

DARK FANTASY



ALTERED
REALITY

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Formatting by SpaceDragon Creations.

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Star-Spangled Robes by D.J. Tyrer

Without his spells, the wizard was no longer a threat. His tripods and wands were broken, his books of blasphemous lore burnt with cleansing fire, and the Horn of Roland's sonorous blast had stripped away the protective enchantments woven into the silver stars of his midnight-blue robes that, once, had rendered him unkillable.

As Jeanne looked at him, all she saw was a mortal man – and, a distinctly-unimpressive one, at that.

“You...” he hissed in anger, and she laughed.

“Yes, wizard. You've been bested by a 'mere' woman. In your arrogance, you were quite, quite blind.”

For someone who surely could've conjured utensils into life to serve him and knew the requisite rituals to summon sylphs and undines to his side, the wizard had maintained a desire for women to serve him in both his scullery and his bed, as if all his powers were worthless unless he had quailing maidens to fear and adore him.

It had been no trouble to have herself waylaid and brought into his presence by some of the imps that served him.

But, Jeanne had come not as a slave, but prepared, using her knowledge and the enchantments bestowed upon her by her aunt to bypass his protections and undo his spells.

Now, she stood before him, victorious.

The wizard glared at her with impotent rage.

Jeanne drew her enchanted dagger.

“Your reign of terror ends today,” she said.

The thunderous look slipped from the wizard's face and he began to chuckle, softly. His hands dropped to the belt at his waist, which held his star-spangled robes in place.

Shaking her head, Jeanne said, “I have no desire for what you hide beneath there and, if by some chance, you possess a rod of power that I have overlooked, be certain that the blast of the Horn will have stripped it of any power.”

“Ah,” he said, his chuckle sliding into mad laughter, “but, it is no weapon that I conceal, but this...”

He let his robes fall open and Jeanne fell back with a horrified gasp. Where the wizard's belly should've been, there was a twisted and ugly face, coloured puce, with a look of malignant cruelty in its eyes, which opened now to gaze upon her.

“Sometimes,” he said, “a summoning goes awry...”

He stepped towards her. “I had cursed my fumbling of the ritual signs, but now...”

The wizard smiled cruelly at her and lunged towards her, thrusting out his belly-face.

The demonic face opened its maw wide and with a shriek, Jeanne was consumed, her protections worthless against the snapping jaws.

With a satisfied belch, the vile face closed its eyes once more and the wizard bound his robe tight.

It was all very inconvenient – it had taken him years to amass the knowledge and equipment Jeanne had destroyed. But, such heroic souls as hers were harder to replace.

“I believe,” he murmured to himself, “we were both arrogant this day.”

Smiling to himself, he reflected that what he had lost could be replaced. More than one Archduke of Hell owed him a favour, after all...

Yes, he would return to power – and, those who opposed him would come to regret their actions.

The demonic face hummed softly to itself beneath his robes, as if in agreement.

End



DJ Tyrer is the person behind Atlantean Publishing and has been widely published in anthologies and magazines around the world, such as Tales of the Black Arts (Hazardous Press), and Pagan (Zimbell House), and issues of Broadwords and Blasters, BFS Horizons, Journ-E, Swords and Sorcery Magazine, and Tales from the Magician's Skull, and in addition, has a novella available in paperback and on the Kindle, The Yellow House (Dunhams Manor). Find DJ online at <https://djtyrer.blogspot.co.uk/>

Joel Bisailon ARTIST INTERVIEW

1. What got you interested in art?

When I was younger, I danced with the idea of worldbuilding with RPGs. This never came to fruition, but the creative spark ignited there.

2. Do you preferer digital art or traditional mediums?

For the most part digital art. It's not that I'm opposed to traditional it just that I've both invested in the equipment for digital products and equipment.

3. Banking off that, how do you compose? First, what's your process. Second, do you go back and forth between programs and hand drawn?

First, I use a program called Daz Studio that is like a digital doll that I would morph the model, manipulate the textures, and eventually pose to the proper posture. Eventually, I add lighting, backgrounds, and scenery for a complete environment. Second, I would render three layers. A). the lighting layer, B). the outline layer, and C). the depth layer. Third, off to Photoshop where I begin the paint aspect of the artwork using A). as the colour and lighting and C). for the paint details. B). is used a s grayscale layer that I would help with highlights and shadows of the focus of the image by creating a multiply and an overlay layer at very low values.

4. What's your favorite genre to create art in?

I have a penchant for horror and dark fantasy. You can see that in my portfolio. It's full of beasties and monsters in dark environments. Occasionally I throw in a



bit of Sci-Fi just to keep my mind in check.

5. Side question for our readers, do you like Star Trek and if you do, TOS or another iteration?

When I was younger, I didn't mind TNG but I'm more of an Expanse kinda boy. More realistic as to how human beings are to each other.

6. Who is your favorite villain in movies, TV show, or book?

Hannibal. Specifically, the Bryan Fuller iteration played by Mads Mikkelsen. I feel he is a great anti-hero and I know I'm using that lightly, but we've all wanted to "eat the rude" from time to time. Humbert Humbert is a despicable loathsome character from Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*. The character is so well written that I hate that I don't want him to die more if that makes sense.



7. Do you read? What genre? And do you have a certain author you like?

Generally, I'm a fan of historical fiction like the stuff Jack Whyte, Bernard Cornwell, Jan Gillou, and Umberto Eco write. However, I just finished reading *Tender is the Flesh* by Agustina Bazterrica and it was both an easy and a hard read. Oddly enough any story about cannibalism would do for me besides *The Road*. Cormac McCarthy's lack of punctuation drives my dyslexic brain nuts.

8. Do things like books and movies influence what you decide to draw?

Absolutely. I gained a director's eye from watching Kubrick, Del Toro,

Singh, The Brothers Quay, Jeunet, Chan-wook, and Gilliam movies. So much of my visual learning is from the masters. The narrative imagery I can chalk up to all the old fairy tales from

Hans Christian Andersen, the Brothers Grim, The Mabinogion, Icelandic Sagas, Middle Eastern folk tales of the Islamic Golden Age, African American Folktales, Slavic Folklore, to anything fantastic mythical. I think as a child I read all 14 Oz books by L. Frank Baum and I never looked back.

9. Do you draw for commissions?

Right now, it's my only income as an artist. So, send them my way because I've got a graphics card to pay off. (it's used in my artwork)

10. When draw for yourself, does it relax you?

I don't know if relax would be the word, but I know when I have a vision in my head of how I want a personal work to be done 6-8 hours have passed with no recollection as to where they went. Perhaps Zen is the proper term.

11. Is art your full-time job?

Unfortunately, no. I'm a full-time chef at a mid-range restaurant in Kingston Ontario. It pays the bills and makes me feel like a working-class hero.

12. Lastly, anything you'd like us to know about you? And please offer a piece of advice for artists in your field.

There is no such thing as talent and don't kid yourself that there is. As artists we pick up the tools of our medium and don't mind the hard work, we invest into them, we enjoy the process. It's not something that comes easily to us, we just have the passion to work harder at our craft, learn the tricks of the trade and hone our skills. This accounts for any trade be it Dancer, Plumber, Writer,



or Soldier. If you take pride in your mastery and understand that you will always have something new to learn you are an artist in your field.

13. Where can our readers find you online?

My Linktree is

<https://linktr.ee/umbraludusproductions> and my portfolio is at <https://www.artstation.com/umbraludus>



Hunted by Simon MacCulloch

The vampire moon has leeches the sun, she rises from the dead
Now we who creep below can feel a pricking on our skins
The piercing gaze of stars like vultures circling to be fed
By creatures of the cratered goddess, as the hunt begins.

The scents are rich on city streets and pure among the hills
For every one a quivering nostril tuned to that alone
A lolling tongue, a mind that throbs with past and future kills
The pointed teeth to carve the flesh, the square to grind the bone.

The trails twist through the crooked alleys, past the ink-dark streams
Where wind-tossed rubbish, rock-torn waters rush to join the chase
The racing shadows shift their shapes like swift-encroaching dreams
A siren banshee wails a panic, lost in night-warped space.

A final bend, an open field, the quarry turns at bay
A cloud engulfs the moon so that the darkness is complete
And with her veiling that which drove the hunters drops away
To leave just wind that blows the grass, the litter on the street.

Thus we, who ran so long from superstition's hounds of dread
Are freed at last to follow paths more fit for men to die on
And if the starlight, hungry still, weaves thorns about our head
We'll claim the belt and whistle up the dog-star of Orion.

Hex by Simon MacCulloch

The Sabbat calls, the witches whoosh in flight.
The moon is but a bauble, one whose light
Is pale reflection, stolen out of spite
From fire of demon cat's-eyes, emerald bright.
Come celebrate the wild Walpurgis night
Make right your wrong, and wrong your glorious right!

For who's to say the Devil has no right
To share with us the ecstasy of flight
And set his sun-face blazing in the night
To lead our souls to freedom with its light?
Of all the angels, Lucifer shone bright

They damned him out of pure seraphic spite.

So let us praise him, worship him in spite
Of those who walk the gloomy path of "right"
Where guttering candles never burn as bright
As beacon flares that guide us in our flight
To find our master's hot unholy light
And make a glowing morning of the night.

Not creatures of the fog and creeping night
Not weird old dams engaged in petty spite
No, Satan's daughters manifest the light
Of sheer rebellious will that claims by right
The wonders of our raving fancy's flight
Through golden voids where Beelzebub swarms bright.

