) being released soon (April 2nd on Amazon Kindle, paperback release April 4th); can you tell us about the background to that and where you hope it will go?

Oof, where to start! The short version is, that one started out as fanfiction. Yes, I can well imagine the rolling eyes out there, but towards the end of my fanfiction writing days I had a tendency to invent characters and ideas that would have worked well, or even better, as original work (I did much the same for a game I'm working on). So much so, in fact, that I actually failed a bit as a fanfiction writer because I spent so much time writing the original ideas, working out how they fit into the world, et al. This was kind of superfluous in the story I was doing as fanfic, but worked well for original work.

When the fanfiction became a little difficult to work on due to conflicting personalities and other... issues (not getting into that, thank you), I decided to rework the stuff I did as original work. That meant, of course, renaming and reworking all the characters who weren't mine into brand new characters, along with some pretty hefty rewrites, and to put that into perspective: not only did I do the necessary rework of the characters and relationships, I also extended the original (incomplete) story from about 100,000 words by the time you get to what is now the seventh act of my story (Act Seven is in book two, not book one) to 115,000 in just the first four Acts. There were also structural changes and

The general gist of the story is that it's a slow-burning story of a war between an Earth that's populated with superheroes and supernatural monsters (everything from demons to the fae – fairies and elves essentially) and a high-fantasy world with Queens and knights and Dark Lords and the whole high-fantasy shebang. What's really exciting about it is creating twists on the archetypes of both genres and really playing with what can be there. So, there's wise magicians in the story, but not exclusively as bearded old guys (or even humans). There's knights and heroes, but there's also a librarian who serves a crucial function to the story (actually, she's the main character), the wise magician is a thirty-year-old eccentric cat-woman, and there's superheroes but they're more like government agents with codenames or the heirs of weird cults and such than actual "cap and tights" (I mean, there is a "cap and tights" hero or two, but they're rare).

That's probably a very bad explanation but honestly, I just had an absolute blast writing it all. That, really, was the biggest thing for me: finding the things I enjoyed doing, finding the characters whose stories I wanted to tell, and getting to tell them. I'd like to hope that people buy it and read it, but ultimately, I'm just aiming to enjoy the experience of writing it and seeing it complete.

How do you evaluate your ideas and edit your book? Do you show or chat to other people as you write or after a draft of a book?

It's a weird process: some books and short stories I write, I seek out a lot of validation for the ideas in my head – from my wife, from my friends, that sort of thing. Other times, it's a case of "write it and who cares if others like it?" It's one reason I enjoy self-publishing – there's a lot to be said for being able to essentially vanity-publish a work that you've not had to vet with an editor, a book whose creative decisions are entirely my own without having to really push for them or having to mould what I made to some current idea of "what's the in-thing this year". I feel like, honestly, seeking validation for your ideas from others is a double-edged sword. Writing is an intensely personal thing – the words you write, the stories you tell, are always from a place deep in your heart that's entirely you. When you seek out validation from others and forget to validate for yourself, that almost feels to me like you're leaving the most important person out of the equation.

As for editing, that's a fairly involved process – sometimes I'll be editing when the story's not complete when I realise that I want to go back and add some new detail I've just thought of into the earlier part of the story. Other times, I'll complete the whole thing and go back and add new details and iron out flaws later. Of course, properly speaking one should really hire an editor for flaws like spelling errors or grammatical mistakes (or obvious stuff), but that tends to be expensive so I don't get to do that, which means my self-published work tends to run the risk of errors slipping through the net. Rather embarrassingly, the paperback of my first novel (*Oracle: The Liberators* – available on Amazon in kindle and paperback formats – Editor) has a small but noticeable error early on. I'll let anyone who buys that version look for themselves.

What would you say to people who want to write but feel they don't have any good ideas or are not good at writing?

I mean, the first thing I'd say is to take my advice with a pinch of salt: I've been writing a long time, but one's always learning how to grow as a writer and I know I'm a long way from a true "expert" (if there's such a thing as a "true expert" to begin with, which I doubt). That being said, I've come to think that there is no such thing as a bad idea, just bad execution. That's the glib response, and what it generally means is that your ideas can work if you put in the time.

What I would also say is that, generally speaking, putting in the time results in success – at least in terms of the execution of your ideas. I've grown a ridiculous amount as a writer (he said egotistically) and that's due to the time I've put into practicing my craft. I work to better myself as a writer, to develop my style and to expand my pool of influence and inspiration, and that's all any of us can do, especially at the stage of being a self-published author or hobbyist. Practicing your craft also means that you're practicing with your ideas, and as your execution gets better, the ideas get better too, and you slowly start to develop a better sense of characters, plots, structure and all the meat and potatoes of writing.

