

SCHLOCK  
THE GOTHIC ISSUE



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## EDITORIAL

As summer edges to a close, Schlock explores darker climes with our latest issue, GOTHIC. Perversion, obsession, fishy fetishism... all that stuff you can't help but think about on a melancholy autumn afternoon. We know we can't.

Our international team of contributors presents new work that hearkens back to the genre's golden age, while tapping into a modern and ironic edge. There's enough darkly flavored fiction for any taste (and none).

Special thanks go to *Daniela Attard* for creating the gorgeous cover illustration. Schlock also welcomes two new members into the fold: Teena and Nico. Teena's artwork features in the bulk of this issue's stories, and Nico lent his talents to helping with the pdf.

Rounding off your Schlock GOTHIC experience, here's our *themed flash week* and *latest podcast*.

The next issue of Schlock will herald some major changes you won't want to miss. Happy reading!

## The Plagiarist And The Poet

*by Kris Green*

Maestro Sardini lived just outside of Paris near a pleasant arboreal suburb called Chapel du Lac. His exile from the life of court rounds and parties was partially self-imposed, and partially the result of an act of plagiarism he committed some years ago and for which he had never been forgiven. His other habits; his Italian heritage, his appetite for alchemical infusions of his own concoction, and his reputation as a devil worshipper, were all seen as lesser foibles compared to the heinous crime of copying almost verbatim from a book of verse and claiming them as his own.

The villagers from Chapel du Lac did not visit the Maestro's lands. Even those men who were of the nocturnal temperament had long since given up poaching on his estate, citing the strangeness of the woods as a reason. Two brothers, Pierre and Claude – notorious poachers both – familiar with the land they had grown up ranging upon, had been the last to cease their hunting for rabbits and trout and other small game within a month of Sardini's arrival. Claude became a lay-priest and Pierre travelled to Paris and opened a small restaurant. Neither man ever poached or hunted again.

The Maestro was not a bad man. His friends, such as they were, considered him to be viciously-clever and quick-witted but intellectually quite lazy; hence his downfall in the eyes of his peers, for plagiarism was a very serious business in those days, especially to a man of letters which was how the Maestro styled himself. Following his exile he counted the numbers of his friends on the fingers of one elegant and well manicured hand. That is to say six, for he had six fingers on each hand and six toes on his left foot. His right foot sported an ordinary amount of toes, with a stub where the sixth and smallest toe had been, but he never talked about that.

Sardini's house, if anything so enormous and sprawling can be called a house, was built into the ruins of a castle, and had at times in the past been used as a prison, an asylum and an abbey, though not in that order. The previous occupant had fled after living in the house for fourteen days. The owner before that had spent his entire life inside of the building, and had procured labourers to expand it to almost three times its original size, exhausting a small local quarry. He was thought by everyone to be quite insane. The villagers at Chapel du Lac waited in vain for the Maestro Sardini to begin to show signs of madness or agitation. It was eventually suggested that such behaviour would be indistinguishable from his normal demeanor. The women of the town continued to cross the street to avoid him, and the children continued to follow him in the hopes that sweets or imps would fall out of his pockets.

It was almost a year to the day from the beginning of his exile that the Maestro was visited by an emissary of the King of France. The man arrived at the Chateaux in good time, though the brief

stopover in the village acquainted him with the rumours of the house and caused him both to delay and to experience a small amount of trepidation on the approach. The messenger, whose name was Gaston, was an ensign in the King's Musketeers, and therefore not used to giving in to fear. He pressed on therefore, noting the wild state of the lawn and the trees blasted by lightning and stripped bare by the wind, naked branches pleading to an uncaring heavens. In Chapel du Lac it had been snowing, over the Maestro's lands a heavy and sullen drizzle was falling from the sulking clouds so that the ground was saturated and swamped.

Gaston kicked the mud from his boots at the base of the Maestro's stone steps before using the cast-iron bootsrape to clean off the rest. He sought for a bell-pull, or other, similar device for the purpose of alerting the occupants of the house to the presence of guests without. He was on the verge of employing the squat brass gargoyle, which he decided was a knocker of sorts, when the wide oak doors swung noisily open to reveal the dark lobby interior. Gaston found himself balefully regarded by a slender figure in a black velvet frock-coat and white silk shirt, ruffled at the collar. The man who did the regarding, baleful or otherwise, was taller than the Ensign by at least a foot, and Gaston was not a small man. The stranger had long dark hair braided and decorated with black silk ribbons. His skin was of a colour close to alabaster, his eyes pale, glared from above an aquiline nose and hollow cheeks. Thin red lips formed the word;

"Yes?"

"I um, I'm come from Paris, on an errand for the King."

At the mention of the word "King," Gaston straightened his back reflexively.

The ghoulish spectre in the doorway was silent for a moment, then spoke.

"Enter," it said.

Shuddering, Gaston did as he was bidden. He had to suppress another shudder when the doors were banged shut behind him and he was plunged into darkness.

Immediately, his nose was assailed by a sharp acrid stench which blew up from the bowels of the house. It was dark in the lobby and it took a moment for him to accustom his senses to the gloom. In that moment there came a low growling noise close to his knees. He froze, sensing large and dangerous animals were close, inspecting him.

"Down Behemoth, back Leviathan," the tall figure hissed, its face the only thing visible in the dim hall.

Now that his eyes were able to pierce the dark, Gaston was surprised to see that the creatures were a pair of cats – cats the size of mastiffs – but cats nonetheless. They slinked away towards the great stairs at the far end of the hallway. The one that had been addressed as Leviathan appeared to have two tails.

Remembering himself, and hoping to forestall some dark fate in the interior of the cursed house, or worse, hospitality, Gaston said.

“Perhaps I should wait here while you fetch your master?”

“Master?” the other intoned.

“The Maestro Sardini?” said Gaston, “I bear a message for him, from the King.”

To Gaston’s astonishment the spectre broke into a wide and horrible grin and began to laugh. It was a terrible sound.

“You have found him, boy,” he said. “I am Sardini.”

The summons delivered and accepted, Sardini began to plan his trip to Paris. Since His Majesty had stipulated a particular time and date to present himself before the court, the Maestro chose to waste no time. He arrived in Paris a full week early so that he could visit at his leisure with those few men and women he still counted as his friends. His first port of call was to Hildebrandt and Sons, the renowned tailor on Rue \_\_\_\_\_. Having made his purchases, Sardini happened on a whim to visit the shop of Master Hiram Milton, an Englishman and the proprietor of a small and somewhat labyrinthine book shop on Rue \_\_\_\_\_. The shop catered for a most discerning clientele. Those who prized a very particular genre of esoteric erotica in which the erotica is as liberating as the occult knowledge enlightening<sup>1</sup>.

Master Milton was a short, nervous man in his fifties. He bore upon his wide shoulders the weight of a life of solitude spent among dust and books, filled with the sound of crinkling pages rather than the laughter of women. His face was red, his hair was white (and stark white, and not because of his age, it had been that way since his fourteenth birth day). The mark of the devil was upon him.

He started when the Maestro Sardini entered his shop, bowing low to clear the lintel. Milton watched with growing unease while Sardini fingered five rare volumes devoted to raising the serpentine force known as Kundalini (with illustrations in colour). He squirmed in his chair for almost ten minutes when the Maestro crossed the room and began to casually leaf through several tomes on the occult uses of menstrual blood. Finally his nerves reached the very limits of durance.

“You,” he said, “You’re Sardini, the plagiarist from Chapel du Lac.”

It was not a question.

Sardini scowled and put down the volume he was perusing, carefully marking his place with a finger.

“I am he,” he said in low dangerous tones.

“You’ve not been to court yet or you wouldn’t remain in Paris,” the Englishman said, all in a rush.

“Oh?” said the Maestro raising an eyebrow, “Why would I not?”

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<sup>1</sup> One of Hiram Milton’s great great grand children still owns a shop devoted to the occult sciences, though it is situated in London, on \_\_\_\_\_ street.

“De Rascinny is in Paris.”

Marcel Alexander de Rascinny was a notorious adventurer, poet and missionary. Friend to the King of France, he was given to long and romantic sojourns across the seas to bring the word of God to heathen shores and wealth and riches back to France. It was his verse that Sardini had copied and which had earned for him the disapprobation of his peers and the disapproval of the crown. The news that Marcel de Rascinny was in Paris was certainly not good news. It could even have been said to be disastrous news.

“Ah,” said Sardini, employing his gift for understatement.

He withdrew his finger from the book he was holding, losing his place.

“de Rascinny is a notorious adventurer, poet and missionary,” said Milton, “moreover he has the fastest temper in all of Paris. It is likely he will seek a confrontation. No doubt that is the reason you have been summoned to court. Not to forgive your transgression, but finally to see justice done.”

“Monsieur Milton,” Sardini began, “you have revealed yourself as more of a friend to me than those I count upon as allies. Three friends I have seen since my arrival, and none have thought to warn me of de Rascinny. I feel it is my duty to grant you a boon. Were you aware that you carry the mark of Mammon, Arch-duke of Hell, upon your brow?”

“I am, sir,” said the Englishman.

“In that case, in three days time you will meet a young woman who will serve you faithfully and bear you two sons and a daughter. She will remain at your side for thirty and eight years until she is taken up to heaven, where, God willing, you will follow her within a year.”

Shaken, Milton stood and bowed.

“Were I not confirmed in my bachelordom, Monsieur, I would believe your words, so commanding was your tone of voice.”

“Believe them,” said the Maestro, with utter conviction.

“Would that I could,” said the Englishman with deep sadness. “I wish you every luck in your interview with King Louis.”

Sardini bowed and took his leave.