What's black to you we magic blinding bright
For when your God made two of Day and Night
And saw the light was good, his bumbling flight
Made fickle pinpricks in the deep, in spite
Of all his claims to wielding power's right.
Hail Lucifer - you let there be *more* light!

For energy is at the heart of light
And ours the task of fanning balefires bright
Through energising conflict, wrong and right
A-crackle in the cold entropic night
Inferno kindled from the sparks of spite
A rocket fuel to power our endless flight.

Prometheus was right to bring us light
So now we'll aim our flight at suns more bright
And leave behind in night the gods we spite.

Simon MacCulloch lives in London. His poetry has been published in Reach Poetry, The Dawntreader, Aphelion and others.

Life, One Battle at a Time by Dan Rice

Most warriors experienced the song of battle as a bowel-loosening clamor. Even the Queen's household guard looked less than enthusiastic while waiting to enter the smoked choked fray beneath the town wall. The cacophony only reminded Adrik what he was denied: the sweet release of magic spewing from his body to rip all in its path asunder.

The magic burning through Adrik caused the runes scarring his skin to bulge and pulsate, creating the illusion insects crawled over and beneath his flesh. The sensation of thousands of insects scuttling over and through him was no illusion. They scurried over his skin and ran down his throat to turn intestines and arteries into a road system more complex than any empire's. The ceaseless formication would induce psychosis in an ordinary person, but since the time Adrik could walk, he had been conditioned to suffer the phantasmal insects without going mad.

His reward for mastering the sensations and the magic that came one with them was a life of endless war as Queen Niang's most prized battle mage. He'd fought in so many battles he'd lost count years ago. He might've killed hundreds or thousands or tens of thousands, maybe more than that in those fights. Sometimes at night, when sleep remained just beyond his grasp, he contemplated all those he killed for Queen Niang. Men, women, children, and many other creatures who lived under Mother Sun fell to his sword or were burned by his magic. They all died the same—easily, oh, so easily. Sometimes he tried to remember their faces, especially the children, because he felt he should remember and mourn them, for their lives cut short, but all too soon, their faces oozed together into an everchanging demon soup, one blurred countenance melting into the next.

Still, as he sat on a stump in the mud, waiting for the rebels to break the armistice on battle magic and doing his damndest not to scratch his skin to a bloody pulp with blunt fingernails, he yearned to join the battle. Only by releasing the magic bubbling through veins could he free himself from the formication for a little while.

Adrik had no doubt the rebels would break the ban on magic. The rebel leaders would become desperate when the wall was taken, and their followers fell like threshed wheat under the blades of the Queen's soldiers. Then, magic would crackle through the air to slay without mercy. Only then would Adrik be unleashed like a rabid dog to hunt down with fire and whirling blade any who barred the Queen's victory, and in doing so, wash the insects from his skin and expel them through his pores.

Siege ladders slammed against the wall. The first wave, conscripts in sun-bleached rags, armed with a little more than clubs, scrambled up the ladders. Soon, the rabble's blood stained the battlefield. Their bodies formed a second wall, stinking of blood and defecation, before the stone one. Adrik nodded to himself as he listened to their death cries. Their lifeblood would win Father War's favor because there was nothing the battle god loved more than a day painted gory red.

The second wave was veteran soldiers armed with axes, spears, and even a few swords. Most men wore helms, and about one in twenty was blessed with a smattering of armor. A handful of veterans gained the ramparts, hewing the defenders with axes and stabbing with spears or swords. Father War smiled upon those doughty warriors, for soon, they won a foothold upon the ramparts and were joined by their comrades. Not long now, the wall would be ripped from the rebels' grasp, and the real slaughter would begin. Adrik drew his sword, Lifebane, a

two-handed weapon with runes glowing a faint reddish light encrusting every millimeter of the blade. As soon as the rebels panicked, he could unleash the power thrumming through his body.

A trumpet blared from behind Adrik. Sergeants hollered the order to march, and the rhythmic thump of the advancing household guard followed. Adrik's gaze flicked to the shock troops, men bedecked in armor reminiscent of a beetle's carapace. They were led by Prince Chi, heir to the kingdom, on his prancing white stallion. The prince was a puissant warlord bedecked in polished plate mail and a helm shaped like a roaring dragon.

Adrik's gaze did not linger on the prince. Instead, he sought out Sir Chadwick, the royal's bodyguard, upon his black stallion. Adrik yearned to tear apart the steel encasing Chadwick and embrace the handsome man inside. He wished, he hoped, he pined Chadwick reciprocated his desire, but that was a chimeric dream.

"Prince Chi." Adrik stood. A loincloth held up by finely tooled leather belt his only clothing. A heavy dagger hung in a sheath at his hip. "Allow me to fight."

The prince heard Adrik, for few men could match the mage's battle voice. Chi glanced at Adrik and signaled Sir Chadwick with a gauntleted hand. The bodyguard guided his mount out of the line of troops. Even mounted, the man craned his neck to look the battle mage in the eyes.

"He must let me fight," Adrik scratched at his forearm with blunt nails. Even so, red scratches crisscrossed the rune-covered skin.

Chadwick sighed and removed his eagle-crested helm to reveal hair as lustrous as gleaming bronze and a chiseled face. Adrik desired to run his hands through Chadwick's beautiful hair almost as much as he craved the release of battle to cleanse the scampering insects from his body.

Chadwick's eyes, twin chips of the greenest jade, were arresting. Before entering battle, most soldiers' gazes were excited, haunted, or, at the very least, determined. Not Chadwick's. As always, his gaze was kind and empathetic. It made Adrik want to bend down and kiss the man, but he feared Chadwick would fix him with a glower of absolute loathing, slaying him as surely a battle-axe carving into his skull.

Chadwick shook his head. "I'm sorry, my friend." The knight placed a gauntleted hand on Adrik's rune-covered shoulder.

The battle mage shuddered. Embarrassment and desire tore through him, stilling the insects.

"His orders come directly from the Queen. The rebels must break the accord first."

Chadwick took his hand from Adrik's shoulder. The bug scurried once more.

"Men will die needlessly. I can end this now. Prince Chi need not put himself in danger."

"The dead win us Father War's favor and are the foundation of kingdoms." Chadwick frowned. "I know you suffer. For that, I'm sorry, but we must be seen as giving the rebels every opportunity not to bring magical devastation upon the town."

Chadwick turned his mount away.

"They will use magic before the end," Adrik called. "Prince Chi should unleash me now."

Chadwick glanced over his shoulder, sadly smiling. "Be patient, my friend, be patient."

The knight replaced his helmet, transforming from a compassionate man into a lord of war. He spurred his mount to rejoin Prince Chi, who had drawn his sword and swept it toward the wall. More ladders pressed against the unyielding stone. The household guards howled blood-curdling cries and charged like a pack of hungry wolves. Gods, how Adrik wished to enter the melee beside Sir Chadwick. Instead, he prayed to Mother Peace to spare the knight. It was a

pathetic act. Father War ruled this ground on this day, and the forbidding war god loved blood and savagery.

Burning disrupted Adrik's prayers like thousands of fire ants sunk their mandibles into his skin and innards. He writhed, his eyes bulged, and a keen escaped his lips. A giant fireball, blood-red against the smudgy gray clouds, rose from behind the town wall and slashed toward the charging household guard. The ground shook from the fireball's explosive impact. Men burst aflame and were catapulted through the air like straw dolls.

Lifebane glowed brighter in Adrik's hand. The mage gasped and smiled at the relief of hundreds, maybe thousands of insects sliding off his skin and bursting from his pores. Insects still scampered over his flesh and went spelunking in his intestines, but the formication decreased in intensity.

"Magic," Adrik whispered as the power within him detected and responded to the presence of another battle mage. Rage, the magic's and his own, flooded him, and burning power that seemed nigh infinite along with it.

Bellowing wordlessly, Adrik charged into battle with the subtlety of a fire Drake in the rut. Men scrambled from his path to avoid being trampled. The battle rage guided him, his vision a tunnel leading to the ironbound gate protected by a massive barbican bristling with bowmen. Arrows, stones, and curses poured from overhead as thick as raindrops in a squall. The arrows and stones were burned to ash by the battle magic flaring from Adrik's rune-encrusted body before puncturing his flesh or cracking his bones.

Adrik hurled a shoulder against the ironbound gate. The wood groaned and cracked. Men desperately reinforced the gate. Adrik laughed at their pitiful efforts. Lifebane whistled through the air, shearing metal and wood. Blood sprayed, and men screamed. The gate collapsed under two more strokes of Lifebane's fiery blade. Men ran, blubbering prayers and screaming, as Adrik burst through the wreckage, followed by howling warriors determined to exact revenge for the earlier magical fireball.

A handful of brave defenders stood their ground and died with swords in their hands. Many more were cut down from behind as they fled. Miraculously unharmed and unsoiled, Prince Chi directed men from astride his prancing white stallion. Adrik smiled when he glimpsed Sir Chadwick, now without a mount, standing beside the prince. The knight was caked in grime, his livery shredded, his shield a burned and useless wreckage hanging from his arm, and his sword awash in blood, but he lived.

With the magic bursting out, Adrik allowed himself to believe what he felt for Chadwick was more than lust, and the knight felt the same for him. The dream ended when the enemy battle mage, a burning fire goddess, exploded from a stable near the gatehouse onto the street. A trident spun in her hands, skewering and eviscerating friend and foe.