You can find Jed's books on Amazon - search "Jed T. E. Rhodes". You can also follow his work on Facebook and Twitter.

The End of an Era

M. R. Mills

Doug looked on as his friend Terry spoke those words. The rest of the world didn't matter, Doug focused solely on Terry's words. When Terry had finished speaking, Doug sat in silence with his friend at the back of the late night bus. He searched his mind for some sort of answer to give his friend but none came when needed.

'There's still plenty of time to-' Terry stopped mid-sentence, falling back into silence. The two must have been quite the curious sight in that moment. Both rested the heads in their hands, waiting for the other to say something that would help.

Terry's head rose up again and peered out of the window. He chuckled, getting Doug's attention who swiftly raised his head in the same direction.

'Joggers,' Doug said. 'There's always joggers.'

'Always a few crazy people who like running in the cold.'

Doug's hand shot past Terry's face. 'Isn't that where you and Mitchell-'

'Beat the living hell out of each other? Yes.' Terry took a pocket watch out of his jacket. 'It also where I got this lopped at my head.'

Both of them gazed out of the window with nostalgia in mind. The bus had briefly stopped outside a park the two were familiar with. Time had been waging a long war on the park though. The once almost magical equipment that children flocked to the park to use had decayed and seen too many days to seem innocent anymore.

Terry sighed. 'It's not the end.'

Doug put down his arm.

'Not yet. You're not getting rid of me that easily,' Terry joked.

Doug mustered an attempt at a smile.

'Look at it this way,' Terry began as the bus continued on. 'Right now, I'm sat next to you. Tomorrow, I'll be at my house. You will know exactly where to find me for a while yet.'

'And then?' Doug asked dryly.

Terry stopped himself before answering.

'It's not like I could just come round and visit everyday like I do now.'

'True,' Terry said after a moment of thought. 'To do that you'd need to be a wizard.'

Doug expression changed from worry to a friendly smirk. 'You've been watching Harry Potter again haven't you?'

Terry didn't respond with words, he simple tapped his nose.

'I guess being a wizard would help greatly but even then that would have problems.'

'One of which is the fact that wizards don't exist,' Terry said grimly. Before the smirk could be wiped from Doug's face, Terry clapped his hands together. A few other heads on the bus turned around for an instant. 'What if we made a movie of us just mucking about?'

'We're a bit old for that now aren't we?' Doug noted.

Terry shot a sarcastic glance his way. 'Says the man who gladly dressed as Jason Voorhees when the Friday the 13th remake came out, only to watch Confessions of a Shopaholic.'

The thought of that day made Doug laugh. 'Very true.'

'So we're agreed. A film is a good idea.'

'Would you have time to do that?' Doug looked on concerned.

'Not to worry,' Terry chortled. 'If we work fast we can have it done in no time.'

"Where would we film?"

'Knowing us? The park.'

'It would be a nice trip down memory lane,' Doug sighed, a mind now lost in memories. Memories can only satisfy you for so long though. 'It's not gonna be the same without you.'

Terry nodded.

'Wha...how did you family take the news?' Doug was almost afraid to think about the response.

'Understandably not well.' Terry replied, his cheery tone now completely reversed.

It was a while on that journey before the two spoke again. Instead they took in the scenery of the late night. The pub goers, the homeless, the young children out with their parents for lord knows what reason.

'You'll have to watch all this without me,' Terry said, bringing Doug's mind back to the conversation. 'I won't be around here to see what happens.'

'You won't miss much. I'm sure you'll have more interesting...' A voice in the back of Doug's head was frantically telling him to change the subject. 'When you think about it, humanity doesn't change that much.'

'I see philosophical Doug has come out to play.' Terry said.

'It's not often he does.'

'We could use him at this point.' Terry gestured for Doug to continue.

'That's all I've got. In a few life times from now there will still be pubs, there will still be people who can't make ends meet and there will still be terrible parents.'

'I'd say that would end in a few life times. Besides, you and I live in the now.'

Doug wiped away the beginnings of a tear from his eyes. 'Here and now, isn't that easy to focus on.'

'Which is why you should try. Easy never suited us.'

Doug looked back out to the people of the town. The same pub would probably be there for a long time. 'Are we stuck in traffic or something?'

Terry peered down the row of seats and out the front window of the bus. As far as the horizon was, there were cars blocking the bus's way. 'That would be a yes. An annoyed yes.' Terry placed a reassuring hand onto Doug's quivering shoulder. 'Gives us more time to talk.'

'That's one advantage.' Doug paused. 'Suppose we did manage to film. What would we film?'

'I'm pretty sure we could improvise something. Just bring a fair few props.'