From Hiram Milton’s shop he returned to his quarters then went to visit his oldest friend in Paris, the Madame de \_\_\_\_\_. He had delayed his visit on purpose, both to end his stay in Paris on a pleasant note – for it seemed that he already apprehended unpleasantness at court – and because the Madame’s mood was mercurial, and given swiftly to change. Such changeability was why he prized her so highly, Sardini despised people who always remained the same no matter what. He left his card with the doorman, and within moments he was called from the antechamber into her boudoir.

“Madame,” he said, bowing with a flourish. “You grow more beautiful every time we meet.” When he chose to do so, the Maestro could be charming in the extreme.

Madame de \_\_\_\_\_, fanned herself. She was not flustered, but liked to give the impression that she was.

“Monsieur,” she said, “this is rather unexpected. Had I realised you would drop everything to visit me I would have made more of an effort.”

“Madame, if you have made no effort, then you have only put half of Paris to shame,” said the Maestro with a glowering look, “but tonight I have no time for verbal fencing...”

“How apt that you should speak of fencing,” said Madame de \_\_\_\_\_.

“Oh?”

“Haven’t you heard?” She fanned herself again.

“Heard what?”

Madame de \_\_\_\_\_ eyed him carefully for a moment then lifted her chin and laughed cruelly.

“You have heard, of course. That’s why you’re here.”

Sardini inclined his head.

“Marvellous. You know of my relationship with de Rascinny then?”

“Madame, everyone knows or else nobody knows.”

“We have been discrete.”

“Not discrete enough,” said the Maestro, “or how would a famous recluse such as I come to hear of it?”

“You have your ways or else we would not be friends. Now, do you expect me to divulge the secrets shared in hushed whispers in the bedroom? I thought you were better than that.”

“They call me the Plagiarist of Chapel du Lac, who dwells in a madhouse in the forest.”

“Very well...”

“But no, tell me only what de Rascinny intends.”

Madame de \_\_\_\_\_ frowned and put down her fan.

“I could give you an edge you know,” she said. “I could tell you things that would make de Rascinny leave Paris within the hour. Such things that he would take his own life rather than have it become common knowledge.”

“I am flattered that you would share as much with me.”

“And I am curious as to why you will not cheat.”

Sardini waved a hand airily.

“You do know that he intends to put three feet of steel through your heart?”

“I had guessed as much when I learnt he was at court.”

“At the very least a bullet through your intestines. So for the love of mercy, why did you come?”

“Only to learn his intentions I swear, which you have provided for me. God and the Devil willing, I will see you again before I leave for home.”

“There is no God, Monsieur, and you will be dead before the week ends.”

“We shall see, Madame.”

Saying that, he took her by the hand and planted a lingering kiss across her knuckles, causing her to blush. They locked eyes and drank deeply of each other, before Sardini straightened and took his leave without a backwards glance.

Four days went by and the news that the notorious plagiarist was to meet his maker at the hands of the adventurer, de Rascinny had set Paris alight with speculation. Of course, de Rascinny would challenge the Maestro to a duel, de Rascinny's prowess with a blade and pistol was as deft as his ability to form a rhyming couplet. Sardini had a well known aversion to swordplay, was positively allergic to gunpowder and his ineptitude with verse was sadly evident. Simultaneously, the city's dark nature was evoked by the promise of bloodshed. On the nights leading up to the duel, twelve people were murdered; eight in scuffles, three in seemingly unconnected incidences of violent death by accident and the last, an elderly doctor, was stifled in his bed. Added to this a notorious crypt robber, who was known to the Paris broadsheets as l'homme de l'obre noir, who once upon a time terrorised Paris only to disappear suddenly, had apparently returned to resume his grisly toil. Between the murders and the desecration (graves belonging to national heroes, all feted for their skill with the Epee) the strain on the populace was noticeable and the impending duel was viewed by many as a valve through which the roiling tensions could be released.

On the day of the audience, Sardini presented himself at the gates of the palace at first light. The guardsmen, resplendent in their purple and gold livery, took his proffered invitation and led him through the marbled halls and gilded corridors until at last he found himself before the throne of the kings of France.

The Maestro gave a bow so deep the back of his wrist touched the floor. The King waved his hand and a page appeared at his side and gave a show of presenting some piece of news or other. With half an eye on Sardini, who was given leave to rise, he attended upon the lad, nodding gravely.

Everyone knew what was to come next.

“Is that the plagiarist of Chapel du Lac?” a voice boomed from the doorway.

All eyes turned to find Marcel Alexander de Rascinny, a towering livid form, quivering with a volcanic rage that burned to be released.

Sardini merely nodded and turned back to the King.

“What is this? He won’t even face me? Your majesty, this is too much.”

It requires eighteen paces to cross the grand hall, Rascinny crossed it in twelve. There was a sound as of leather striking marble. At Sardini’s feet was a single black glove. Sardini, who appeared to refuse even to acknowledge the other’s presence, let alone his legitimate anger, merely nodded to the glove and said, “Monsieur has dropped his glove.”

There was an audible gasp from the assembled crowd.

“Monsieur goes too far. Your Majesty, I have issued a formal challenge!”

“Monsieur Sardini,” King Louis began. Sardini frowned to be addressed so, even by the King of France. “Monsieur Sardini, a clear challenge has been issued. While I do not condone duelling, under these circumstances I cannot turn a blind eye. Pick up the glove, sir.”

No one in the room was party to the secret look that Sardini gave the King, they bore witness instead to the effect it had upon his Majesty. King Louis bounded out of his chair and flung out an arm as if to protect himself. The page at his side caught Sardini’s look and blanched.

The Maestro himself leaned over and retrieved de Rascinny’s glove which he handed back to the irascible adventurer with an air of boredom. The King, who by this time had recovered his spirits said,

“You accept then?”

“If the gentleman insists.”

“I do, sir!” said de Rascinny.

“Very well. The time and place?”

“Here,” said de Rascinny, “Now.”

Sardini expressed surprise.

“I am eager to be done with this business,” said de Rascinny, “I have a lunch appointment waiting.”

“Will blood satisfy the gentleman?” said the Maestro.

“Only a corpse is sufficient to wipe clean the stain on my honour,” the poet said with a growl.

“Very well.” Sardini sighed.

A space was cleared in the hall until someone began to object. The case was made for ricochets and unsightly blood stains and the proceedings were moved out of doors. The assembly gathered on the lawn, the choice of weapons was left to the Maestro who waited until the very last before deciding.

“Blades,” he said, loud enough for all to hear.

There was a hushed murmur among the crowd. Bets had already been laid and the smartest pundits had laid good odds on the match being fought with pistols, Sardini’s ineptitude with a sword being widely known. Swords were brought in matching cases and de Rascinny made experimental passes in the air with his. Sardini nodded at the weapon he was offered, but left it where it was for the time being.

“Your seconds?” said the somewhat officious young man who had been roped in to be the judge.

De Rascinny gestured to the crowd of lackeys and hangers on at his heels.

“One of them will do.”

“Very well,” said the judge, “And Monsieur?” he addressed the Maestro.

“I have need of none.”

“It is quite irregular,” the judge began.

“No one here would have me, and to choose a friend, or even someone neutral to me would be to render them unloved in the eyes of the crown.” He fixed his own eyes upon Louis, who reddened.

“Sir, you go too far!” said de Rascinny.

“It is a good thing you are his Majesty’s champion,” said the Maestro sardonically.

“Fetch your blade so that I can avenge both our honours,” said de Rascinny.

The Maestro bowed before the King, merely nodded at de Rascinny, which served to infuriate the man even further, then gestured to the servant bearing the casket of arms.

“My sword,” he presented it to the judge for inspection.

“And mine,” said de Rascinny.

“Very well,” said the judge. “I trust that circumstances have gone beyond the reparation of mere words.”

“Yes, yes,” de Rascinny adopted the En Garde position.

“Very well then.” The judge backed away.

Sardini raised his own blade, but it was clear to everyone that his stance was poor. De Rascinny lunged forward and pierced him in the chest, running him neatly through. Sardini widened his eyes.

“I hope you are pleased with yourself, you have ruined a perfectly good shirt.”

De Rascinny withdrew, but the Maestro didn't fall. A neat circle of red blossomed upon his shirt where the rapier point had skewered him.

“Die, you monster.”

De Rascinny lunged a second time, but Sardini caught the attack in a simple bind and slashed his point across his opponent's throat. De Rascinny drew back then took two steps and fell.

A moan went up from the crowd, but Sardini didn't care to stay. He threw the borrowed sword upon the turf and recovered his jacket.

The Maestro Sardini still lives to this day, in a house of his own design near a small arboreal suburb, though the city of Paris has caught up with his lands and devoured the forest thereabouts. His home resembles a castle, though at times in the past it has been an asylum, an abbey and a prison, though not in that order.

One of Hiram Milton's great-great grandchildren still owns a shop devoted to the occult sciences, though it is situated in London, on \_\_\_\_\_ street.

*Photo: Sarah Micallef*



## THE AUTHOR

Kris Green claimed his birthright as the true heir to the throne of Lanitalthantia on his 18th birthday when he slew the tyrannical overlord, Lord Vur. He was led to the shores of that mythical place by eight portents, three virtuous maidens, twelve ghoulish slaves, a magical boat and a talking sword. Not content with living an idyllic (if somewhat adventurous) life as the ruler of a mythic kingdom, Kris Green (or King Antarius Warbux Cruciform XII, as he is known to his subjects in Lanitalthantia) decided to settle for working in a book shop on the island of Malta where he lives with his mother and two cats.

# The Prague Transmutation

*by Mike Sweeney*

March 15, 1908  
Prague

My dearest Lucas,

I have entrusted this letter to the representative of Assicurazioni Generali here in Prague, with strict instructions that it be sent with all dispatch to their Headquarters in Trieste and thence by fastest ship possible to New York. Assicurazioni has handled my father's affairs in Central Europe for decades and their local agent, Mr. Kafka, assures me they will see my correspondence safely to you. What you, my trusted friend, will make of its contents, I can only guess.