The trident darted toward Adrik with the celerity of a three-headed viper. He parried an otherwise fatal thrust, deflecting the trident's trajectory so its tips pierced his shoulder. Pain lashed his chest and down his arm. She vaulted forward, driving the prongs deeper into his flesh, forcing him back until he lost his footing on the corpses spoiling the ground.

Adrik spasmed and lost his grip on Lifebane. The stench of gore and urine and defecation lodged in his nostrils. Blood slicked his rune-covered back, and jutting body parts jammed into him. The goddess pressed all her weight down onto the radiant trident. The tines sunk deeper until he was pinned to the earth. From the wound seeped magical power as dark and thick as clotted blood. Adrik knew he was about to die, but at least the formication decreased.

He could have fought back and made an epic battle with the mage, maybe mortally wounding her and guaranteeing Queen Niang victory. But as the scurrying bugs over and inside his body dropped dead one by one, Adrik found peace.

Over the din of combat, he heard a resonating voice thunder. “Witch!”

Sir Chadwick’s voice slithered Adrik’s inner peace, focusing him on the death-filled chaos around him and the utter misery of the trident’s barbed prongs being ripped from his shoulder. His vision went red, then white, as pain crescendoed to a climax as terrible as he had ever experienced.

The goddess spun away. Adrik forced himself up, his left hand pressing into the face of some poor bastard whose forehead was split open like a melon. Adrik’s right arm was a useless sack of meat guttering blood and magical light. Chadwick engaged the battle mage, sword and trident clashing.

The knight fought with an enchanted blade, imbued with battle magic by Adrik. Such a weapon might pierce the magic shielding the woman and slay her, but even a swordsman as formidable as Chadwick was no match for a mage consumed by battle rage.

“Run,” Adrik attempted to bellow, but the word escaped his lips as an incoherent snivel.

In a flurry of thrusts, the battle goddess drove Chadwick back until Adrik lost sight of the knight. Clenching his teeth, Adrik forced himself to his feet. His left hand clasped Lifebane, the blade flaring at his touch.

He charged the battle mage, his gait reduced to a shambling trundle. He focused on reaching the foe who attacked the one he desired. Chadwick still fought, but he was slowing, and Adrik saw the trident would spear the knight through the chest.

Adrik stabbed the battle mage in the back, grunting with the effort. Lifebane impaled her, and she shrieked as blinding light erupted around the wound.

The dead littered the ground like leaves in the heart of autumn. The late afternoon sun burned through the high clouds and baked the bodies. Death’s perfume saturated the air as thick as a plague pit’s. Wincing, Adrik shambled around the battlefield. Soldiers aided wounded comrades and gifted wounded foes a quick end.

“Adrik,” Prince Chi called. He was still astride his glistening white stallion. The only hint he had survived a bloodbath was a red splatter across the gaping mouth of his dragon helm. “Go see the physician. The Queen will not tolerate a lame battle mage.”

Adrik grimaced. Queen Niang wouldn’t tolerate that any more than she would a rabid dog under her table.

“I must find Sir Chadwick,” Adrik said.

Prince Chi removed his dragon helm, revealing dark, sweat-matted hair and eyes as black as obsidian. Adrik glimpsed fleeting sadness in those dark orbs.

No,” Adrik whispered. “No.”

Adrik found Chadwick with the tines of the trident piercing his chest. The last wisps of hope Adrik clung to dissipated on a mournful wind. He knelt beside the knight and gently removed the eagle-crested helm. Chadwick stared lifelessly at the sky above, and his beautiful hair was wet with sweat.

Adrik sobbed as he brushed Chadwick’s eyes shut with his fingers and laid a bittersweet kiss upon the knight’s brow. Taking a knife from his belt, Adrik cut a lock of Chadwick’s hair and held it to his chest. Standing, he sheathed the blade, and started the lonely trek to the physician’s tent beyond the town wall.

Adrik's only keepsake of the man he loved was a lock of hair, and his only consolation was that the fornication abated until the next battle.

Dan Rice pens the young adult urban fantasy series The Allison Lee Chronicles in the wee hours of the morning. The series kicks off with his award-winning debut, *Dragons Walk Among Us*, which Kirkus Reviews calls, "An inspirational and socially relevant fantasy." While not pulling down the 9 to 5 or chauffeuring his soccer fanatic sons to practices and games, Dan enjoys photography and hiking through the wilderness. To discover more about Dan's writing and keep tabs on his upcoming releases, check out his blog (<https://danscifi.com>) and join his newsletter. Find Dan online at <https://danscifi.com>



The Isle of Reincarnation by Michael Fowler

Reincarnation hurt more than Fowler thought it would. Writhing on a bier of branches and straw in a stone-age village on a remote island of stony hills and forest, he cried out in pain while his body underwent untold transformations. This was no way to die.

Otham, the local priest who oversaw his death and rebirth, spoke an unlikely tongue resembling the classical Latin Fowler had studied in school. The priest subscribed to the age-old belief in return from decease, specializing in the transition from human to *serpens*, snake.

Fowler's rebirth, as Otham described it to the dying explorer, would be a smooth and pleasant change into this desirable reptile. Fowler could guess from Otham's snake mask and his many tattoos of open-mouthed snakes in green and yellow that the serpent was the essence of life to the strange priest.

But so far the pleasurable part of the changeover was missing. Since crash-landing in his three-seater aero-copter, resulting in the instant death of the pilot and copilot and himself being carried, broken in body and near death, into the village for care, Fowler had known nothing but pain and misery, despite his having drunk heavily of the native drink *wero*. This potion, recommended by Otham for its aid in preparing one for the life to come, gave Fowler little relief. Rebirth, if that was truly happening to him, was excruciating, not to mention dying broken-bodied in the first place.

Yet according to Otham, who tended to him day and night on his deathbed of straw and branches, everyone who died on the island found their demise a joyful awakening. This included not only the natives, who all looked forward to death and its transitions, but strangers too: those who like the explorer suffered from bad luck or made some fatal miscalculation while visiting the island—falling from one of the rocky hills that surrounded the village, say, or succumbing to infection and fever in this remote spot where antibiotics and medical degrees were unheard of, or attempting to land an airplane in dense trees.

Surrounded by sculptures and portraits of snakes, and by aged men who wore serpent masks and serpent tattoos, the mortally wounded never failed to sing and chant in bliss, celebrating their imminent transition to snakehood, or in a few rare cases usually reserved for children, to rabbitness or fishdom. Fowler understood that the *wero* flowed freely during these celebrations. Children drank the stuff too, with glee.

Otham assured him that his two flying companions, the pilot Cherrybold and copilot Wineschmidt, perished instantly in the bungled landing, and at once transitioned into handsome snakes, colorful and nonpoisonous, before the priest and his brethren finished extracting Fowler from the wreckage of that ill-fated machine. His deceased companions had not, in Fowler's understanding of Otham's words, done sufficient slithering and coiling as men, nor stalked and eaten enough mice and birds, and would profit mightily from the snake-shape that would amend these too-human shortcomings.

Or so Otham seemed to say. In any case, Fowler never once glimpsed his partners' mangled bodies after the crash, but had to rely on Otham's affirmations in localized Latin that both men had effortlessly become snakes, and that the priest had seen them deep in the forest, enjoying their scaly new lives. Both sent Fowler their heartfelt greetings, claimed Otham.

And yet the explorer, hovering between death and rebirth, was metamorphosing into a different sort of creature. Delirious and wracked with pain, Fowler regained full consciousness one evening, the second of his confinement to his deathbed of straw and twigs, to find that he had sprouted the wings of an angel. Yet the heavenly pinions were deformed, the left one stunted and shriveled like a bundle of dead leaves, the right drooping almost to the ground as if broken. They bore him nowhere, not to an afterlife nor to an aerie aloft in the hills. Fowler saw and felt the botched wings as if in a bad dream. For all their hint of a resurrection, they weighed him down like two anchors hinged to his back.

By the next night his angelic wings were gone, though he remained bedfast and endured bodily changes almost on the hour—now sporting hooves and horns, then fur and claws, and so forth—none of them lasting, and all painful despite gulps of the bitter *vero* Otham held to his lips.

The spirits that ruled over life and its sequel, Otham proclaimed during the explorer's lucid and less tormented moments, were contesting his fate. His form after death, when death finally arrived—unless he was dead already, with his next state still in flux—might be that of a hydra-headed beast, a blind burrower in the soil, a tiny parasite afloat in a river, or any he had not yet experienced. But the priest was confident that, when his past lives were sorted out, Fowler would return as a serpent, like all good men.

As ever Otham made no secret of his bias in favor of serpents. As the leader of a sect of would-be-serpents, he planned to return as one himself. Should Fowler happen to recover and not die after all—the slimmest of possibilities—Otham would show him a cavern, not far from the hut where he lay in *medias res*, full of sacred serpent carvings and paintings.

Yet Fowler, summoning his strength after his third or fourth day of painful and abortive transitioning, protested to the priest that he, named Fowler, could not so discount his forebears as to wish to become anything other than a chicken, or some sort of fowl. His very name, Fowler, bespoke his lineage, and marked him as the descendant of bird-hunters and fowl-breeders going back centuries on the island of Great Britain, if Otham had heard of the place. Surely the ruling spirits would not so divert his family tradition and bloodline as to treat him as the scion of snake-handlers rather than bird-trappers.