Doug mentally went through a list of things he could take. A lightsaber, a prop skull, some masks that might come in handy, so many to choose from.

'Hell, I'm sure I could type up a quick script in one night.' Terry boasted.

'You need to rest.'

'Not when there's filming to be done.'

'Terry.' Doug's voice was stern but caring.

Terry sighed. 'How about we film something inside then. That way I can rest and won't have to worry about the weather, making the script go faster.' He held out a hand for the deal.

With only a little hesitation, Doug grabbed his friend's hand. 'Deal. I think our first goal though should actually getting home.'

'We could get out and push.'

As if it had been listening to the conversation the bus began to move once more. It must have driven for a staggering five minutes before stopping at another bus stop, allowing more people to get off and leaving Doug and Terry as the last people on board.

'You know I won't really be gone,' Terry spoke up.

Doug looked confused.

'Well I will but I won't.'

'How so?' Doug asked.

'Well not in a literal sense,' Terry noted quickly. 'In a metaphorical sense. All you have to do is close your eyes and, quite honestly you'll be seeing nothing but in a metaphorical sense...'

Doug seemed more confused the more Terry went on. 'What?'

'We'll have the film of course and you'll have the memories of us hanging out to look back on.'

Doug put his feet up onto the seat in front on him. There were plenty of memories to chose from but they might not have made him feel better.

'Call it a new chapter in both our lives.'

'New chapter?'

Terry mimicked Doug's laid back position and the two relaxed in the comfort of the city owned bus. That is, until the driver noticed and roared at the two to get their feet down.

'How long have you got?' Doug's eyes were the picture of innocence.

'Best guess? Around a month.'

'We do need to make the most of it.'

'Which is why you are going to be really nice and buy me my own personally time machine,' Terry chuckled, trying to lighten the mood.

'I thought you said I wasn't a wizard.' It had worked.

Terry's eyes wandered for a bit and then he stood up swiftly. "Mine's the next stop." he muttered. Terry turned to Doug. 'Will you be okay?'

'Give it time. I suppose I'll have to get used to the idea.' Doug responded somberly

'We all will.'

'Particularly you. Will you be okay?'

Terry pressed the button and made his way to the front of the bus. 'I'll get back to you with that. It's not the kind of news anybody really likes.' he said. 'Okay anybody with a healthy mind likes.'

That, Doug agreed with.

The stop came and Terry went off, waving as the bus continued on with one person left in it. Doug's eyes didn't leave the last window where he had seen Terry waving, even after his friend had gone. Every moment with him, from the second Doug has heard the news, would be locked into Doug's mind to be repeated when he approached his final days. Terry and him, laughing for a solid month.



M. R. Mills and Writing have been close friends for as long as he can remember.

Happily married to an amazing wife, with a loving step-son, both of whom fill his life with light and inspiration, Mills divides his time between fan and original projects, each with an equal measure of his flavour.

Writing has stated they do not wish to settle down yet but are open to the idea in the future.



JE BOOKS INTERVIEW

For this issue of the Scroll, we took the time to talk to Julie Ellam of JE Books in Hull's Hepworth Arcade to get a sense of her experience of the city's writing scene...

Tell us a little bit about your bookshop

I sell new and second hand books and literary gifts such as bags, mugs, bookmarks etc. My shop is J. E. Books and it is in the Old Town at 12 Hepworth's Arcade, next door but one to the jokeshop!!

What inspired you to start a bookshop?

Well, when I turned 50 I thought why not. I have always enjoyed reading and when I saw this vacant property in Hepworth's Arcade it just seemed the right place to have a bookshop, and the right time in my life. I got some great advice from the Goodwin Trust too about some of the things you have to do when starting up a new business. The moral support was also greatly appreciated.

What was the first book you ever read?

Ooh cannot truly recall the first book, but Janet and John books were a big thing in primary schools in the 70s so I guess one of them.

How important do you think it is for young people to get into books?

I think reading is such a great pleasure in life and sometimes young people just need to find the books for them and not to be made to feel embarrassed about their interests. As a kid, for example, I absolutely loved comics and I often think how reading and literacy skills are like keys to a door - and of course libraries should be supported at all costs.

Tell us a little bit about your experience of the local writing scene?

One of the many benefits of opening a bookshop has been meeting so many local writers. It was such a lovely day in December 2019 when a group of local poets agreed to perform their poetry from upstairs in my shop and Beasleys, with the help of megaphones.

How important do you feel it is to support local writers in Hull and the surrounding area?

This area has often been overlooked in many ways including in the arts. The City of Culture status of 2017 went some way to building confidence and letting people know we are here, but this is an ongoing project for all of us so it is very important to support each other.

How do you feel things in writing have changed over the years (esp. due to Covid!)?