I have spent the previous nine months in London, apprenticing with the prestigious banking firm whose name I will not sully with this twisted affair. I undertook the internship at the insistence of my father. Though originally I evinced neither the skill nor the enthusiasm for financial work, in a short time I rapidly found myself displaying a heretofore unknown aptitude with stocks and other investments. My successes at the firm were sufficient that the senior partner offered me a full-time position and two months leave to consider a permanent relocation to London. I set about the Continent, first to Paris and then to Cologne, idling my time in salons and hotels as I contemplated whether to accept the offer.

It had been my intention all along to end my journey in Prague by spending several weeks with Mathias and we corresponded extensively during my stay in London. He had secured a small flat of rooms in the Mala Strana, on the west bank of the Vltava, not far from the magnificent Prague Castle. His modest physician's practice had found an ever-growing following as he was regarded as something of a novelty for having been educated in New York, a fact which Mathias found infinitely amusing given the superior reputation of European medical schools on our own side of the Atlantic.

To further supplement his income, he took on a side occupation as an English-language tutor for children from Prague's more well-heeled families. His letters were filled with robust descriptions of the beautiful sights and charming people of the jewel city of the Hapsburg Empire; above all else, his correspondence showed our friend to be happy and at peace in his surroundings.

We had not written during the previous weeks as I travelled the Continent and I thus held no clue as to the radical change in our friend's fortunes and demeanour. My first indication that something

was seriously wrong waited for me at the Hotel San Marco upon my arrival from Cologne. Our friend had deposited a parcel for me at the front desk. If you asked me to guess the contents of the package before I unwrapped the thick, wax brown paper, I would never – even in a million tries – have said that it contained two autopsy reports. Yet that is precisely what was inside the parcel, along with newspaper clippings of a series of grizzly killings.

In Kamenice, a village on the southeast outskirts of Prague, two ritualistic murders had been committed. Both victims were well-respected young men, from good families. Each, it appeared, was kidnapped by a cult group, perhaps with ties to the Roma community, who held the young men in crude stables for days prior to releasing them into the nearby woods, at which pointed they were hunted and impaled with spears. The murders – and the ghastly details surrounding their execution – caused an understandable scandal.

Neither of the young men's bodies was ever found and the details of what befell them came from the sole survivor of the ordeal, the teenage son of a local magistrate. The boy, Vaclav Mendel, was found shackled in a wooded hut, badly mistreated and severely malnourished. His mental state had deteriorated with his physical condition, but he was still sufficiently lucid to provide some rough details of his fellow captives' fate. Yet he was also reported to be given to fits of gibberish that the local police could not decipher. Sent back to his family, the boy lapsed into a silent torpor and after two days, committed suicide.

It was here that our friend entered these events directly. The boy's father – not willing to accept that his son took his own life – insisted on an autopsy and asked for Mathias personally on the basis of his rising reputation as a physician to Prague's elite. Our friend agreed and though his notes show that he concurred with the assessment of a self-inflicted wound, his examination also revealed several findings that he was at a loss to explain. Vaclav's teeth, for example, appeared to have experienced an inexplicable phase of growth, overreaching the young man's lips and giving him an almost fang-like dentition. Second, there were isolated patches of thick bristle-like hair on his hands and chest, yet he showed little, if any, other body hair on his arms or legs. Finally, and most perplexing of all, at the base of the boy's spine, a patch of black insect-like scales had begun to coalesce.

A fortnight later, Mathias was asked to consult on a second autopsy – this time by the Prague police. The victim, Jakub Starosta, also showed signs of the mysterious black scaling. However, Mathias's notes show that Jakub did not have dental distortions nor any of the hideous black hair patches seen on Vaclav. Jakub also apparently died from a single gunshot to the head, although in his case Mathias was certain it was not self-inflicted. The young man's body was found near the back of Prague Castle, in an abandoned brewery on which renovations had recently begun.

I admit being somewhat unnerved at the unexpected presentation of these curious papers and by our friend's failure to meet me personally at either the hotel or train station. There seemed to be more than a slight sense of foreboding over all that had transpired since my arrival in Prague that morning. But I also confess that having come from London, where the creation of Conan Doyle is still quite popular, the whole affair imbued me with a thrilling sense of intrigue. As I looked out my hotel window at the fantastic medieval city before me, I could scarcely think of a more worthy setting for such an adventure – and who better to share it with than my dearest comrade, Mathias. I remember

wishing I had bought a deerstalker cap during my time in England. How ludicrous it seems to me now that I actually relished the evening to come, thinking it all some exciting game, a parlor mystery for Mathias and I to crack.

The final document in the parcel was a brief note from Mathias with detailed directions to his club not far from Wenceslas Square. I followed them exactly and our friend's customary precision did not fail me. I arrived one half hour in advance of our appointed meeting time of eight o'clock and took the liberty of indulging in a cigar and ordering a glass of the absinthe for which Prague is so famous.

It was only as time wore on and our usually punctual friend failed to materialize that my curious excitement switched back to unnerved worry. When Mathias finally arrived at nine, his appearance did little to calm my fears. He was pale and disheveled and if I didn't know him better I would say he'd been wearing the same clothes for days. His eyes were frantic and furtive, darting everywhere with great anxiousness. Finally, he held his right oblique with his left hand, as if his side would spill forth his intestines were it left unattended. For the duration of the evening, the hand stayed locked against his side, hidden underneath his suit jacket. When I say the hand never left his side, Lucas, I am not exaggerating.

If his appearance left me concerned, his first word did little to calm my fears. He walked up to me, still anxiously looking over his shoulder and said one syllable: "Dead."

Our friend's agitated state and unkempt condition drew immediate looks from the other visitors to the salon. Fearing for his reputation, I swept him immediately into the chair across from mine and insisted he down a mouthful of absinthe to settle his nerves and calm his demeanour. This he did without protest and I was quickly ordering second glasses of the greenish spirit for both of us.

After several moments and additional absinthe, a flicker of our old friend returned. He looked at me with eyes that were brighter. He shook his head as if apologizing for his manner of greeting and simply said, "I'm glad you're here, Sebastian."

Our friend's return to civility greatly heartened me and I returned his warmth. "It's good to be with you too, old friend. Now tell me, who, prey, is dead?"

"Jiri Jezek," our friend said matter-of-factly, as if the name explained itself.

"Another victim?" I asked.

"A patient," Mathias said, his eyes no longer meeting mine. "No, that's not quite right. He was actually my student."

"Your tutoring?" I prompted.

"Yes," Mathias nodded. "Jiri was a quick study. He was eighteen and his father, a well-known physician, was hoping to send the boy abroad to study. Maybe to London. I was actually planning on having him call upon you."

“But now?”

Mathias shook his head as if to describe what happened to the boy was simply too much. Then he simply said the word, “Changed.”

“What?” I asked.

Our friend sighed as if it was burdensome that I didn't immediately understand his meaning. He spoke calmly again, as if reciting events of which he had not been a part.

“It was last night, you see. Dr. Jezek's butler was waiting outside my flat. I was understandably surprised to see him at that hour. He said the doctor needed my urgent help. That something had happened to Jiri. I pressed the manservant for details, but he simply said that they'd discovered the boy the day before unconscious near the old brewery.

“I arrived at the Jezek's' home at about ten o'clock. Mrs. Jezek was upstairs but I could hear her weeping as soon as I entered the downstairs foyer. Dr. Jezek greeted me with equal parts relief and concern. I asked what had happened to Jiri and he grew deathly silent. He simply took my hand and led me up the stairs to the boy's room.

“I tell you, Sebastian, never has there been such a thing. You see, Jezek opened the door and the boy had changed...”

*Illustration: Teena Faye Kingswell*



Mathias' voice trailed off and he said no more for several minutes. Finally, growing exasperated I asked the obvious question. "For heaven's sakes, man, what do you mean the boy changed?"

"Not here," he hissed at me, with the utmost seriousness in his eyes. Whatever detached calm our friend mustered during his preceding narration was gone and he lapsed into the same anxious, furtive state he displayed when he first entered the club. He gripped his side tighter and glanced around the high-back leather chair as if expecting someone to be lurking there, listening unbidden. In a gulp, he finished the last of his absinthe and then immediately left the club, leaving at such a pace that I could scarcely keep up with him. It was only when we were out in the streets – the cool, soothing night air embracing us – that Mathias slowed his pace and allowed me to rejoin him.

I tell you, Lucas, never have I held a more conflicted set of feelings: all around me, this magnificent city was alive and bustling after dark. I longed to see its wonders and explore its pleasures. Yet next to me my dearest friend in the whole world shuffled along in the darkest fugue imaginable, his very sanity increasingly in doubt in my own mind. But I could perceive no way to help him but to wait out his twisted narrative and hope that by allowing him to finish his macabre tale it might somehow unburden his mind and allow his spirit to rally.

He led me through the Old Town in silence, through one labyrinth turn then another until finally we were on a cobble-stoned street that unceremoniously deposited us in front of one of the most magnificent sites I have seen in all of Europe: Charles Bridge, that great massive stone span over the Vltava, lit up in a golden haze by gas lamps.

For a moment, the breathtaking view almost made me forget the plight of our friend. We walked about a third of the way across the bridge when reality again took hold: Mathias began to sob quietly and leaned against the side of the bridge, as if his legs would no longer carry him. I made a move to examine his side, but he waved me off angrily.

After several minutes of silence, I decided to repeat my question from the club.

"Mathias," I said as calmly as I could, "you told me the boy changed. For God's sake what do you mean? What did he change into?"

At this point, our friend's right hand grabbed me by the collar with great violence. Startled and further concerned for his sanity, I shook him off as gently as I could. He looked up at me with as deranged an expression as I should never hope to see on another human being. He said the two words which will forever haunt my mind's domain.