Fowler was actually surprised to hear himself say that he cared about his destiny—what could it matter to a rational man like himself if he became a snake rather than a chicken?—but he was a serious historian and anthropologist, and beholden to tradition. Besides, suspended between species, sickened and in pain, he was losing his grip on sanity.

Otham, who claimed to have seen such vacillation in reincarnated forms before, gazed sternly at the explorer. “We shall put it to the test,” said the priest, and summoned two of his underlings to the now disheveled bedside. As in a nightmare, Fowler watched the holy pair carry in buckets of whitish sludge. Starting with his still human feet, they covered him with the thick stuff, and he saw it harden quickly into a giant egglike shell that enclosed him to the chin. The last part they sealed in was his head, and then all was dimmest light. Warmth spread through him, as if the man-filled egg had rolled into brooding sunlight.

Unable to see, and constrained within this ovoid, Fowler underwent successive visions, including some famous ones written down by literary souls who seemingly also had suffered bodily reconfigurations. He saw his helpless insect legs waving above his arched belly as he lay in bed...he became a fascistic sheep who would rule the world...he swam as a vengeful white whale who sank vessels out of New Bedford...he became the fabled Greek narcissist who turned into a flower...

Whether they were real embodiments or figments brought on by his delirium, Fowler beheld all these transformations in his tiny bird brain. Yes, bird brain: at last breaking through the egg shell by pounding it from within with his forehead, aided by a sturdy beak, he had wound up a chicken at last, the most timorous fowl. Since to be a bird was the destiny he felt he deserved, he decided he must make the best of it.

Yet he found that his new form caused much gaiety among the natives. The priests smirked as the unfolding creature kicked away the pieces of egg shell, then hoisted itself on wobbly legs. The villagers laughed as his bird-self—an awkward but normal chicken—devoured disgusting insects and ran from children and dogs while helplessly making odd clucking sounds.

Terrified, Fowler sought refuge in the cave where the sacred serpent totems stood, its sunlit entryway enlivened by many paintings of snakes. Still, there were dark spaces and shadows enough inside to conceal him, though once there he quickly encountered two old friends, whom he didn't at once recognize.

These were two serpents, with something familiar about them. The one in the entryway, coiled in the sunlight, had one eye larger than the other, like Cherrybold's, and the other a slight curvature of the spine, as had afflicted Wineschmidt. The chicken avoided them with increasing fear, since he knew the local serpents feasted on fowl. It was little comfort to know that his demise upon being eaten would be followed by yet another transformation designed to complete his life cycle. More than likely he would remain true to his past, and again become a helpless bird.

"Cherrybold! Wineschmidt!" he cried or rather clucked, as his fellow explorers closed in on him. "Don't you recognize me? It's me, Fowler! Stop!"

Not put off by his former friend's helpless pecking and stuttering, Cherrybold at once moved in for the kill, showing the same impatience that he, as pilot of their craft, had displayed in his foolish attempt to set down where trees stood. And Wineschmidt too, with his usual forcefulness—he was the one who had insisted they come to this little known and dangerous isle to begin with—closed off any route of the chicken's escaping their clutches. With red-veined, straining eyes, Fowler watched his former friend Cherrybottom wrap his bent spine around him, and felt the squeeze as Wineschmidt looked on with darting tongue. His friends no longer knew him.

But then Fowler's claws and wings grew heavier and larger, his strength mightier, and he became a *fowler*, a great bird of prey that destroyed small fry. Holding the two serpents in his talons, he carried them over the trees and stony cliffs and, from a deadly height, dropped them into a rocky abyss below. Not knowing when he would next encounter them, or what form they might then assume if not the snake, he flew on, his destiny soaring.

END



Michael Fowler writes humor and horror in Ohio.

The Massacre at Rue Saint-Séverin by Lucy Rumble

My name is Nicolas, and I need to set the record straight. I'm the one who set it all wrong to begin with, but I think France is finally ready for the truth. Something big is coming, and we need to unite against despotism now more than ever. But I'm getting ahead of myself. I'll tell my story as it really happened, and allow you, dear reader, to make of it what you will. I hope you won't think me too cruel; I hope you'll see why this was – and will be – necessary for France's survival.

*

In my twenties, I found employment with one Jacques Vincent, the great Parisian printmaker. It was a dream come true, and such prestigious circumstances naturally brought with them delusions of some future grandeur. France had increasingly become the breeding ground for new philosophical thought, and its salons spewed out hope for socio-economic advancement. Such was the poison of the age: hope. Regardless, we lowly workers saw Vincent's print shop as our chance to climb the pecking order and make something of ourselves. I often fancied myself becoming master of my very own printshop, and it was this hope of my future prospects that kept me going through the more gruelling periods of my employment. But 1730 killed that dream. 1730 was when we killed the cats – at least, that's the story I printed in the morning paper. 'The Great Cat Massacre' I called it, a clever title, betraying just enough truth to ease my guilt at lying in the small print.

There was a massacre, sure. Borne from hysteria. True hysteria, that is, the kind that only comes to minds that have been damaged beyond repair. You've got to understand, dear reader, that past year had been tough on all of us, workers especially. At Vincent's, we fell victim to that endless stream of payless, thankless work that so perfectly captured the modern age. The printing industry was relentless: developing in leaps and bounds, the great wheel of progress rolled onwards, sweeping us into its cycle and crushing us as it turned. I can't remember much of 1729, so dirtied and depraved we were that every day seemed to merge into one long sequence of work, grime, colleagues jumping boat, ink, and cats. There was only so much hardship we could take before something happened. Let me remind you: this was inevitable.

During that year, we lived for our work. Not in any meaningful sense – our ever-deteriorating conditions had rather rid us of any remaining passion, and we received little reward for our long hours. Rather, I mean that the shop became our home. We acted like machines, our limbs moving in patterns we had hardly ordered them to, bodies carrying out their work as slaves to the routine. Vincent had become forgetful, sometimes leaving us locked inside that shop for days at a time. Our bodies gathered black blotches, bruised from lying on the hard wooden floor and splattered with stray blobs of ink. The only real sense of passing time were the scratches on our arms, crusting over and reopening as Vincent's vast array of fat cats clambered over us while we worked, digging their uncut claws into our skin. We were mostly fed scraps, peelings of meat taken from their dinner plates, thick with gristle, sometimes accompanied by a foul-smelling sludge that was clearly intended for the cats. How we hated those feline fiends then.

They seemed to grow by the day. Gorging themselves on the fruits of our labour, they invaded the shop after mealtime, winding their fat bodies round our legs to prove their superiority. They clambered across every surface, spreading inky paws across our newly printed pages. We heard their voices more often than our own, and soon enough, Leveille and I had become so accustomed to the intonations of their meows that we began to fancy that we could make out what they were saying. The cats were talking about us, sneering and jibing at our misfortune. How pitiful we were, us abandoned creatures, devoid of master's love.

So – remember the conditions dear reader, our hysteria – we decided to unionise. Leveille and I gathered the paltry band of workers that had remained in that cursed place and together we devised a plan to rid the shop of cats once and for all. We may not have had any say in our conditions, or our pay, but we'd be damned if we couldn't get ourselves some peace. Killing the cats directly would achieve nothing, we knew that; Vincent would just knock our pay even further, or remove us from the shop entirely. No, we had to go further. We had to torture him the same way his cats had tortured us, drive him to that same hysteria so he'd want rid of them too.

The next night, when Vincent came to release us from our entrapment, we followed him home. We waited until we were sure he was asleep, before we clambered onto the roof, padding along to perch above his open window. Leveille led our chorus, howling into the clammy air in a long, whiney meow. The rest of us followed suit, voices merging into a cacophony of desperate screeches, begging to the heavens for our sanity to return. This awful nightly song continued for almost a week before the cats decided to join us. Locked out and starved, they too had been cast away unloved. Vincent had thought them possessed, and soon enough he was bursting through the doors of the shop, barking orders at us to kill those rascals.

We were more than happy to oblige. Our lives had been ruined, and our sights were set on destroying those who had benefited most. In the shop that night, we staged a trial. Cats sat in stalls, Leveille and I behind a makeshift podium, and we set out to determine who was to blame for our demise. The hearing was short, and the resulting judgement unanimous: all of them were rotten, and the only suitable sentence was death.

Our torturers tried to flee. They rose from their seats in unison, fat fleshy forms squirming and lurching toward the door as one big pathetic beast. We smacked them down, grabbing whatever objects we could to finish the job. We beat them hard, watching their plump frames flail around with each hit. Slowly but surely, we made our way through the body of the beast, capturing those scrambling toward the front doors and bludgeoning them until we were sure they were dead. Screams filled the night – they were being too loud. I gripped one by the throat and poured ink down its gullet, listening to its muted splutters as its lifeforce was choked out. We were grinning, our frenzied movements spurred on by the sounds of their agony. We'd make it in the world, we thought, now we had rid it of its noise. When all was done, and the cats lay still, we dragged their bodies into the streets, foaming with blood and dirt, and hung them on display in that sleeping city.

When we awoke the next morning, our trance was over. We found ourselves in the main shop, covered in blood. I couldn't remember what had happened, not just the night before but for the past month. It has come back to me now, in pieces, but time is still mostly blurred. I remember clutching at my skeletal frame, my stomach aching in that familiar dullness, hands thick with brownish stains. My head was spinning, it felt like it had been extracted from a larger system, unable to function properly on its own. I glanced around to see cats covering the floor of the

shop, bodies piled on top of one another. I saw Leveille in the corner, licking the dirt and blood off his hands in long, deliberate strokes. He meowed, brushing flaxen hair from his face and smearing a brown stain across his forehead. He crawled over to me, eyes wide as realisation set in.