I am hoping that many of the events of the past two years have meant that we are more open to new ideas, to diverse opinions and that the big named publishers will be cottoning on to this too. We shall see.



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The Knockingbird's Call

Elizabeth Mayhew glared at the short, bent straw clutched tightly in her grip and bit back the stream of swears she really, really wanted to let loose. Out of the long list of bad ideas that had been written and rewritten over the course of human history; this was the worst.

'Split up,' Elizabeth mumbled under her breath. 'Split up. Of course you'd suggest we bloody split up. Kath; if there is a god out there I hope he bursts the septic tank open onto you.'

She was quietly padding through the halls of Hangsgate School's girls dormitory and it was currently the dead of night. It was light's out and had been for several hours now and, in light of that fact, Elizabeth had no torch, not even her phone, to light her way. The moon, at the very least, offered enough illumination through the windows to her left to let Elizabeth vaguely see where she was going but it wasn't much. At the very least, it was too late for her to have to worry about Julianne Helmsley, the prefect.

Thump! Thump! Thump! The irritatingly familiar sound that came from the ceiling sounded again. It had gone off every night, giving its dull beat every few hours for the entire two and a half years she had been at the school.

'And now we deal with you,' Elizabeth muttered to herself. She knew there was something off about the noise.

Every time the school did something to deal with the problem, whether they said it was the plumbing, or the age of the buildings or any other plausible reason, it always came back, sounding its beat and then fading away until the next time it went off. After so long, however, they had all figured it out. Herself, Kath, the rest of Mayholm Productions – and despite herself she still found that name presumptive – they knew there was more to the noise than just old pipes or old support beams. There was something making that noise and the school didn't know how to get rid of it.

Elizabeth crept down the corridor, minding every step as she tried to avoid making too much noise. She had dressed lightly, making sure she wouldn't snag on anything, even forgoing shoes just to make sure they wouldn't squeak on the floorboards. Of course this probably wouldn't matter if any of the others were caught. Everyone knew who her friends were and that being caught in some of the places they were going tonight would definitely look suspicious.

Seconds passed that felt like hours as she carefully made her way down the corridor, the little light that was cast by the moon throwing shadows against the doors on the other side. It was only when she got to the other end of the hall that she realised she had been holding her breath.

Thump! Thump! Thump! The beat sounded again. Elizabeth jumped, a rash of nervous goosebumps growing along her arms. A moment later confusion replaced the sensation.

Again? So soon? Elizabeth quietly asked herself. She took a deep breath and looked up to the ceiling, an unsettled frown on her face. *That's different.*

A cold chill went down her spine. It was a familiar feeling, one she had never wanted to experience again. One a small part of her knew she was always going to feel at some point no matter what.

'So soon?' she groaned aloud softly, backing up against the wall and sliding down it a few inches. Her hair caught and began to pull and she let it. The pain managed to overpower the chill and Elizabeth let it sink in for a moment.

'Why am I doing this?' she asked herself. It wasn't the first time she had asked this question. In fact she had voiced it openly only a few hours ago, and the night before that and the week before that when they had voted on whether or not to investigate the noise. To her shock – which still hadn't really worn off – she had been the only one to vote against.

Come on. It's not like you can just walk out now. In the last week she had done her part for this scheme; more than her part, in fact, and now she was going to put herself out in the open. *At the very least you can't waste a week of planning now. Come on. Just get to the attic, check the lock, walk back and say you can't do this tonight. Go back to the drawing board and if nothing comes of it; nothing comes of it.*

Katherine Holmes, co-creator of Mayholm Productions and the primary reason it had managed to grow into the little circle of friends Elizabeth now had, had gotten it into her head that it was finally time to investigate the noise. Really, after everything the group had gone through in the last few months, it seemed Kath just wanted to keep herself busy without having to resort to more exam revision. It had taken Kath all of her powers of persuasion – such as they were – to convince the group to even consider the idea and days of constant, cautious pestering that had frayed many tempers for that consideration to turn into begrudging agreement.

'If there really is more to the knocks than old pipes why should we go poking our noses in it?' Elizabeth had asked all those days ago. It was a question she had wanted to repeat again but after agreeing to go it just

wouldn't be right to show hesitation. She just couldn't do it. It wasn't who she was, as much as she hated it.

Complaining silently about these decisions, however, was also a part of who she was.

At the other end of the hall, through the entrance that led to the dormitory's stairway and across the landing, was another door, one that held the way to the utility staircase. Through there was the way to the attic and that was Elizabeth's reconnaissance point; as Kath had labelled it.

The door stood in front of her, wide and dark and swathed in the shadows. Elizabeth wasn't sure if it was just in her mind but the moonlight even seemed to be avoiding the dark portal. Taking a deep breath, she reached out and grasped the doorknob.