"Monstrous vermin," he hissed, "the boy had become a monstrous vermin!"

"You saw this with your own eyes?" I demanded.

He nodded slowly and then resumed his narration.

"The boy – the thing – was repelled by the light. As soon as his father and I entered, it – he – slithered under the bed. How he forced his monstrous bulk into the space between the floor and the

bed frame I'll never know, but he did it with such remarkable speed. I saw only flashes of his thick dark skin – like insectoid scales at one moment, then at others the thick, oily hair of a rodent. I saw only glimpses, you see, flashes of that horrible bulk but the sound – the sound! – that Godforsaken noise of his claws on the floorboards as they scraped and scurried I shall never forget.”

I spoke to him as a parent to a scared child: “Flashes, you say. Glimpses. So you didn't actually perceive the whole of the creature? You had no way of knowing that it was in fact the boy somehow transmuted into this horrible fiend?”

He looked at me with something like mad anger. But just as quickly the rage in his eyes dissipated. What I saw in its place was resignation. He continued:

“I saw the whole of the beast when they came for him. I was shocked – appalled – unable to speak. Next to me, the father could barely stand, he reached out to support himself on my shoulder and I made no protest. I think the fact of showing it – his son – what he had become to another man of science somehow confirmed for him the worst of this cruel and twisted reality in an irreversible way. The two of us gaped, despairing and dumbfounded, as dark twitchy eyes stared out at us from under the bed while underneath those inhuman feet scratched and clawed in place.

“How long we stood there I cannot honestly say. I was trying to formulate some plan, some course of treatment but my every thought seemed consumed with the horrid madness lurking in the shadows. I finally made some effort to speak when the room was assailed with a hail of rocks and bricks. The windows burst forth and missiles struck at the overhead light rendering us in total darkness. My heart pounded as I realized that the creature was now free to prowl about the room but no sooner had that heinous thought entered my mind then I was blinded by a wall of phosphorous powder.

“The creature that had once been Jiri Jezek screamed in pain – and my God, Sebastian, there never has been such a scream heard by human ears. Unholy wailing ripped through the house as dark figures charged in through the broken windows. I could feel Dr. Jezek knocked to the floor next to me as I myself was punched and kicked till I left my feet and landed hard on my side. I lay on the ground in darkness, sure that I would meet some foul end or another.”

Our friend paused his narration here, his eyes drifting off to some unseen spot in the darkness of the Vltava. My own eyes fixed again on the spot where our friend clung to his side. I wondered if he had broken ribs in the attack. Perhaps there was internal bleeding or infection, either of which I surmised could explain his agitated demeanor and questionable mindset.

Mathias paid my looks of concern no attention and kept speaking, increasing the pace of his words as if he were running out of time in which to tell them.

“When the last of the phosphorous powder burned off, I tried to blink away the bright color splashes that danced before my eyes. Slowly, my sight returned and by the moonlight I could see six or seven, maybe eight shadowy figures binding the hideous creature with nets. They must have managed to muzzle it somehow as the shrill shrieks were now replaced with stifled grunts. It was when they were hauling the thing through the window that I saw the outline of its true form, roughly the length of a man, but of such a bulk and contour that it was as if

nature had combined the most repugnant aspects of a cockroach and a rodent all into the same massive, twisted frame.”

The speed with which he spoke left our friend breathless and he paused now, his breathing shallow and agitated. I very much wanted to continue to question him on the encounter – to point out that he’d never seen the beast directly, just in silhouette, but I sensed that Mathias was in a state well past where logic would apply. Oh, Lucas, how I wish you had been there to counsel me last night. How does one tell one’s best friend that he fears for his sanity? I can only hope that that is not a question you yourself are asking as you read my own words.

Unprompted, our friend began speaking again in the same rapid diction to which I was now becoming accustomed.

“The elder Jezek said nothing. He looked at me with the eyes of a man who has not only lost a child but has been forsaken by God Himself. He shook his head and wordlessly stumbled out of the room and down the hall. I followed and saw him collapse into his terrified wife’s arms. Their sobs followed me as I walked in a dreamlike stupor down the stairs and out the front door.

“If you had seen me that night, Sebastian, you would have thought for sure I was a hopeless drunkard. My gait was wild and unsteady as I careened down the winding streets of Mala Strana.

“But then somehow, somehow, I knew the way. You see, Sebastian, it called to me.”

He said the last words as a statement that was plain to all, but I had no idea what he could possibly mean. The empty look in his eyes further convinced me that our friend’s sanity was in the gravest danger. I reached out to place a hand on his shoulder, hoping he might allow me to examine the wound I now was sure must be festering in his side. But he took two quick steps back, almost without looking at me and lapsed into a trance-like recitation.

“It called to me, Sebastian. I have no memory of walking there, yet I found myself outside the old brewery. As if watching another person, I felt myself climbing the old, darkened steps. I don’t remember how I got through the locked door, but I must have. The smell...the thick, musty odor was all I do remember. That and the many, many steps as I descended into the cellar.”

There was something in our friend’s voice that forced me to believe he was recalling an actual memory and not just rambling incoherently. He spoke his words with both fear and conviction, and the earnestness of his dread forced my attention.

“I wandered through the cellar, past the vats and the shelves, through the alcoves and down passages, along paths that seemed to veer off from one another at angles I considered impossible. The walls became covered with shapes that became letters and letters that spoke to me in a tongue I couldn’t pronounce. I walked through shadows and around different colors, my mind abandoning any reason as to the physics and geometry of my passage. Until I saw it.”

Our friend went abruptly silent; yet he had relayed the preceding to me with a calmness that was absent in his voice since we left the club.

“What did you see?” The words escaped my lips, before I could stop them. I did not wish to encourage our friend’s delusions, but some part of me, I confess, was starting to believe this tale of lunacy.

Mathias stared at some null point between my shoulder and the horizon for several seconds. He finally spoke in an empty, dispassionate voice that unnerved me more than if he had been screaming bloody murder. I record here his chilling words: “If I say that my imagination yielded simultaneous pictures of a rodent, a beetle, and a human caricature, I shall not be unfaithful to the spirit of the thing. It was all of these, but none. It had shape, but did not. It had life, yet reeked of death. It moved in those foul tunnels, but I have no doubt that its proper home is the place of dreams or more aptly, nightmares.”

Our friend said nothing else for some time, and I continued to survey his condition. I was making my mind up to inspect his side, by force if necessary. Surely, a wound must lay there festering. What other explanation could there be for this insane story, this macabre tale? What else could explain how he could speak such nonsense so convincingly?

“He touched me,” he said in a voice barely audible. My eyes darted to his side and then to his eyes which had dilated with fear.

“He touched me,” he repeated in the same hollow whisper.

And at that I could bear no more of our friend’s condition or his gabble. I set for him when the slightest of movements stopped me cold in my tracks. I can tell you there was neither a darker nor a more unexpected moment in my brief life as the second when our friend finally withdrew his left hand and held it clear into the illumination from the gas lights on Charles Bridge. In an instant I realized it was not his side that had been afflicted all evening, but rather his hand. Our comrade’s five fingers had morphed into three claw-like appendages and on the palm and back, there were thick, bristle-like hairs, slicked with an oily substance. I was left with the unmistakable impression that I was looking at the paw of a giant rat.

I took two steps back and was near taking full flight when Mathias reached out and grabbed hold of me again. “Don’t let them take me!” he roared, as I fought in vain to escape his clutches. But his rat-like paw held my waistcoat in an iron grip as he pleaded with me through fetid breath. “Swear! Swear, sir, you will end this! Swear!”

I finally summoned all my might and pushed him away, sending our friend sprawling on the cobblestones. As he fell, his shirt collar came undone and a thatch of the hideous bristle-like hairs poked forth, leaving me no doubt that the aberration now covered most of his chest as well. His mouth twisted in a demonic grimace that bared an unholy dentition; his teeth seemed to be shifting before my eyes, narrowing and lengthening into a mass of fangs.

“How long?!” I screamed the words half as a question and half as a demand; to my everlasting shame, it was as if I were blaming our friend for his abhorrent condition.

“My hand, this afternoon,” he said with difficulty, it already becoming an effort to force his mouth to form words. Then he pointed first to the thick oily hairs protruding from his shirt and then

secondly to the monstrous teeth. "Since the club," he whispered and his shoulders collapsed as he began weeping openly.

I thought back to the anticipation and joy I felt a mere two hours before as I sat enjoying deep pulls on my cigar, waiting for Mathias to arrive. The city – our lives – seemed bright with every conceivable promise. Two hours and now the unspeakable had befallen he who was dearest to my heart. Two hours and I was being asked to do that which went beyond unspeakable.

Our friend's cries grew deeper and heavier. They sprung from him in violent fits, deep gurgles in a voice that I could already tell was not quite human.

"How long?" I said once again, but this time there was no rancor in my voice, only the deepest possible sadness.

"By morning," he barely mumbled, his teeth seeming to overgrow his mouth even as he spoke. They would be the last human words he would utter.

With effort, I placed my hand on his shoulder and tried not to recoil as I felt something spiny and cold rather than solid shoulder muscle. I held my hand there just long enough to say the words that needed to be said. "It will be done, my friend. I swear."

He looked up at me with eyes that still seemed all too human and I helped him stand. I was thankful for the thickness of his overcoat as the wool felt provided some shielding between my hands and the unspeakable changes slowly afflicting our friend's arms. The form I helped move through the streets of Prague that night was still manlike, but from his occasional jerks and the string of low painful growls I could perceive the earliest stages of the hideous metamorphosis that would transform him from a creature that walked on two legs to one that would more naturally be at home scurrying in the dark on four.