What had we done? I looked down at the blood pooling at my feet. It stunk.

I felt my heart pounding, racing, as I focused on the low vibration resounding round the room. Purrs emerged from the heaps of reddened cats around us, sleeping in satisfaction at our victory. Ours. Us and the cats. They were still living, still purring, still infesting the workshop. But this time, I couldn't find it in myself to mind. I felt peaceful. The cats were never really our enemy, people were. Vincent was dead, and we were free to use our hard-earned money however we liked.

I set about writing a story, telling of how we killed the cats. 'It was a bloodbath', I wrote, 'a real shame'. Perhaps if I constructed a different story, one with the same ending, we could fool France into believing something else. Then we could move on from this nightmare and live out our days in peace. And as you already know, dear reader, it worked.

As we left the shop that day, Leveille and I, and our new friends, we felt optimistic. Scared, certainly, and horrified at what we had done. But we knew there was a future for people like us, even if France wasn't ready to know it yet.

We sauntered off into the distant glimmer of the rising sun, cats trailing behind cats, meowing in satisfaction. Our whiskers fluttered in the wind, fur pricked at the sight of our victims hanging in the streets. Flagellated skin was peeling from their bodies, lynched and pale, as they swayed in the morning breeze. Some living ones stood at the end of the road, not daring to move as we slowly padded up, winding our way around their legs and nuzzling into their shins, bidding the people of Paris goodbye.

Somewhere in the story, the line between human and cat became blurred, and we realised we weren't so different after all. We were all victims of our masters, beaten and fed the wrong food. Bodies bruised and emaciated when times were tough and they decided that they mattered more than us. Jealousy morphed into unity, and we became stronger together. I might not be a print maker now, but we started something that day. And sometime soon, the whole of France will know our pain. Something big is coming, and we must learn to fight as one, so we might free ourselves of our dependency. And we will succeed, because that's the forgotten truth of the Great Cat Massacre at Rue Saint-Séverin: it was us, the cats, that won.



Lucy Rumble is an emerging writer from Essex. Her poem 'My Nan, Remembered' won third place in the 2023 Tap Into Poetry contest, and her work has been published in Crow & Cross Keys, Schlock! Webzine, and Needle Poetry, among others. When she isn't writing, she is trapped in the dust and darkness of an archive (or her mind). Find Lucy online at Instagram: @lucyrumble.writes or on the Website: www.lucy.smlr.uk



BLUE DEMON by Janis Holm

Janis Butler Holm served as Associate Editor for Wide Angle, the film journal, and currently works as a writer and editor in sunny Los Angeles. Her prose, poems, art, and performance pieces have appeared in small-press, national, and international magazines. Her plays have been produced in the U.S., Canada, Russia, and the U.K

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Lindwyrn's Bride by L.R. Morrow

My father is shaking, his knuckles bone white
as he tells me the king has demanded my life.
The queen used magic badly, as fools often do
and gave birth to a prince, and a lindwyrn too.
The lindwyrn, born first, is demanding a bride
thus far the princeling has eaten the past nine.
No nobles will now give up their last daughters
but we are but gardeners, so I'm forced into slaughter.

My nightgown is linen—even this bridal white
as I pick up my skirt and run into verdant night.
In royal gardens where I worked all my hours
a witch steps forward, dripping in flowers.
The witch softly claims I can trick my new groom
into shedding dragon form, thus a true man exhume.
I think over her instructions, complex as they are
as my hands, work calloused, pick at old scars.

My bridegroom is pale, scales tipping moon white
his eyes black as oil, and his fangs venom bright.
The dress is heavy, layers of silk wrapping steel
holding all that I need to avoid becoming his meal.
I think of the royals, all through my vows,
and of who made enchantment that such violence allows.
There are many victims in this, my groom just first
but he still devoured nine girls, no matter the curse.

Our bedsheets are stained, soaked through with red
as I cradle my knife and my dead husband's head.
I drag bloodied dagger across venomous fang
knowing full well in the morning I'll hang.
The poison acts quick, though I have three more:
King, Queen, and Witch, to settle the score.
They buried nine girls, made gardens of daughters
what could I do, but be forced into slaughter?

L.R. Morrow is a queer storyteller and poet currently based out of Pittsburgh. A lover of fantasy and sci-fi, their work has a heavy focus on identity, choice, and toying with narrative expectations. When they aren't writing, they're usually hoarding books, yearning over the ocean, or doing yoga. Find them online at <https://linktr.ee/lrmorrow>

The Sword That Stayed in the Stone by Alex Horn

“Only the strong can rule,” the Hammer-Queen told me from her hammer-throne.

She was weak, then. Sick. Failing. Ninety-nine years old. Despite all that, my grandmother still cut an impressive figure. Her legendary size had diminished somewhat, in her old age, and yet still she was six-and-a-half feet tall or more. The muscles of her arms, once thicker than those of any knight in her service, had shrunk considerably, yet they still looked wiry-tough. And her pointed, stony face was as proud as ever.

Only her voice revealed the full extent of her decline. The wasting disease inside her had spread to her lungs and throat. Her words came out raspy, and each one seemed to pain her. Yet still she spoke.

Only the strong can rule.

We sat together side by side upon Groundshaker, the immense warhammer that was both the Royal Weapon and the Royal Seat. The weighty, unpolished boulder that was its head also made for a usable chair, just large enough for two people to squat down beside each other, if they squeezed together. Behind us, in the middle of the boulder, a two-handed greatsword stuck out straight up. Before its point had been buried in the stone, that sword had been Earthtaker — the legendary blade of the Sword-Kings, who had ruled the Realm for many long millennia before my grandmother’s rise to power. Now, the sword wasn’t even a sword. It was only Groundshaker’s handle.

A handle I would never be able to truly grasp.

“Only the strong can rule,” I repeated, “and I am not strong. Is that what you mean to say?”

This response may have been needlessly combative, considering I was speaking to my dying grandmother, and the Queen besides. In my defense, I was only saying what we both already knew. Whispers of my weakness had dogged me for years now. And I had to admit: they were not undeserved.

My grandmother had first lifted Groundshaker at the age of seventeen. She had spent her teenage and adult years using it to smash aside all opposition. And she had remained capable of wielding it until well after her eightieth birthday. I, on the other hand, was a man grown, in the fullness of my strength, and still had never once so much as nudged it off the ground. Recently, I had given up trying. The throne room was empty at the moment, at my grandmother’s command, but it rarely was otherwise. Why bother with the embarrassment? Why give the court the satisfaction?

The Heir That Never Should Have Been, they called me now, behind my back.

The Frail Prince.

So the Hammer-Queen’s response surprised me.

“You have the strength to rule, Prince Edgar,” the Queen said firmly. “I have no doubt of that. But as to whether you will be able to use your own strength — of that, I am not yet sure. That is up to you.”

“What do you mean?”

The Hammer-Queen shrugged her mighty shoulders. It occurred to me how much smaller I was than her: even diminished, she had nearly a foot on me.

“You do not seem comfortable in your own skin. You are not at one with your mind and body. How can you hope to rule the Realm, if you cannot even rule yourself?”

She had a fair point. My grandmother sat straight and proud upon her hammer-throne. I was hunched forward, leaning away from the chair as if I wanted nothing to do with it. Which I really didn't.

To be fair: Groundshaker did not make for a comfortable seat. After all, it had no back — at least, not one that was advisable to lean on. The sword Earthtaker might only be a glorified handle now, and its tip ensconced in stone, but the upper length of the blade remained razor sharp. Yet in all eighty-two years of my grandmother's reign, not once had she cut herself upon it. She'd been sick for years now; entirely bedridden for months. Yet she had still come here, to sit with me upon the throne that would soon be mine. And she sat upright and unafraid, just as she always had. That was real strength.

The difference between us could not have been clearer. As hard as I willed it, my spine would not straighten, and my fears were plain enough.

“What if I can't?” I asked. “What if I can't rule?”

My grandmother shrugged again.

“But there's no one else,” I said, slightly panicked. “I'm the only one left.”

And so I was.

The Hammer-Queen had birthed three sons. The youngest prince had died in childhood of a pox. My Father, the Prince Broderick, was the eldest and heir, but he had died in battle two years ago, felled by rebel lords from the Leopardlands. My sister, the Princess Edith, his beloved daughter and squire, died beside him. Before she fell, though, she picked up Groundshaker from where our fallen father had dropped it, and used it to take a dozen Leopardland spearmen down with her. Soon after, my uncle, the Prince Morgan, had journeyed to the Leopardlands, retrieved Groundshaker, and avenged his brother's and niece's deaths. But Uncle Morgan had sought to punish the Leopardlands further, and with the Hammer-Queen's reluctant leave, he returned there three more times to burn their cities and their fields. On the third campaign, not four months ago, he'd taken a javelin through the shoulder. It hadn't seemed serious, at first. Prince Morgan was a veteran of three-dozen battles: a strong man, he had suffered worse injuries before, and healed from them all. But then the wound had festered, and he too had died. Not even strong men can fight off infection. Not every time.