It was cold in her fingers. Elizabeth turned the doorknob in her hand and felt it shift, felt it knock up against the lock and then, with a sinking feeling in her stomach, slipped free and opened the door. The breath Elizabeth had taken slipped out through her teeth.

Thump! Thump! Thump! The beat sounded again, coming from that directionless place that was vaguely above her and through the slight crack between the door and the doorway it rested in. The sound was coming from the attic. She had found it. Found where the beat was coming from.

'Job's done,' Elizabeth hissed. 'Job's bloody well done.'

I know where it is, she thought. Then a treacherous little fact ran by. *Not what it is.*

For a moment Elizabeth lingered, half-turning back towards the corridor. Her hand was still on the doorknob, keeping the door open just a crack but as she shifted it inched shut. Elizabeth froze in spot, her grip on the doorknob tightening. Seconds ticked by as she stood in place.

Come on, she thought to herself. *I've found it. I can go back and tell everyone and we can all check it out together. I'm standing in the light right now and the longer I stay out here the more likely I'm going to get caught here. Anyway it's far too bloody late to be up and I've still got tomorrow's classes. Why am I still here?*

She let out a sigh and turned back to the door, staring at it for several seconds, then turning back to the corridor, then at the window, down the stairwell and finally back to the door.

'Is this my life,' she said, her face falling as she pushed the door open. *I wonder for how much longer,* she added silently.

The door revealed darkness, the light of the moon barely showing even the vaguest outline of a stairway that led up and immediately spiralled. Her left hand letting go of the doorknob, Elizabeth tentatively let it brush the doorway and then grope somewhat blindly into the dark.

There was nothing in front of her; no undeniable pull, no inexplicable compulsion, not even a chill in the air. All that there was was a dark passageway snaking up into a building she had lived in for years. Yet, despite all of that, Elizabeth felt revulsion, a visceral desire to shut the door and never look at it again.

Once again Elizabeth found herself frozen, gazing into the yawning chasm and near black void of the utility staircase. The doorknob rattled as her hands shook and the next breath of air she took in tasted stale. Elizabeth resisted the urge to cough it all back up and she stepped back from the door, releasing her grip on the doorknob and the doorway. The moment she was away her breath returned, it shuddered free and was sucked back in, tasteless but far less off-putting in her mouth.

There was nothing in front of her; just a winding stairway in a windowless, stone corridor. Elizabeth brought her hands up to her face and rubbed her eyes, muffling a groan when she moved her palms over her mouth.

'This is it,' she mumbled. 'This is it. This is it. This is it. This is it. Come on.' Her words became more and more frantic and angry, practically hissing from her lips. 'Come on. I either go in or I turn around. I get in there or I go to bed. Come! On!'

She held her hands up in front of her face, clenching them into claws in front of her eyes and then into fists. Lowering her arms to her sides, slowly and bitterly, Elizabeth stared into the darkness and took a step forward. The first was halting but the second that actually crossed the threshold was more sure. The third felt almost normal, at least by the slow, creeping standard she had been using throughout the night. The fourth took her entirely through the doorway and into the darkness of the utility stairway.

Inside the door, she felt nothing.

Shut the door, a voice said in the back of her mind. *Don't shut the door. Leave it open and you'll get caught. Shut it and it'll be harder to leave. Leave the door. Shut the damn door!*

'Uhhhh,' she moaned. 'To hell with this.'

Elizabeth walked away from the door, leaving it be. Her hands shot out to find the wall and brushed against first stone, followed by brick and mortar. Leaning back she felt a metallic box and a switch on it. Flicking it, several dim bulbs came to life and cast thin illumination over the stairway.

'Oh, thank god,' Elizabeth sighed.

She climbed up the stairs, taking one step after another and found it wound up and up and up. The higher it

went the steeper, thinner and more worn the steps became. The lights were spaced further and further apart as well, never growing weaker but unable to light the stairs. A few times Elizabeth stumbled on a step that the lights didn't properly reveal.

Finally, after a minute that felt like hours, she came to the top of the stairs. In front of her was a trapdoor set at an angle; looming over her. Once again, there was nothing; no compulsion, no beckoning call, no feeling or pull. It was just a door and she had no reason to open it other than by her own free will.

Thump! Thump! Thump! This time it was so loud it was practically in front of her face, hidden just behind the door. Now there was something.

It's here. Elizabeth didn't dare speak. She had never heard the beat that loud before. She wasn't sure if it was because she was closer – as well as she could assume such things – or because whatever was causing it knew she was looking for it. There were only a few steps between her and the door but she lingered in her spot.