Of the state of his mind, I cannot say for sure. To his credit, he managed to lead me directly to his rooms a short ways from the Charles' Bridge. With grunts and nods he directed me both to the key to his flat (secured cleverly in a faux rock outside his window) and, once inside, to a newly purchased padlock. I used that device to secure his bedroom door after he entered. He disappeared into the darkness, offering me not so much as a glance. Truth be told, I was relieved for the quietness of his exit and collapsed onto his settee to collect my tattered thoughts and sort the impossible events of that evening.

Perhaps I am a coward for not doing the foul deed right then and there. But there was still too much humanity in him for me to strike him dead in cold blood. I needed the night – that long, dreadful night – to think on what had transpired and to plan for what I must do. Most of all, Lucas, I needed to set these words down for you. I trust you will not curse me for relating this mad tale to you but rather I leave it to your good judgment to see that without the effort of writing this letter I might well have lost my own sanity during that long darkness as I waited for the dawn. In your own way, my friend, you have seen me through these horrible events.

For here, my tale must end, sparing you – and would God only will it that I could be spared it as well – the final act of this dreadful play. I have purchased a set of dueling revolvers and plan to make

my way forthwith back to Mathias's rooms. Once there I shall waste no time in doing what I must, what I promised our dear friend I would. The padlock shall be removed and with all the swiftness I can muster, the door will be kicked open, and the electric light snapped on. I pray that I will have the courage to immediately empty both barrels into the face of the fiend that now lurks where our friend once walked.

But what awaits me? When I locked Mathias in his bedroom last night he still had the general visage of a man. Then in the night I could hear unimaginable screams and horrendous scratching that no human body could produce. "Monstrous vermin," he whispered to me in terror on the Charles Bridge. How far has his hideous metamorphosis progressed?

I can only hope that the electric light will be enough to stun him, to give me that one essential moment to end his misery, though it will not end mine. Not only must I live with the twisted tale I heard upon arriving in this city, but I must bear the knowledge of having been the final instrument of my best friend's destruction, even if it be a kindness to end such an abominable existence.

Pray for me, Lucas, and keep always my memory and that of our beloved Mathias in your thoughts.

*afew.*

Yours in deepest friendship,  
Sebastian L. Rasmussen, III

## THE AUTHOR

Mike Sweeney lives in Central New Jersey where he writes constantly, but never quite enough. His short stories can be found here and there. He's especially fond of the ones over at Jersey Devil Press: [www.jerseydevilpress.com](http://www.jerseydevilpress.com).

# The Castle

*by Teodor Reljic*

Ferdinand knew the hours would feel like years. He was fully aware of how time will stop and stretch its cruel way onwards, and onwards, and onwards, in this castle. How the pock-marked bricks would feel less like a quaint architectural feature and more like an optical illusion as the days went by, and as he would wake up in this self-imposed prison fully aware of the fact that the next day will be exactly the same.

Ferdinand knew full well what all of this implied. In fact, he barricaded himself in the castle precisely to enjoy that unmitigated awareness: fully reared to confront the torrent of boredom and loneliness that awaited him, he chose to dedicate the rest of his life to this, the closest to eternity he thought a man could get.

And like all imprisoned men inevitably do, he read.

The fact that Ferdinand was named after a murdered Archduke was a fact he held closely to his heart, like a proud, public fetish. He would get drunk at parties and trot it out like it was the best joke he had ever heard and when nobody laughed, he knew that he was on to something good.

Being in the castle gave him the perfect opportunity to read up on his namesake, to maybe reach a level of kinship that would make him a successor. The library was well furnished and meticulously filed. He was certain that he would find what he was looking for, even though he sometimes had to cross floor upon floor of crumbling spiral staircases. His only guides would be the perfectly signposted codes, ('H76-AAA') and the deepening darkness.

This would have been preposterous on the outside, of course, but this was exactly why Ferdinand chose to live outside the outside. There's a purity to preposterousness, he would mouth with his lips. He was as tempted to speak about it as he was to write it down. But committing the myriad of ideas and images that passed through his mind every hour of every single day, giving them a voice and allowing them to exist outside the cerebral crevice in which they were born felt, to Ferdinand, like a fundamental breach. His pact was with stillness, his pact was with lethargy.

He could choose to break that pact, of course. But doing so would be equivalent to laying dynamite at the foundations of the castle itself.

"You had a past once, Ferdinand, and now it's no more," he told himself each morning. It was the one thing he allowed himself to vocalise, because he did not believe it qualified as a fully-fledged thought but as an incantation. Its purpose was flat – it existed as a simple reminder, a cog for him to continue on his mission. He knew that forgetting was impossible. That is why he acknowledged the



*Photo: Sarah Micallef*

existence of the past, but refused to give it any credence. And the sun shined, and then the moon came and then, it was dark. It happened again and again, and when Ferdinand lost count of this inevitable diurnal churn, he allowed himself a tiny smile.

“We began with fire,” he thought to himself one night as he was preparing himself to sleep. He slept on the floor by the battlements in summer, on an outstretched tablecloth that he kept just clean enough for it not to smell.

“It begins with fire, our artificial rule... it begins with fire, there is always light in the skies be it sun or stars but we begin with fire, and that much is right.”

Ferdinand’s vow was simple: he would live in the castle until he faded by natural means. He was not yet able to obliterate being able to recognise the seasons – he still felt the summer and the cold. But Ferdinand never hoped to accomplish this, so he was not disappointed. And how could he be? The balmy breeze washed over his face and if it didn’t, he would sweat.

“These are the moments we miss, on the outside,” he said silently to himself. “These are the moments in between everything else and now, they are mine.”

\* \* \*

“There is a thing about making your thoughts heard, and visible. I don’t quite know what to call this thing because really what can you call anything without making sound like something else but here it is: it’s something like vanity, something like shouting just a little too much.

“I never liked that, and what I hated – really hated, like the true opposite of love – is when people chose to do it for you.

“It wasn’t murder I committed, because my sister wanted to die. She told me so many times: how she hated life, and I always thought she hated it as much as I did.

“I left because I didn’t want to eat her remains. That would have been the only way to complete the gesture: I read her... I read her, I mean I read what she wanted: and she wanted to be no more. And if I helped her die then shouldn’t I have consumed her also, taken her no-life into my life and let her exist the only proper way she could exist?

“She is buried somewhere below this lump of rock. This castle I chose to make something spiritual of myself. I chose for her, I knew I had to choose for her and that means I did something I hated but there was no other way. The other way would be to go on.

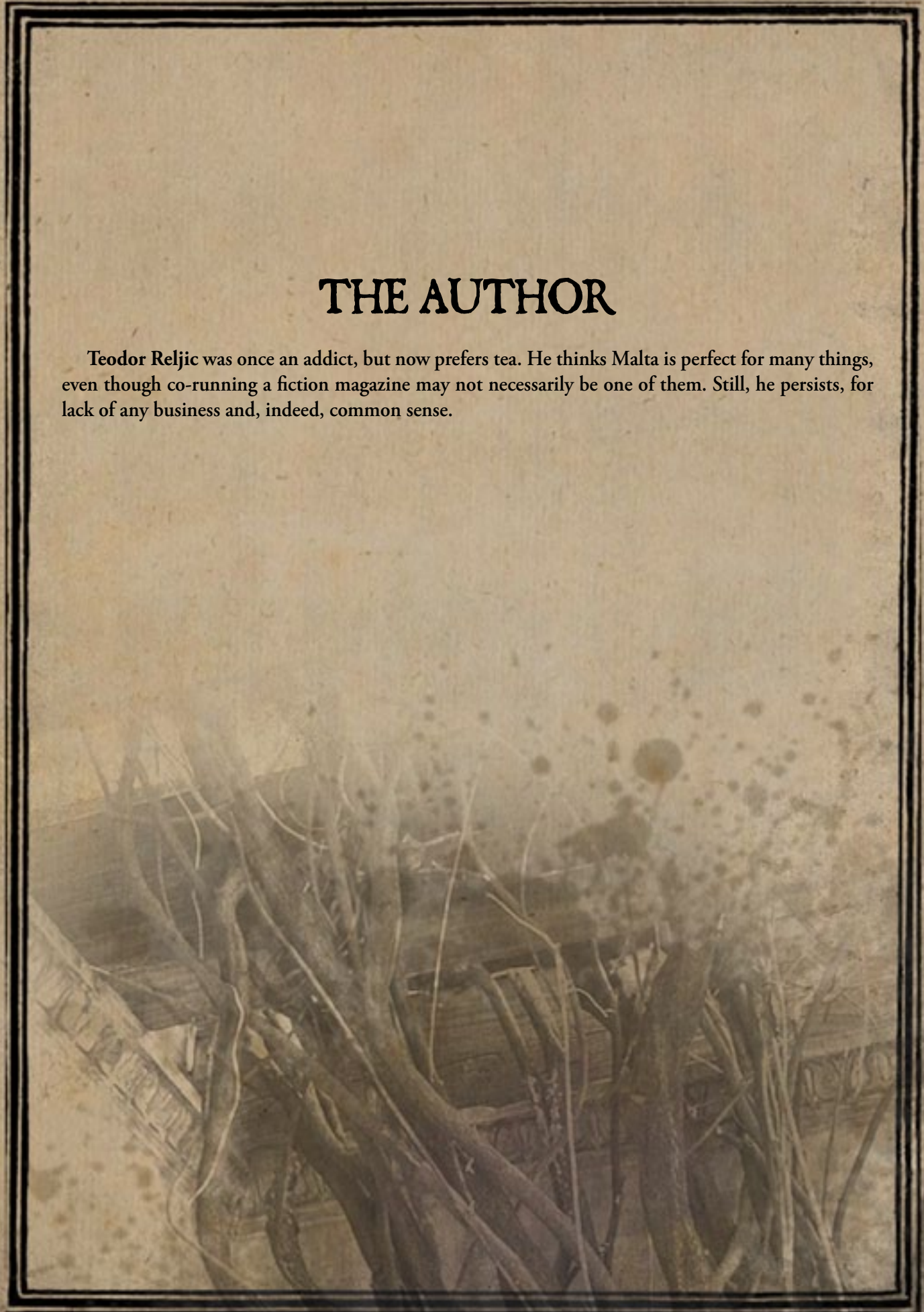
“And that is what I – and that is what we – are doing now.