I'd never been close with my uncle, nor even my father. They were brash, boisterous men, and restless — only at peace in the thick of battle. And yet I'd loved them. My sister, though smarter than our father and uncle by far, had been, if anything, even more vicious and violent. And yet I'd loved her even more. She was the true heir, my Father's firstborn, destined to rule in her own right one day as the second Hammer-Queen. But now she was dead. She, and Father, and Uncle Morgan too. And now the Hammer-Queen herself had one foot in the grave.

It was not hard to imagine what would happen once she passed. For years, fear of my grandmother's strength had held the Realm together. Even after she weakened, the strength of that legend endured. When she died, though — that was going to change things. Rebellions would sprout from every corner. The Leopardlands would no doubt rise up again; other secessionists would join them, seeking independence from the Realm. Distant cousins of the old Sword-Kings — feigned or otherwise — would seek to “reclaim” the throne of their supposed ancestors. And those were just the internal threats. The Realm my grandmother had hammered together was too big for its own good. Our borders were too long to patrol; our rivals, too numerous to pacify. We might be invaded from most any direction. I was no soldier, but I had

always been a student of history. I knew what happens when a weak King takes the throne. One way or another, I was going to wind up with my head on the end of a spear. And so would end the line of the Hammer-Queen. I suppose I could only count it a mercy that I did not have children of my own, to suffer the same fate. I would die alone.

I felt the tears rising behind my eyes, but I pushed them down. I did not want to cry in front of my royal grandmother. I might never make a knight, but I was a man of three-and-thirty, and a Prince besides, and I had my pride. I took a deep breath, and looked the Hammer-Queen in the eye.

“What should I do?” I asked her.

She answered with a question.

“Do you know the story of how I came to be the Hammer-Queen?”

I looked at her blankly.

“Of course.”

My grandmother’s ascent had become more than legend. To the people of the Realm, it was scripture.

“Prove it to me, then. Tell me, from the beginning.”

I didn’t hesitate. My muscles may have been weak, but my memory has always been sharp. And though I’d never known a battle, I loved all stories of glory and woe. This, at least, I could do.

“For thousands of years, the Sword-Kings ruled. The blade Earthtaker was their symbol, and with it their Kings and Queens won many great battles and made the Realm as one. But a century ago, the last Sword-King died childless, and without nieces or nephews. Many more distant cousins of the royal family sought to claim the throne, and battle broke out everywhere. Each pretender asked for aid from the Realm’s Lady Seneschal— a much-feared sorceress, and trusted advisor to the last Sword-King, who had received the king’s blade Earthtaker after his death. To try and stop the fighting, the Lady Seneschal cast an enchantment upon the sword.”

“The spell submerged the sword into a great slab of stone. The Lady Seneschal decreed that only the rightful King or Queen could pull the sword from the stone. All the claimants to the throne called a truce, and attempted to free the sword. But none of them could do it. The truce was broken, and in the fighting that followed, the Lady Seneschal was killed. Now there was no one with magical skill enough to remove the sword by spellwork. And if there was some ‘rightful King’, as the Lady’s spell would recognize it, they were nowhere to be found. The Realm split into a dozen warring factions, until it was a Realm no longer, but only a land of broken princedoms.”

I paused.

“Go on,” my grandmother urged me.

“Wouldn’t you tell this next part better than me?”

My grandmother laughed a laugh that turned into a cough at the end of it. In her youth, she had been known as “the Laughing Hammer”; and even in my own youth, when she had already grown old, her guffaws had boomed as strong as her hammer-blows. Now, although that laugh had turned thin and sickly, I still heard the joy in it.

“I suppose I would,” she answered. “But I’d rather hear you tell it.”

“Well,” I continued, “the fighting went on. Half the cousins of the last Sword-King were killed, and many of the surviving claimants fled. In the meantime, thousands of people swarmed around the sword in the stone, and attempted to pull it free. But no one could. Until one day, you tried. The simple daughter of a blacksmith. You couldn’t free Earthtaker from the stone, either.

So instead, you picked the whole thing up and swung it around like a hammer. You declared it a new weapon, Groundshaker, and yourself the new Queen. Then you went and battered all the remaining claimants into submission, one by one. Until at last you laid the hammer down, handle-up, and seated yourself upon it as your throne. You ruled for many years of peace and plenty.”

“Until I grew too old to wield Groundshaker in battle, and rebellions rose up. Resulting in the deaths of my two sons and my only granddaughter.”

I paused for a moment, stunned.

“I — I didn’t think to include that part.”

“Why not?” she said. “It’s the ending. Every true story needs an ending. And I will not soften the blow of my words, any more than I used to soften my hammer blows. There is no time. Words must needs hit harder than hammers ever could.”

Words, at least, I could use. I’d never gone to war — not with my family, and not to avenge them, either. Twice or thrice, I’d asked the Hammer-Queen for leave to join this army or another, but she’d always denied me. I would only get myself killed, she said: I was no warrior. Instead, I stayed safe at home, and sat on the Queen’s councils. I read my books and studied my histories. When my grandmother had to settle hard cases, I pored over books of ancient law, and made my recommendations. I had contributed, best as I could, to the wellbeing of the Realm. But never once had I been made to fear for my life. Never once had I led men and women into battle. And never once had I lifted Groundshaker. I was a Prince, yes — lords and subjects alike sought my counsel, and some even followed it. But no one would mistake me for a suitable heir to the Hammer-Queen. She had won the throne with the fury of her fists; with the hammering of her hammer. My own fists were made for wielding quill and parchment.

When my father and sister lived, that was a little thing. They were both born warriors, and ahead of me in the line of succession. Their hands were made to wield Groundshaker. They were to be the first Hammer-King and then the second Hammer-Queen, in their own time. But then death had claimed them, and now they were to be nothing at all. Only memories. And now here I was, heir to a burden I could not lift.

“I have my words,” I grumbled, “for what little good they’ll do me.”

“I feared as much is true,” the Hammer-Queen responded, and now she sounded exasperated. “You told the whole story of my rise, and yet I do not think you understood a word of it.”

“What do you mean?”

“Why did I win the throne?”

“Because you lifted Groundshaker.”

The Hammer-Queen sighed.

“No, my Prince. I won the throne because I *named* Groundshaker. Thousands of knights and lords tried to pull the sword from the stone, and failed. I failed too. But then I lifted it above my head, and made it my weapon, and declared that good enough. When I failed the game I was playing, I changed the game, and won that way. Before I lifted it, Groundshaker wasn’t Groundshaker. It was only Earthtaker, stuck in a stone. I claimed it. I named it. It wasn’t the weapon that built my reign. It was my words.”

“And then you went on to use that weapon to beat half the lords of the Realm into submission,” I pointed out. “You killed the Dagger-King in single combat, and left the Duke of Shadows groveling at your feet, broken-legged, begging for mercy. I’d say *those* triumphs were what won your throne.”

“Then you’d be wrong. The singers and tale-tellers make much of my victories, and I won’t deny the value of battles won. But no one sings of peaceful surrender. I won more battles at the negotiating table than I ever did on the field. My words served me then. My legend served me as well. The girl who’d lifted both sword and stone and made them her own. The inheritor of the Sword-King’s legacy. The Hammer-Queen. Such was the strength of the legend that more often than not, my enemies knelt in front of Groundshaker before I ever had to swing it at them.”

“A legend still built on strength and martial prowess,” I insisted. “Not an option for me.”

“You’re missing the point,” my grandmother replied, and now she really sounded exasperated. “I won the throne because I *claimed* it. The Lady Seneschal had witch’s powers I will never know — sorceries that might have wowed armies far more effectively than my hammerwork. She could have made herself the Sword-Queen. But she did not seize the sword by the handle while she had the chance. I did. She didn’t. She died. I didn’t. Do you think that’s because I was more powerful? Because I was the righteous Queen? Of course not. It’s because I *declared myself* to be so. The people were waiting for a prince to pull the sword from the stone. When I lifted the stone by its handle — that by itself was nothing. Just a curiosity. A freak feat of strength from a blacksmith’s daughter. No one cared. Until I *made them care*.”

She paused for a moment, catching her breath, and I thought perhaps I should say something. But no words occurred to me, and then she went on.

“One warrior, no matter how great, does not win a war. But one *leader* can. I rallied my armies around me. I built loyalty in my men. I did this in my own way. And you can do it in yours.”

Slowly, the Hammer-Queen pushed herself to her feet. It was humbling to see how hard it was for her to rise from her stony throne — this Queen who had once lifted it above her head and used it to smash her foes to pieces. But at last she was standing. She turned to face me. I sat alone now on the Hammer-Throne. I felt even less comfortable than before.

“Only the strong can rule, Prince Edgar,” she told me. “But anyone can find their own kind of strength, if they’re willing to look for it.”

Then, without another word, she turned for the door, and left me sitting alone on the throne to ponder her words.

I stayed there in the throne room for many hours, thinking over my options. Three times, I tried in vain to lift Groundshaker, but it didn’t even budge. Once, I even attempted to pull the sword out from its stone, but that was just as futile. In the end, I sat there on the stony throne all night long, and weighed my grandmother’s words. At last, the first rays of sunshine began to creep through the windows – and just then, the seed of an idea dropped suddenly into my mind, as if it had come with the dawn.

I walked slowly out of the throne room, and went back to my own apartments. But though I had been up all night, I went not to my bed, but to my desk. I had a lot of planning to do, and very little time to do it. Even less than I knew.

Three weeks later, the Hammer-Queen was dead.