Minutes passed; the beat didn't come.

The door almost seemed to glare back at Elizabeth as she waited for something to change. Once again, there was nothing, no change in the air, no noises, no movement and yet she couldn't move. All she could do was suck in shuddering breathes through her teeth. She was wound up like a spring but had no idea in what direction she was going to bolt when it was done. The door just stared back; and did nothing.

It's here. Elizabeth's mind tried to fight through whatever had frozen her in the spot. Dark memories she had tried her hardest to forget came back; memories of a dark hole in the ground, dripping walls and a cold ache in her gut. *It's here. The door's still open. I know it's here. I can tell the others. The door's still open. I can just go. We can all come back tomorrow. It's not going anywhere. I can go. The door's still open. I can... just... go.*

Elizabeth turned and took several steps down the stairway and then stopped. She could still feel the trapdoor staring down at her. It sent a shiver down her spine.

This is a bad idea. No, it's a terrible idea. Elizabeth took another step and then stopped.

Once again she rubbed her face and shook her head as if she was trying to force the sensation out of her head. Turning around, Elizabeth stared the door down and then took several steps forward, each of them heavy and forceful until the trapdoor was right in front of her face. She reached out and took the doorknob turned out. There was no hesitation this time. She couldn't afford it.

Breathing through her teeth, Elizabeth tested the door for a fraction of a second and then pushed. The trapdoor swung open. *Another one left unlocked?* Beyond it was more darkness, deep, barely illuminated by the light-bulb that was currently sitting over Elizabeth's head and otherwise unremarkable. There was nothing; again.

'Of course there's nothing,' Elizabeth whispered.

She reached out her hand and pushed it past the rim of the doorway and froze. Her hand could no longer move, only shake a little.

'Come on.' Elizabeth could only sway a little and stare into the dark. Something was there; she knew it.

Her hand remained there, sticking just into the darkness' embrace, waiting for something, anything to brush it, to grab it, to do anything, to reveal what squatted in the attic. Seconds slipped by and nothing happened. Letting out her breath, Elizabeth turned her hand until it was just inside the attic. There was a light-switch, a cold metal box exactly like the one for the stairway.

The light came on; and it was weak.

The attic was massive and, like the stairway that led to it, had far too little light to see. Various large boxes, covered in dusty tarps sat right in front of Elizabeth's face with just enough space to step inside separating them from the doorway. Elizabeth slowly, carefully peaked her head inside.

Once again, there was nothing, just more tightly packed boxes, dust-smothered tarps and tight corridors. There were more lights but they were spaced far apart and weak; a few even blinked occasionally.

This is a bad idea, Elizabeth repeated in her mind. She then raised her phone, lit up its light and shined it down the passage to her left, revealing nothing. One foot stepped through the threshold and she turned to her right; nothing again. Her other foot went through, bringing the rest of her inside of the attic. The roof was high enough that she didn't have to duck. In fact there was plenty of room for her to stand. She was backed against the wall by the boxes, however.

And the plan was walk until I do or don't find anything. Elizabeth stepped forward, crab-walking with her back scrapping against the wall every few steps. She occasionally looked back behind her and up at the high, vaulted ceiling with its sweeping arches but never moved her phone from in front of her. She wanted, no needed, the path ahead to be lit.

I hate this. This is a bad idea. A really, really, bloody bad idea. She felt surrounded by the room. She was surrounded by the room, or at least everything inside of it. It took her slow, drudging seconds to pass by the tarp covered shapes, each one becoming less and less distinct every time she went by them. The odder they became the

smaller they were as well. Elizabeth could see the other side of the room, though it was almost completely covered in shadows, the lights barely seeming to reach them.

Then something moved. Elizabeth's head whipped around as one of shadows shifted. It was only there for a split second, a shape on the wall changing as her phone's light passed. Elizabeth froze, staring at the wall, daring the shadow to move again.

'Come on,' she hissed. 'Come on.' A cringe formed on her face as she stood in place, waiting for movement. She knew that there was something here.

Thump! Thump! Thump! The noise was right in front of her, louder and clearer than ever. Thump! Thump! Thump!

Elizabeth span around. Her light streamed ahead, showing more boxes and, ahead of it all, a brick wall.

Thump! Thump! Thump! It sounded again; this time behind her. Elizabeth turned her phone to see nothing again, just the passage she had crept through before.

'To hell with this,' Elizabeth seethed, gritting her teeth. The noise may have come from the other way but she was not staying in the attic. She had found the noise, she had followed the idiotic plan and she was done.

Crack! The sound of something splitting under her feet caused Elizabeth to freeze. Her head whipped down to see tiny fragments and splinters around her shoe which was currently pressing down on a small object on the floor. The light streaming in front of Elizabeth shook as the hand holding it shivered.