“I see the fire I burned her in each night. It flickers past my eyes, a flash of orange flame as artificial as any other thought.

“And tomorrow, again.”

## THE AUTHOR

Teodor Reljic was once an addict, but now prefers tea. He thinks Malta is perfect for many things, even though co-running a fiction magazine may not necessarily be one of them. Still, he persists, for lack of any business and, indeed, common sense.



## The House On The Cliff

*by Gerri Leen*

The house dominated the hillside, looking far darker in the fading light than it probably was. Arabella saw the coachman swallow nervously before he turned to her and asked, "Ready to go up there now, miss?"

"Ready." She climbed back into the hired carriage, nearly tripping on her woolen skirts as she found her seat. She was used to lighter material, suitable for the tropics. She'd lived her life with bare feet and hair pinned up haphazardly to let the breeze blow through.

Until her parents had died, leaving her alone on Martinique with no funds once the creditors had finished pillaging the accounts. Her whole world now fit into the small valise at her feet and the battered trunk tied to the back of the carriage that would soon be headed for the forbidding English house on the cliff.

Reaching out the small window, she patted the side of the carriage. "Drive on."

There was no one waiting for her as they pulled into the portico. She climbed out of the carriage and stared up at the imposing door so soundly shut.

"You're sure they're expecting you, miss?"

She saw movement out of the corner of her eye, a flicker of light in a window. Someone was watching her.

Then she felt it. Magic: warm, slightly dangerous. Someone was taking her measure. She closed her eyes and let the power wash over her.

Then whoever it was went deeper. Too deep. She felt as if tiny fingers were reaching into her, looking for memories of the things she'd loved and lost.

Anger flared, and she channeled it the way her nurse Nathalie had taught her, turning it to fire and sending the flames down the mystical connection, which was standing wide open--whoever was testing her was clearly not expecting a reaction.

She heard a shout, saw the coachman startle, and smiled. "I think they know I'm here now."

The door banged open, and a man strode out. On first look, he bore no mark from her magic. But inwardly--she had to bite back a laugh as she ran her own little check of him--inside he felt a tad singed, like damp shoes left too long to dry near the fire.

“Miss Carruthers?”

“Mister Landham?”

His eyes flashed, and she decided not to push him. Instead she dropped a small curtsy, one of politeness, not obeisance. He was her new employer, not her master.

He studied her. “When I hired you as a tutor for my children, I did not realize you were so... advanced.”

“It was not listed as a concern in your prerequisites for employment.”

“I shall have to be more mindful of that.”

Or perhaps he should not leave the interviewing to those with no magic. She smiled as gently as she could. “I am housebroken.”

His eyebrows went up, thick and dark, a perfect frame for his angry brown eyes. “That remains to be seen.”

The coachman coughed softly, then louder, as he discreetly held his palm out.

For a moment, Landham’s expression softened. “I suppose you lack funds?”

She looked down, making a helpless gesture with her hands. Did he think she was seeking employment for her health?

Landham paid the man and watched as he manhandled her things from the carriage. Several servants appeared at the door, then hurried to take over the task.

As they moved her bags into the house, the sun started to set, and a chill wind seemed to spring up, blowing salty air from the sea so far below them. She’d lived on the water all her life, but it had been warm water, blue-green like the turquoise stones in her favorite necklace--gone now, no doubt adorning the wife of one of the creditors. This sea was gray and stormy, the cliffs harsh and forbidding.

“How do you find Devon?” Landham murmured. He seemed to be making an effort to keep his magic to himself. Not one brush of it touched her as he moved to stand next to her. But she could still sense it around her. Power that reeked of ironclad control of both it and the man’s emotions.

“It’s very cold here.”

“You’re a surprisingly strong woman, Miss Carruthers. I’m sure you’ll get used to it.” He looked out to sea, his gaze changing, turning soft again for a moment. “Devon has a beauty all its own.”

The wind grew even more chill. The sea melded with the blackness of the falling night. Soon the only light came from the dark and silent house.

She could not see the beauty at all.

\* \* \*

Did you sleep well, dear? The wind was blowing so hard last night. I think it was to welcome you.”

Arabella followed the housekeeper, Mrs. Morton, down the hall and presumably toward the nursery and schoolroom. The other woman chattered on in a sweet way that had immediately reminded Arabella of Nathalie.

“Is the wind always so loud?”

“North Devon is a hard land. With rough seas and winds. But no, that was strong even for our standards.” Mrs. Morton winked at her, her round face beaming. She radiated warmth in a house that last night had seemed devoid of it. Was the woman impervious to the atmosphere here? Or was she new? “Have you served Mister Landham long?”

“I’ve been with him since he was a boy. I feel a certain...possessiveness I suppose is the right word.”

“Like in some way he’s your son?” Arabella knew Nathalie had felt that way about her. She’d certainly considered the woman a mother of sorts. Her parents were loving and kind, but they’d been frivolous, fond of parties and going out. She’d been left behind many times with Nathalie.

Which had worked out well for her magic, but perhaps not so well for her heart. On the other hand, Nathalie had been everything she’d ever wanted, had loved her unreservedly, so it was unfair for her to think she’d been deprived in some way.

Instead of answering, Mrs. Morton glanced at a door that lay ahead on their right, her mouth tightening.

Arabella reached out with her magic, felt a rush of power come back, pushing her away. Something precious must be inside to be guarded with that much of Landham’s power.

“What’s in there?” she asked, careful to keep her voice low.

“The...mistress is in there.” Mrs. Morton took a deep breath. “She’s very sick.”

This wasn’t the kind of power you used around someone with a wasting illness. But then sick could mean so many different things.

“She doesn’t come out?”

“Never. The master goes in.”

Arabella was about to ask more when a small girl came barreling around the corner and down the hall to them. Without meaning to, Arabella checked her for magical power.

Nothing.

“Lily, this is Miss Carruthers who’s come to teach you.”

Lily shot her a huge, gap-toothed grin. “I’ve been waiting all morning to meet you.”

Arabella was charmed by her energy. She knew from the interview that Landham had two daughters. One six--this little blonde moppet--and one eleven.

“So you’ve arrived.” An older voice, resonant like her father’s.

Arabella looked up, saw the other girl watching her from the end of the hall. This was Rose. Unlike her sister, she’d moved around the corner silently, and her face held no smile. She pushed back a strand of red-blond hair and stared Arabella down.

Arabella didn’t have to reach out for this one. Rose was pushing on her hard, magic hitting her in an undisciplined way.

“That’s very rude,” Arabella said, taking the opportunity to give Rose a quick, magical swat, and saw Mrs. Morton give her an odd look.

Rose’s attack stopped abruptly as she rubbed at her shoulder. She looked afraid, and Arabella wondered if she was hiding the power from her father. “Don’t tell,” the girl said, confirming it.

“I trust you’ll give me a reason not to?”

Rose nodded quickly.

“Well, I wasn’t sure you two would get on. But look at you. Like two peas in a pod.” Mrs. Morton beamed at them, her confusion seemingly gone. “Rose, you show her the classroom, will you?”

Arabella felt Lily take her hand, and smiled down at the child.

Rose waited for them to catch up, watching her warily. “You’re prettier than the last one.”

“And the one before that.” Lily beamed at her. “She had dark hair, too, but her eyes weren’t as pretty as yours. Your eyes are like the sea.”

She’d always considered her gray eyes dull, wanted the azure eyes of her mother or her father’s hazel ones.

“Pretty doesn’t build character,” Rose said with a small smirk. “Or provide backbone.”

“Ran out the other governesses, did you?”

Rose shrugged, but Arabella knew she was right. Magic, in small doses could be like nails run hard against a chalkboard. A constant barrage of it--perhaps accompanied by more mundane pranks--would send any normal woman packing.

Rose led them into the room that was set up with everything Arabella thought she might need. She wasn't entirely sure; her tutors had been excellent but informal. The island had been their classroom. Trips to the beach, to the volcano Mount Pelee, to Saint-Pierre or Fort-de-France had served as teaching opportunities for history, biology, French, and English.

"Have you ever actually taught anyone?" Rose looked sullen.

"Have you ever actually learned anything?" Arabella nodded at one of the chairs. "Go sit down. It's time to begin. We're going to start with French." It was a bit of a retreat, falling back on her mother's native tongue, but the children wouldn't know that.

"I love French," Lily said with a little laugh. The child probably loved everything.

"I don't," Rose muttered as she took her seat. But she worked hard at it despite her supposed antipathy. Arabella could feel her trying to fold her magic around her, wasn't surprised when the girl did a very good job of it--she'd have to be clever to keep her power from her father--although she did wonder where the girl had learned to do it. Natural talent usually didn't get you as far as Rose had progressed.

In any case, Rose seemed to be very motivated to keep him from finding out. Arabella smiled as she set them to conjugating verbs. Blackmail was a terribly useful educational tool.

\* \* \*

Arabella sat in a sheltered corner of the yard, watching as the wind blew past and set the tree branches waving. She pulled her shawl around her and tried to imagine she was back in Martinique, under the gentle sun, with the swish of bathwater-warm water lulling her to sleep.

The cold wind found her, laying waste to her imaginary moment. She shivered and reached for her magic, letting it settle around her like a downy quilt.

"Where did you learn to control it?"

She twisted around on her bench, saw that Landham was standing behind her. He studied her, then seemed to come to some inner resolution as he walked over and sat next to her on the bench.