* * *

In accordance with the Sword-King’s custom of old, I allowed eight-and-ten days of mourning for my grandmother the Hammer-Queen, before I took up the crown myself. Sometimes, traditions must be broken. But other times, they should be followed. Like when they’re convenient. As it turned out, eighteen days was just as long as I needed to set my own plans into motion.

I wrote countless pages; sent countless letters; read my words to the mirror countless times. I gave the hammer-throne Groundshaker over to the royal engineers, and supplied them with plans on how it should be modified.

On the nineteenth day, I held my coronation. The throne room could hold only three hundred people, but it didn't matter. Though I could only be crowned once, I was to give some version of the following speech at least a hundred times, in a hundred different places. And even now, horsed messengers were bringing written copies of it to every quarter of the Realm.

Even so: that first time, at the coronation, was special. I reserved only half of the throne room's capacity for the usual lords and knights. The rest I filled with the common people of the city. Tailors and tanners; spearmen and singers; farmers and fishers; and even blacksmiths, like my own great-grandfather. I had to speak to everyone.

People, noble and peasant alike, began to murmur as soon as they entered the throne room. I sat on the throne awaiting them, but it was not the throne they knew. Groundshaker was gone — or rather, it had changed. It was a hammer-throne no longer, but now a proper seat, carved from stone, and lined with cushions. The handle that had once been the sword Earthtaker was completely gone.

Or rather: it too had changed. In my right hand I held a stone-and-metal gavel. My smiths had snapped off the last eight inches of Earthtaker's blade, and then carved it away from the stone so that only a fist-sized chunk remained, magically fused to the swordpoint. I held it from the other end, by a stone handle attached to the base.

A little outlet of stone now hung over the front of the throne, like a desk. I had a large stack of papers spread across this stone desk, along with two quills and a pot of ink. The addition of this desk to the throne, and the cushions, were just two of many practical changes I intended to make to the Realm.

I waited a moment to see if the crowd would settle down by itself, but they continued to murmur. That was just as I had planned it. I lifted the gavel and banged it ten times on the stone. The noise cut the air like a razor. Then there was silence.

"Groundshaker is not gone," I began. "It is here before you, in two parts: the throne beneath my seat, and the hammer in my hands."

I stood up, and held the gavel aloft so all could see it.

"The Hammer-Queen was the queen we needed. When she was born, the Realm was divided. But because of her might, we are now bound together. She hammered the Realm together, as her blacksmith father might have hammered together two plates of steel."

"I will not be the same kind of ruler as my grandmother. But I *will be* the leader we need today. The realm has already been hammered together. It is now time to polish it into perfection."

"My grandmother was a great woman: the greatest the Realm has ever known. She will not be easily replaced. And I do not hesitate to admit that I am, alone, not equal to the task. I will need help. I will need *all* of your help, from the mightiest knight to the lowliest ditch-digger, and everyone in between. We must all work together to make this Realm a land of which we can all be proud."

"And so I declare that my reign will be a reign of justice. From now on, *anyone* — whether they be man or woman, child or elder, peasant or merchant or lord — will have the right to come before me, pay homage to Groundshaker, and seek my personal verdict on any conflict or complaint. *All* will be heard, and *all* will be given fair redress. And when we find ancient laws

that are unfair and outdated, we will change them, and establish new rights for all. My grandmother's hammer was a warhammer. Mine shall be a gavel of justice."

I paused. I'd hoped for some hesitant applause, at this point. But there was no clapping, hesitant or otherwise. The crowd was mostly silent. The nobles looked stunned, or skeptical; the commoners looked scared. As I stood there, a few nervous murmurs broke out. But I was prepared for this.

I turned and banged the gavel upon the throne, as hard as I could. I still struck with no great strength, but it didn't matter. When the two halves of Groundshaker reunited, thunder seemed to fill the room.

From behind me, a group of thirty men and women, armed and armored, emerged from the royal chambers where I had stationed them, and crowded behind the throne. Some were knights and local heroes: the celebrated subjects of a thousand songs. Others were high lords, taken from all across the Realm — even two from the Leopardlands, where I had negotiated a truce. But most of the crowd were the very same warriors who had marched with my father, sister, and uncle against the Leopardlands, and fought beside them as they fell. Many had known me since childhood. They had not forgotten me now.

I pointed to each of my loyalists, one by one, and gave their names and titles for the whole court to hear. For the greatest of the village heroes, I mentioned their accomplishments — outlaws slain and tournaments won. For the greatest of the lords, I gave due respect to their status as Generals, and praised the might of their armies.

"Come before the throne in peace," I said to the crowd, "lay out your grievances, and you will be heard. But never think to come before the throne with sword in hand. I may be no fighter, but I am surrounded by fighters. And what's more, I am the Hammer-Queen's grandson. Rise against me, and the hammer will fall."

One of the lords stepped forward now. It was the Duke of Silversea: the admiral of the royal fleet, and my late grandmother's staunchest supporter. He carried with him the simple gold-and-platinum circlet that had been the Hammer-Queen's crown. When he placed it on my head, the silence broke, and the air was filled with claps and cheers.

In the past, I had been "the Frail Prince". That all changed that day. In the future, they would call me "King Edgar the Eloquent", "King Edgar the Even-Handed", and "King Edgar the Equalizer"; "the Just Hammer" and "the Gavel-King". In time, my legend would grow near as great as my grandmother's.

But I was to know none of that then. Standing there, newly crowned, I basked in the love of the crowd. The applause seemed to go on forever. I knew I could silence them with a single strike of hammer against stone. But why bother? Good things should last as long as they're able.

To be sure: only half of the applause was genuine. Perhaps less. My reign meant change, and change never comes easy. Pretenders and would-be usurpers would no doubt plague me. Rebellions would no doubt arrive. And when the time came, I would send forth my armies to crush them — from the comfort of my cushioned throne.



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Fallen by Jenee Dutary

It was a normal high school day for Kary and she was succeeding at blending into the background of teenage monotony until she met his eyes.

A new boy walked into the class and everyone was staring at him, taking advantage of the teacher's request for him to introduce himself. His name was Micah, was new to town, and had the most brilliant eyes shadowed beneath shaggy black hair. Kary had to remind herself to breathe as he sat down in the empty seat next to hers.

Her best friend, Zach, had always been the reigning king of the school when it came to looks. For the first time in three years, he had some competition, and she was interested in seeing how he would take the news. Micah was tall, dark, and had that mysterious thing going on. What was most intriguing were his ocean blue eyes, just like Zach's. Kary wondered if her best friend had a cousin she didn't know about.

Micah must have sensed her unwavering focus because he looked up and stared right back into her eyes. She turned away, heat blooming on her cheeks, and spent the rest of the class looking down at her hands.

When the bell rang Kary grabbed her books and ran out of the classroom as fast as she could, shouldering past a group of gossiping girls. They glared at her as she slipped by.

"Did you see him look at her?"

"Yeah, and he smiled!"

"Do you think they know each other?"

"There's no way anyone as hot as him would know a loser like her."

Kary walked away as fast as she could without running and when she reached her locker, she leaned against it and closed her eyes, trying her best to block out their words. Is it true? She wondered, had he smiled?

Kary tucked her unneeded textbooks into her locker and walked out the school doors, feeling shaky. The sun was bright and lit the grass in vibrant colors. Kary lowered her eyes from the glare and focused on her feet as she did her best to avoid her loitering peers. The August heat beat down on the back of her neck as she counted the cracks in the sidewalk.

A shadow passed in front of her, quiet like a whisper of wings, but when she looked up no one was nearby. She had made her way through the largest congregation of students and now as she turned the corner of the building, no more than a handful of them were around.

"What's your name?"

Kary startled at the voice and its proximity. She glanced to her left and found Micah had fallen in step next to her. His voice was melodic and intriguing. She felt like she could spend all day listening to him discuss particle physics and ask him for more when he finished.

She gulped, "Karilyn." She sounded so ordinary next to him and she knew those other girls would agree. They'd tell her she had no business talking to him in the first place.

"Karilyn," he repeated, testing the way it felt.

"I usually go by Kary," she added, and tucked a strand of hair behind an ear. "I don't even know why I—"

"Hey, Kary!"

She turned around, surprised for the second time in as many minutes, and realized they had stopped walking. Zach was running toward them. Kary turned to Micah to introduce him to Zach but when she looked for him, he was gone.

“Who are you looking for?” Zach asked as he caught up.

She crinkled her face in confusion. He must have seen Micah standing right next to her, why would he pretend he didn’t?

“No one, I guess,” Kary muttered. She didn’t know how she could explain Micah’s sudden departure so it didn’t make sense to try. Zach looked at her worriedly for a second, and then his smile broke the confusion.

“Come on, I’ll take you home.” He grabbed her hand and dragged her toward his car. It took a while to make it out of the school’s parking lot as the upperclassmen fought to be the first ones out. Zach never bothered to get into the mix, but chose to hang back while the others made their exit.

He prattled on about his day and Kary listened as best she could.

“It’s terrible we have no classes together,” he said. “It’s weird without you.” It was, on both accounts. This was their last year of high school and for the first time the two of them didn’t share a single class. She didn’t just miss having her friend, she missed having him.

Zach was known for being funny and with his blond hair and intriguing blue eyes, he was a favorite among the girls. No one understood why he hung out with Kary, but at least they didn’t bother to point that out when he was around. The two of them became fast friends when she moved to Franklin six years ago. Kary and her dad moved a lot after her mom died, struggling to find a place to land. Zach was the only kid that would talk to her, even back then, and she’d always loved him for it.