Painstakingly slowly, as if her legs were wading through thick mud, Elizabeth lifted her foot.

It was bone. She had stepped on a skull; a small bird's skull that had been shattered into several pieces and countless small flakes. The cracked remains of its beak had broken off but was close enough to the rest of the shattered bones around it to give away what the skull had originally belonged to.

Thump! Thump! Thump! This time it was above her.

Something fell from the ceiling, something small. The object bounced off of Elizabeth's forehead, just between her eyes, then another hit her shoulder, another the crown of her head. Small, sharp, hard, whatever they were they rained down on her and bounced off of her unmoving body.

Elizabeth's arm had been speckled white, the fabric of her dull grey t-shirt now freckled with small white objects. They were all tiny, sharp edged, smooth and had clearly been split and fractured.

Bone, she realised. *It's all bone.*

Laughter echoed overhead and the rain of bone stopped. Elizabeth remained in place. The laughter continued. It was a little girl's voice, roaming around Elizabeth, moving from the ceiling and down the wall behind her, clambering over the boxes, unsettling the tarps and sending dust flying to join the last few pieces of bone that fell down from the air. The flapping of feathered wings joined the girl's giggling.

Slowly, painfully slowly, Elizabeth turned around. The rest of her body refused to move but she had to see, had to know that whatever was in here was where she thought it was. She had to know that the way out was still there.

Her head whipped round and she saw it. It was a glimpse, barely lasting a second and that was all she needed to know. All she wanted to know. It was there, sitting atop one of the boxes, surrounded by bone fragments. The bones of small animals littered the room. There were more at her feet, on the floor, on the boxes. Bone fragments were in the air, falling with the dust.

Elizabeth ran, or tried to. The avenue through the boxes was too narrow but she still did her best to push her body back through it all. She felt her shirt snag on the brick of the wall and tear. She felt the skin on her arms scrape as she threw them desperately against the walls. Her feet screamed as bone fragments stabbed into her soles. She was moving too slowly.

The fluttering of wings was all around her but the giggling was gone.

Thump! Thump! Thump! Thump! Thump! There was no pattern anymore. The beat was gone. The noise had become faster. It was the sound of footsteps, quick, excited footsteps that chased after Elizabeth as she tried to stay ahead.

It was getting closer. Elizabeth knew it even as the fluttering of feathers surrounded her and the cracking of bones echoed from every inch of the attic. She tried to run but her shoulder and hips slammed painfully into the boxes pressing in against her. She was trapped. Trapped with the thing in the attic.

In that instant her head whipped around and for a split second the thing stepped under one of the lights. Elizabeth saw a girl's hand. It was small, pale and covered in bleeding scratches and scars. Each opening was ragged and brutally torn and from out of them poked black, dirty feathers. More were trying to burst from the skin, pushed aside by those that were already loose. She saw some tear out of the girl's skin as it ran to catch up with her. There were also talons and beaks poking through the skin, pockmarking it like some disease. Some were thin and needle-like; others were wide and hooked. All of them were oozing black, rotten blood. Tattered remains of the

sleeve of a dress just covered the forearms that came into view in the painfully thin light, also covered in ragged feathers.

Then Elizabeth saw its face. Just a glimpse. All she saw was a smile, a thin, terrible expression that revealed half-rotten teeth, some of them being pushed out by talons and beaks and a face that was torn apart by claw marks and vile rents. Elizabeth turned away desperately just as she caught the thing's eyes. There was excitement but for what, she didn't want to know.

Play! The word suddenly echoed in her mind, more laughter following after it.

Thump! Thump! Crack! Thump! Crack! Thump! Elizabeth could hear the thing catching up with her, the giggling finally overpowering the sound of flapping wings. The cawing of ravens and crows replaced the feathers, coming from behind her, from the thing, from the beaks in its flesh.

Play! The word repeated again, sounding louder and more insistent.

Elizabeth felt something brush her. She wasn't sure if it was the thing catching up on her or one of the tarps which were still flapping around wildly. Her eyes burned with the dust but she didn't care. All she needed to do was keep running but all she could do was hobble and squirm through the avenue.

Where's the door? Her mind begged for an answer. *Where's the door?* She couldn't find it, even after running so far and a part of her was afraid that this was its territory, its home and it could do whatever it wanted with the attic and whoever walked in and got its attention.

Play... with... me! This time the voice was in her ear and her mind and an instant later, as she felt sharp corners and loose mortar scrape away at her skin, something scratched her.