He went on as if she owed him no answer. "Were your parents talented?"

"Only a little." Although they'd used their ability to bind and charm others easily enough. It was what had kept the creditors at bay all the years they were alive. "I learned from my nurse."

She turned to study him. His features looked hard and forbidding, yet he sat easily, his posture relaxed, as if they were old friends. She reached out ever so slightly to see what his magic was doing.

It was calm, lying coiled like a great serpent. Ready to strike, but with eyes closed as it dozed. "And you, sir?"

He shot her a look as if to let her know he knew she'd been probing his power. "My father taught me. As his father taught him." He turned, and his eyes seemed to be drilling into her. "And you are no doubt wondering why I have not taught Rose."

Arabella was not sure what to say.

"She thinks I do not know." He laughed softly, a terrible sound. "But I do."

"Then why are you negl--" Neglect was such a harsh word, and Arabella hadn't been in the house long enough to judge that. Besides, there might have been days in her own past when some thought her parents were neglecting her. But she'd always had Nathalie--until the woman had died two years ago. It had been her first taste of loss. In some ways, it had been the hardest taste. "Was--is her mother talented?"

"No. She was like Lily." He made a sound, one almost of exasperation. "I mean, only in the magical sense. Lily in no way takes after her mother other than hair color."

She wondered if that was true, or if he just wanted his youngest to be nothing like her mother. "You keep your wife locked up. The magic is stronger on that room than anywhere."

"Yes. It is." He rose. "Curiosity is very unbecoming in a governess." He bowed slightly and strode off.

She watched him go, then turned back to the sea, not even bothering to try to imagine Martinique this time. She did feel warmer, though, as if some remnant of his magic had joined with hers.

\* \* \*

"All right, girls." Arabella had them both outside, walking along the trail that led through the woods to the neighboring property. "I want you to identify that tree up ahead."

Lily ran on, but Rose hung back. Arabella waited, but the girl said nothing.

"The tree is waiting, dear."

"I haven't seen my mother in two years." Rose met her eyes, and Arabella was struck by how old the girl's expression seemed. "Your mother's dead, isn't she?"

"She is. And I miss her very much." And she missed Nathalie, too. She'd been missing her for two years, and now had the added pain from the death of her parents. Why did some people experience loss so early in life while others evaded tragedy altogether?

"I don't miss my mother," Rose said, the words coming out as if she was spitting them. "I'm glad I don't have to see her."

"You don't mean that."

Rose unbuttoned her cuff, pushed up her sleeve to bare her right forearm. A long, raised scar marked the skin on the inside. "She did this to me. She was trying to hurt Lily, and I stopped her. And she got mad and grabbed the iron from the fire." She swallowed hard. "I hate her."

Arabella wasn't sure what to say.

"I'd rather have a dead mother I loved, than one I hate who won't die." Rose's lips set in a tight line that looked like a replica of her father's.

"She probably didn't know what she was doing, Rose." Arabella took a chance, reached over, and pulled the girl in so they were walking together.

"That doesn't make it any easier to bear." The girl pressed against her, then she broke away and went to join her sister. She didn't pay attention during the rest of their nature walk.

Arabella didn't have the heart to chastise her.

\* \* \*

The wind whined through the windows, and Arabella plucked out a melody on the piano, trying to mask the moans of the storm.

"Afraid?" Landham was awfully fond of sneaking up on her.

She didn't turn. "Where are your girls?"

"With Mrs. Morton. She makes warm milk and cookies and sits with them while the storm rages. She has her own magic when it comes to calming them." He moved to the window, stood staring out into the blackness.

"Your wife should be calming them, though--that's what you're thinking, isn't it?"

"You're a very presumptuous young woman."

"That doesn't mean I'm not right." She hit a few more notes, then closed the piano cover. "Do you ever talk about it?"

"What possible purpose would talking serve?"

"It might make you feel better." She realized his control had dropped; she could feel pain radiating off him. Old pain, like the healed-over ache of an infected wound.

"There are many things that might make me feel better. I'll choose one of them over talking, if you don't mind." He walked to a side table, poured himself a glass of something, and drank it down quickly. Then he poured another, finally looking at her. "Claret?"

"I don't care for claret."

"Sherry, then?"

She wasn't sure it was proper to be indulging, to be alone with him like this. She should excuse herself, go up to her small, lonely room and try to observe the boundaries of her new situation. But she missed the freedom of her old life and said, "Yes, please," before she could stop herself.

"Very good, my dear. Rebel at the staid principles." His laugh was harsh as he handed her the glass. He was standing closer than he ever had, seemed to be raking his eyes over her.

"You're being rude."

"That's because I'm drunk."

But he wasn't drunk. She reached out with her magic, felt him immediately shield. The lascivious look fell away, wariness replacing it. She pushed at him again, felt him weaken for a moment, and the sensation of pain grew stronger.

"Are you teaching my daughter magic?"

"You have not hired me to teach your daughter magic. You could teach her--in fact, it would probably be better if you did."

He sighed.

"If left untaught, her power will become undisciplined. Shouldn't you take an interest and--"

"Children are a blend of their parents, are they not?" He wasn't looking at her, was gazing at the fire. He sounded as if he was years away.

"Of course. But we don't inherit everything." She took a deep breath, forged ahead. "Your wife is mad, isn't she?"

He nodded, apparently too captivated by his memories to lie or rebuke her for her bluntness.

"Rose isn't."

"Are you suddenly an expert on madness and sanity? Are you Doctor Carruthers now?" His voice turned bitter, his lips inching up in a cruel way. "Tell me, little Arabella of Martinique, how do you know anything at all about my daughter?"

"She doesn't feel mad."

"Oh, doesn't she?" He threw the glass of claret into the fire, and flames roared up for a moment. Grabbing her hand, he yanked her after him, up the stairs, then down the hall, to the shielded room.

The web of magic slid aside for him, and he dragged Arabella into the room. She expected him to slam the door, but instead he closed it so gently it made no sound at all.

"Tell me, Miss Carruthers. Does my wife feel mad to you?"

Arabella glanced at the woman in the bed, lying so still, breath coming easily. "She's asleep."

"No, she's not."

The woman sat up. She looked at Landham and laughed softly. "You've brought me company, Papa. I've been a good girl. See." She held out a hand scratched raw.

"I used to try to make her stop," Landham said. "But she wouldn't. And she never knows it's me. I have no idea what she sees when she looks at you." He took a deep breath. "Yes, Violet. Company at last." Backing into the corner, he left Arabella to stand at the edge of the bed.

"You're very pretty. Like a holiday. I love the holidays. The singing and the candles. And the smell--have you ever had a yule log rot from the inside?"

"Tell me what she feels like if you're so blasted wise," Landham muttered.

Arabella reached out with her magic, expecting that the woman's aura would give her some hint of her madness. But there was nothing. She probed deeper and deeper.

Violet laughed. "That tickles."

Arabella turned to Landham. "I thought there would be something."

He was staring at his wife helplessly. "I did, too. It's why I let her go on so long before I took steps to lock her in here. I kept thinking that I'd know if something were wrong with her."

"She hurt Rose."

He looked at her sharply. "How do you know that?"

"Rose told me."

"Rose doesn't talk about her mother."

"Perhaps it's only that Rose doesn't talk about her mother to you." She didn't mean her words to strike deep and realized too late they had. "I mean--"

"Please go. I'm going to build the shields up."

"I could help you. It might be easier with two."

"I said go." He stared at her with absolutely no emotion. "Good night, Miss Carruthers."  
She quit trying to make things better. Nothing was going to do that at this moment. "Good night, Mister Landham."

\* \* \*

Lily ran along the surf-line, dodging waves and picking up shells as they caught her eyes.

"She's lucky. She's too young to know." Rose drew patterns in the sand, then wiped them out and started again.

"Arabella," Lily's voice got louder as she sped toward them. "Look at this." She flopped down next to Rose, leaning against her sister, her little hand tightening on Rose's skirt as she dumped her shells into Arabella's lap.

Rose pulled her close and kissed the top of her head. Not for the first time, Arabella felt a pang. In so many ways, Rose was the mother Lily had never had. But what was the price of that devotion. A lost childhood? The bitter, raging heart that Rose had stopped trying to hide from Arabella?

"Do you like my father?" Rose asked softly.

"Of course. He's a good man and--"

"I didn't ask what kind of man he was. I asked if you liked him."

Arabella met her eyes. "I don't know."

Rose hugged Lily closer. "He is a good man, though?"

"I think so. Yes."

Rose sighed, and Lily looked up at Arabella and smiled. "He likes you."

With a laugh, she asked, "And how do you know that, little mischief maker?"

"He has to like you." Lily looked up at Rose as if seeking support, but it was clear her older sister had no idea what she wanted from her. "Because if he likes you then he can marry you, and we'll have a mother."

Rose looked away, her jaw set.

"You have a mother, dear heart."

"But she never comes out of her room. We need a new mother."

Rose let go of her and pushed herself up, then strode off.

“What did I say?” Lily looked like she was going to cry.

“Nothing, sweet one. Nothing at all.”

She saw Rose turn, and their eyes met. Rose mouthed something.

“What?”

“I wish that, too,” Rose shouted, then she bolted, running headlong into the wind, her reddish blonde braids streaming behind her.

Arabella sighed. She imagined that if wishes were horses, both girls would ride forever.

\* \* \*

“Rose seemed pensive at dinner.” Landham’s voice was close to her ear, his breath warm.

“I wish you’d stop sneaking up on me.” She moved away from him, left the window, and took a seat at the piano.

“Don’t evade the issue.”

Having eaten with Mrs. Morton in the housekeeper’s room, Arabella wasn’t sure what Rose had done. But she could imagine what her mood might have been like after their afternoon on the beach. “Lily said something that upset her. She’ll get over it.”