From the moment he took her under his wing, she knew he’d be the guy she’d spend the rest of her life crushing on. It was no surprise to her that he didn’t return her feelings. Kary didn’t think she was ugly, just not beautiful. She found herself to be very average and her dislike of crowds and preference for studying over parties didn’t help her popularity level.

“How was your day?” Zach asked after realizing she had zoned off.

“It was alright. There’s a new guy.” She still didn’t understand how Zach didn’t see Micah earlier, or where he went for that matter.

“Yeah? Anything interesting?”

She filled him in on how Micah introduced himself to the class and hesitated before mentioning what everyone else was more interested in: his handsome face. “He didn’t seem to be very friendly though,” Kary offered. “I think your prom crown is still secure.”

Zach hummed, thinking to himself. “Did you notice anything weird about him?”

“Not really, why? Do you know something?” The residents of Franklin were full-time gossips but Zach had never been the kind to feed into rumors.

He shook his head and didn’t say anymore as he pulled the car into Kary’s driveway. Her dad was still at work and it would be hours before he got home.

Kary looked up at Zach as she grabbed her bag. His eyes were shining as he watched her. How can he and Micah have the same exact shade of blue? She thought. She also didn’t think it made sense for Micah to have approached her outside of the school. Sure, maybe it was too early for him to learn that she was a social pariah, but what reason would he have to talk to her in the first place?

“What’s on your mind?” Zach asked. He knew her too well.

Kary focused her eyes and shook her head. “Nothing,” she said, one hand on the door handle. When it looked like he wasn’t buying it, she insisted, “Nothing important.”

Zach fixed her with one of his killer smiles that never failed to make her heart stumble. “You know you can tell me anything, right?”

Kary looked up at him and unlike all the other times in her life, she didn't have to force her smile. "I know." Nothing ever felt forced with Zach, from the moment they met. "Do you want to come in and watch a movie?"

His face lit up and he turned off the engine, hopped out of his seat, and held her door open for her as she climbed out.

Kary knew she could trust Zach, but she didn't think he'd understand what was really bothering her so much. There wasn't a lot that she remembered about her younger years, her brain had blocked out most of it to protect her from the hell she witnessed at four years old.

She had been there when her mom was killed in a robbery gone sideways, locked within the car and left to watch. She only remembered one thing from that day and it was the deep blue color of a stranger's eyes. Maybe it was why she was so drawn to Zach in the first place. Seeing that same color on Micah, she didn't know what to make of it.

Once they were inside, Kary picked the movie, a classic comedy that they both knew all of the words for. Zach made a bowl of popcorn and they took turns acting out the lines. Halfway through, Kary settled on the couch and Zach joined her, sitting close enough for their thighs to brush against each other. The touch warmed her and she told herself to ignore it, that she was ridiculous for letting herself think it meant anything at all.

She leaned her head against his shoulder, glad to have his friendship, if anything. Exhaustion pulled at her and she closed her eyes. Kary struggled to find sleep most nights but spending time with Zach never failed to bring her comfort. It was almost too easy for her to drift away next to him.

Zach shook Kary awake and helped her get into bed. "I'll let myself out," he whispered. She nodded and let him tuck the blanket around her shoulders. Behind closed eyes she could feel his hesitation. Zach's hand trailed from her shoulder and down the length of her arm as he stepped away. Goose bumps exploded over her skin and she shivered. Warmth tingled through her veins and she rolled onto her side, smiling to herself.

It took the smell of food to pull her from sleep. She knew she had dreamt, but all she could remember were flames and an image of Micah. Did I really dream of him? She wondered.

A plate of baked chicken and broccoli was waiting for her on the counter and the rest of the house was silent. It was late in the night and she knew her dad was already in bed.

Kary fed her growling stomach and decided to go outside for some fresh air. The night was still warm but at least there was a breeze to cool Kary down as she walked. She wished she had someone to talk to but she knew no one else would be awake at this time.

Something caught Kary's attention, a small something falling to the ground up ahead in a slow zig-zag pattern. As she got closer, she realized it was a feather and plucked it out of the air. It was black and sleek in near perfect condition.

When she looked up Micah was standing in front of her. She sucked in a deep breath and her eyes grew wide in surprise.

He was staring at Kary as she put a hand to her heart, willing it's wild thumping to calm down. Where did he come from?

"Karilyn," Micah murmured her name and she chastised herself for liking the way he said it far too much.

"Micah," she acknowledged him with a nod. "What are you doing out here?"

"I couldn't sleep."

She nodded, understanding how that was, although for her it was because her dreams tended to be plagued by nightmares.

“What brought you to Franklin?” Kary asked, resuming her pace. She found the coincidence of him moving into the same neighborhood odd, but Franklin was a small town and she was glad to have someone to fill the silence.

“Family,” Micah’s response was short and he didn’t offer to elaborate.

“Is that what you’re calling it?”

Kary whirled around in the direction of Zach’s voice. His face was thunderous in a way she had never seen before.

“What are you doing?” Kary asked, incredulous.

“Go home, Kary. You shouldn’t be out here with him,” Zach’s voice was full of rage and she was taken aback, for the first time wondering if Zach was actually jealous for her. Kary had never seen him jealous of anybody.

“We’re just walking,” she argued. “Where did you even come from?”

Zach stared at Micah with pure rage and...something else. “I was looking for him.” When he turned to her and held out his hand for her, there was fear in his eyes, too. “Come with me, Kary. I’ll take you home.”

Micah thrust an arm out in front of her, holding her back from moving. “She’s not going with you. Your time is up.” The musical tones of Micah’s words were gone and standing next to him, Kary felt a change in the atmosphere, like an electrical charge.

Zach’s eyes flashed and Kary couldn’t believe her eyes as large, spindly bones exploded from his back. They were mangled and bare, with a handful of black feathers hanging haphazardly. Kary gasped at the sight. The ocean blue of his eyes had deepened into a vibrant violet.

Kary stumbled back and when she looked at Micah, her voice choked in her throat. Large enough to encircle his body was another pair of wings, they were white and shimmered in the starlight.

“What are you?” she whispered, too scared to move.

“An angel,” Zach answered, pulling her attention back to him. Kary still had the single black feather in her hand and she looked down at it, trying to wrap her mind around what was happening.

“Have you been following me?” she asked, holding it up. Zach smiled and at least managed to look a touch ashamed.

“I knew he was here for me and might use you to get to me,” Zach spat at Micah, “You should have left her out of this.”

“She would be safer with me,” Micah snarled. “Not a fallen angel.”

“You’re a hunter, Micah! No one is safe with you.”

Kary’s stomach twisted as she inferred their meanings. She looked between the two of them and silently pled for any of it to make sense.

“We had once been brothers,” Micah explained to her. “He threw it all away for you.” Family, Micah had answered when she asked what brought him here. It wasn’t aunts or uncles but Zach, her Zach, he had been searching for, and for what? To hunt him? Kill him? Ice spread through her body as Micah continued to talk.

“He rejected the glory of heaven and interfered with the life of a human.”

“What do you mean?” Kary asked, “What is he talking about, Zach?” But he was refusing to meet her gaze.

Zach clenched his jaw and shot Micah a reproachful look. “It was my fault,” he finally said.

Kary’s heart pounded in her chest as she waited for him to explain.

“It wasn’t supposed to happen. I wanted to give him a second chance, an opportunity to redeem himself, so I led him to the church that day. But he fought my guidance and then you were there. And your mom.” Zach’s face twisted with sadness and regret. He fell to his knees as tears welled in his eyes

Every part of Kary turned cold. No, she begged silently. This can’t be true. This can’t be real. “I could only save you. I kept you locked in the car until he was gone, or else he would have killed you, too.”

Kary wanted to scream but Micah was talking and she forced herself to listen.

“His wings were lost for it, now blackened and useless. Angels are not to interact with humans.”

“But we can guide them!” Zach interjected, climbing back to his feet. “I’ve always watched over you, Kary, I’ve always cared for you.” Her heart skipped a beat at his words. It was a confession she had always wanted to hear but she knew he didn’t mean it the way she hoped.

“It’s come too far now.” Micah’s voice was solemn and she could hear his regret. He raised his hands in front of him and a sword forged of a flaming blade flared into existence. Golden armor wrapped around his arms and chest and a light shone from within him. Kary was terrified and confused, she didn’t understand how any of this was real life.

“With this sword, you will be extinguished forever, Zachriel. You will cease to exist and will no longer damage the paths of human lives.”

Micah hoisted the sword and Zach threw his hands out to stop him.

“Please, Micah, you don’t have to do this. We were brothers once. I promise, I’ll leave the humans alone.” Zach turned to Kary, pleading. “I’m sorry, I wanted to keep you safe and make up for my mistakes. I didn’t mean for any of this.”

“It is too late.” Micah raised his sword. “A balance is required.” Kary screamed as the flames arced downward and she shut her eyes, unable to watch. There was a flare of light from behind her eyelids and she stood there, shaking, too terrified to look.

“Be well, human,” Micah murmured. “Justice has been served.”

She peeled her eyes apart and loosed a shuddering breath. She was alone. There was no sign of the two angels and she was left with the cruel truth that the person who relieved her nightmares led them to her in the first place. And yet, she didn’t feel like justice had been served. She felt like she had been robbed.



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