She felt the dove's neck snap. It was wonderful, the struggle of the bird's feathers in her hands, the twitching of its fragile little bones, the unnatural feeling of its body bending in ways it wasn't supposed to and then breaking in her fingers. The mouse was next. It had been so fast, so hard to catch, so much fun to chase and when she first tried to grab it the tiny little creature had bit her, sinking its teeth into her hand. She had smashed its head against the wall for that and it had gone limp. She had admired the blood and brain matter stuck to the wall after that, watching it dry and harden. The dog had come after that. It had been hard to get him away from her parents but finally, she had managed to get him alone in the woods. It was the first time she had been forced to use something other than her hands. A knife from the kitchens and a big stick she found on the floor had done the job but she had gotten blood on her mittens and had to throw them in the ditch she had left the dog in. Her father had taken his switch to her backside for losing both and another dove had been snapped to make her feel better. Bugs were always the easiest. Feeling them go crunch under her fingers, squashing their remains into pulp in her fingers. They took no effort to catch but they were always there if she ever felt angry, or bored. Then the Raven had come. She had caught it, grinning as it thrashed in her arms, she was oh so very quick but it had gotten too loud, kicked too hard and she had been forced to break it far more quickly than she would have liked. She shouldn't have done that. The Raven's servants had descended on her, torn up her skin, slashed her face, buried their eggs in her flesh, crawled inside her wounds, lifted her into the air and...

Elizabeth pulled away, falling on her side, falling through the trapdoor and landing hard on the stairs. She toppled down a few steps before her hand latched onto the doorway.

There was no time. The giggling was still there, the flapping echoed down the stairway. Elizabeth reached out and grabbed the trapdoor. It swung shut, slamming loudly and with it, the noise stopped. Elizabeth tripped, fell to the side and slammed into the wall, just getting back onto her feet before she fell down the steps. Her heart was hammering, her head pounded from her own pulse and finally, the pain from her scratches was beginning to register.

Thump! Thump! Thump! This time the beat was on the door. She saw it rattle and shake.

She couldn't help it this time. Elizabeth shrieked and fell backwards. She toppled over, falling through the air, her feet sliding off of the smooth steps until she collided with the wall behind her and threatened to finally fall further down the spiral. Her fingers clawed at brick and stone and finally she righted herself, her heart hammering and her breath coming out in ragged gasps.

Thump! Thump! Thump! Elizabeth ran, desperate to get away from the noise and the thing in the attic. She bolted out of the stairway and slammed the door shut.

The moment she did this her mind finally caught up with her. Someone had to have heard all of that. The noise in the attic, her screams, the slamming of doors. The prefect at the very least would have been woken. Elizabeth ran down the corridor, not caring if she woke anyone. What did it matter if she was no longer quiet.

Elizabeth threw the door to her room open and shut it; this time taking care to be quieter. Once that was done she slumped against the door and slowly slid down it to the floor. Her head hurt. It was pounding, throbbing and lancing her skull with pain unlike anything she had felt in months. It was terrifyingly familiar, a sensation she had never wanted to feel again.

She tried to get back to her feet but her legs refused to obey her. Elizabeth could really feel the pain of her scratches and small cuts, each of them sending unbearable, thin and sharp torment through her body. After all of it came crashing down on her Elizabeth wanted to put as much as possible between herself and the thing she had encountered. In her mind's eye she could see the half-hidden form of the girl, her hideous, oozing scratches and the bird parts bursting out of her skin.

Rising on her shaky limbs, Elizabeth crawled onto her bed and threw the covers over her head. The thing was still in her mind, looming over her like a hungry predator waiting for prey it had injured to expire. Desperately, Elizabeth shut her eyes and tried to empty her mind, to drive the thing's image out. She thought of her friends, wherever they were and whatever they were doing, trying to draw on the solace they gave her but the presence in her mind refused to go away.

She wrapped her covers tighter over her head until the air turned stale, begging for morning to come. She needed other people around her; real company who could drive off the thing's memory lurking in her mind.

Thump! Thump! Thump! The beat sounded once again, distant as it had always been but much more insistent. Elizabeth pressed down on her ears and forced her rising gorge back down her throat, fighting back tears. It was going to be a long and horrible night, with the knocking overhead.

Isaac Buttifant is a writer who works largely in high fantasy and dark fantasy. He also has a strong interest in alternate history and map making, with a number of speculative fiction maps on the site DeviantArt, where he works under the pseudonym "RoyalPsycho". Yes, he came up with it when he was 15.

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WHAT IS SCROLL

Scroll Magazine is an online and print magazine made by artists for artists. The magazine aims to highlight a variety of small local artists in the Hull area. Scroll is a platform that intends on helping smaller artists gain exposure and promote their own artwork. From writers, to photographers, to artists, the magazine is a collection of works from a large group of influences and backgrounds.

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