“What did she say?” He moved over, sat down next to her on the bench.

“What are you doing?”

He didn’t answer, just lifted the cover off the keys, and began to play softly. She was surprised—for some reason, she’d assumed the pianist was his wife. She started to rise, to leave him alone with the music.

“Don’t go,” he murmured.

She settled back down.

“I noticed she was pensive because, I think, she has been happier of late. I’ve become accustomed to seeing a smile alight occasionally on her face.” He glanced over at her, and his playing slowed. “I believe I have you to thank for that.”

“I’ve perhaps been some kind of friend to her in addition to tutor.”

“Yes, you have.” He shifted, and she was suddenly acutely aware that his leg was pressing against hers.

She swallowed hard.

He glanced over at her. "Are you all right?"

She nodded. Then was sorry when his leg pressed even harder. "Sir, what are you doing?"

He stopped playing, his hands hovering over the keys. "My name is Marcus, Arabella. No one ever calls me by my name anymore."

"Mister Landham, I can't call you that."

"In Martinique, we'd have been equals. You'd have easily called me Marcus." He let up on her leg. "You make my daughters happy. Is it such a stretch to think you might make me a little happier? It's only a name. And we are quite alone."

She felt the pain again, emanating from him, calling to her. Reaching over, she took his hand, tried to send support and warmth and some kind of healing magic to him, the way Nathalie had done for her whenever she'd been hurting.

"You are kind," he whispered.

"But very unwise." She was sending so much magic out to him that it was making her dizzy. The air felt close and hot, and she had to lean against him to keep from toppling off the bench.

She heard him murmur, "Arabella." Felt him move toward her. "Stop what you're doing, my dearest. Stop before I lose any will to fight what is happening."

"What is happening?" She'd never felt this close to anyone. Her power encircled him, was being drawn in by his own magic. She felt his hand rubbing her back then moving up to the back of her head, pushing her toward him.

She moved ahead of his hand, so that she was the one who kissed him. Her mouth opened to his by instinct, and she heard him groan.

"It has been so long," he said when they finally pulled apart. "And you are so lovely."

"I have never..." She was afraid she was blushing.

"I know." His magic licked up and down hers. It felt possessive. As if he'd laid claim to more than just her lips. "I can feel it in the weave of your power."

She wasn't sure what that meant, was sure her face colored even more at what it might signify.

"You have a wife," she whispered. In Martinique, there had been a name for women who behaved as she was now. A name her mother would have washed her mouth out with expensive soap for using.

He let her go. "I would apologize, but I find I am not sorry." He looked at her. "Are you sorry?"

"I don't know what I am."

But that was a lie. She did know. And she didn't like it.

It was almost painful to pull away from him. She felt as if she was ripping off skin, not just unpeeling her magic from his.

But she did it anyway.

\* \* \*

Arabella stood at the door to Violet's room, feeling the magic in front of her. She thought she could get through, but what would be the use?

"Do you have business with my sister?" A harsh voice. High-pitched for a man and very nasal.

She turned, saw a portly man standing a few feet away, watching her. "I'm sorry. I don't believe we've met."

"And as you're no doubt the new governess, I doubt we ever shall. Be gone at once." He reached for the door and she sensed the shielding giving way to him. Not because of magic. Marcus--Mister Landham had obviously built it to let this man in. As Violet's brother unlocked the door, he glanced at her. "Are you deaf as well as ill mannered?"

She fled, hurrying down to the kitchen where Mrs. Morton sat sipping a cup of tea as she worked on the accounts. Without asking her what was wrong, the housekeeper got up and poured another cup, setting it down in front of Arabella. "He's a right prig, he is. Mister Masterson is the mistress's brother."

"So I gathered." She sipped at her tea, enjoying the tang of the bergamot. Nathalie had favored Earl Grey, too. "He comes here often?"



*Illustration: Teena Faye Kingswell*

"No, thankfully."

The sound of laughter drifted in from outside and Mrs. Morton grinned at her. "They're happier children. That's because of you."

Arabella smiled at the compliment.

"The master's happier, too. Makes an old woman's heart feel good. To see him smile again."

"I haven't seen him break into any earsplitting grins." She shot the woman a look, hoping she'd temper her hyperbole.

"Well, I've certainly seen a change." Mrs. Morton shook her head. "It's been no life for him. Having her here this way. She should be in a place where they can watch her. And he should be free."

Arabella frowned. Divorces in Martinique had been rare but not unheard of. Certainly it would have been understood in circumstances like this, where the woman was a danger to her own children. "He could end the marriage."

Mrs. Morton laughed bitterly. "Oh, yes, he could. And he'd wind up on the street with nothing to his name, including the girls if that man upstairs had his way. And he usually does."

"I don't understand."

"I guess you wouldn't, would you? You've settled in here so well, I forget that you don't know the history." She sighed. "This house belongs to Charles Masterson. He's loaned it to Violet. But if anything were to happen to her or if Mister Landham divorced her..."

Arabella understood too well. "No wonder he walked around as if he owned the place."

"Yes. He hates the master. With a great deal of fervor." Mrs. Morton shook her head. "I hate to think what he'll do to us--how much pleasure he'll get out of it--once she's gone."

Arabella heard the girls' cries turn more strident. "It is time for lessons. I'd hate for Mister Masterson to think I didn't earn my pay."

"We can't have him thinking that." Mrs. Morton favored her with a warm smile before turning back to her accounts.

Arabella hurried upstairs to get a wrap--the girls might think it was warm today, but her blood was still tropics' thin--and passed the study as she headed for the door. She heard loud male voices, could only catch snippets of the conversation: "She's getting worse, and I..." "...you'll do nothing, or I'll send you packing, so help me God."

Magic seemed to roil around the door, and for a moment she was afraid for Violet's brother. Then Marcus seemed to control himself, and she walked away, realizing as she did that she could feel his "touch" on her.

Had he been drawing from her magic to maintain control?

It made her warm inside to think he trusted her that much. It made her afraid, too. Primarily, because she'd never thought to stop him. Hadn't even noticed he'd linked with her magic--she was that open to him.

She heard loud footsteps coming her way and fled before Masterson discovered her lurking at another of his doorways.

\* \* \*

Lily and Rose sat on the ground, drawing detailed versions of the flowers in the garden, and Arabella sat watching them. She felt Marcus coming long before she heard or saw him, and knew he'd done that on purpose, had wanted her to know he was on his way.

He sat down next to her. "I'm sorry. It was an unforgivable breach to draw on your magic that way."

"If I hadn't stopped to see what the shouting was about, I wouldn't have been available for you to use, so it's probably my fault."

"Arabella." He leaned in, his voice pitched low. "I'd have found you, I think. No matter where you were. It was just easier to take it with you standing right there."

"That's far less comforting."

"I agree." He leaned back against the bench. "My brother-in-law and I do not get on."

"Yes, that was evident. He didn't like me much, either. Caught me in front of your wife's door."

He turned to look at her. "What were you doing there?"

"I don't know." She met his eyes, let him see she was being honest.

He nodded, as if accepting her answer.

"Father?" Lily threw her drawing pad down and ran to him, but stopped short of launching herself into his arms.

Arabella thought she wanted to, though.

"Hello, dearest." He pulled her onto his lap, and she cuddled into him, her face transformed by quiet joy. Then he turned to his eldest daughter. "Hello, Rose."

"Father." She didn't look back, just kept drawing.

"You seem quite absorbed in that."

“Miss Carruthers makes sure we have absorbing lessons.”

Arabella felt something go out from him. Magic, barely touching her this time, headed for his daughter and loaded with love and regret.

Rose stiffened as it reached her, and Arabella could tell she was doing her utmost to shield.

“I’ve known for some time, Rosie. You can let go.”

Rose shot her a wounded look. “You promised.”

“Rose, I swear, I didn’t--”

“She didn’t tell me.” He handed Lily to Arabella, stood, and walked over to his eldest. Holding his hand out to her, he said, “Perhaps it’s time for other types of lessons?”

Rose eyed Arabella, as if unsure whether this was a trick or not. Arabella nodded slightly and sent a rush of magical reassurance to the girl, and she could tell by the frown on Marcus’s face that he knew she’d done it, and that it bothered him that his daughter had to think about this.

But then a smile broke out on his face as Rose took his hand and let him pull her up. They walked off together toward the stables, and Arabella could just make out Rose’s energy--let loose at last around her father--jumping off her like a happy puppy.

“Rose doesn’t smile enough,” Lily said, content apparently to stay in Arabella’s lap.

“What about your drawing, Lily?”

“Rose gets a special lesson. I want one, too. Tell me a story that Rose doesn’t know.”

So Arabella told her about Martinique and Nathalie and a little girl who played in the sunshine and the sea. She stopped before the story grew sad.

\* \* \*

Arabella looked at herself in the mirror, studying her reflection. Her skin had grown so pale here. In Martinique, she’d been outside often, riding or swimming or just lazing in the late afternoon breezes. Here, she was outside, but she had not been offered the use of a horse, the water was bone chillingly cold, and the wind was far too harsh to sit for long in.

She looked older. Her skin seemed tighter, her mouth less free. But then she’d never had a thing to worry about in Martinique except to wonder where her parents were and, once she was older, which party she would accompany them to. Her life had been frivolous, and it probably would have continued that way if she’d married before they died. She’d had suitors but hadn’t felt in a hurry to choose one. They’d all melted away once she was penniless.

Taking a deep breath, she pushed her memories away. She was here now. In this dark house where there were people who needed her. No one had ever needed her before, except for Nathalie when she was dying. It was the one time she'd felt useful, reading from the stories Nathalie had once read to her.

A knock sounded on her door. She hurried over and opened it.

Mrs. Morton stood with a tray. "I'm so sorry, dear, but Mister Masterson's visit has Cook at sixes and sevens in the kitchen. He's asked for some special dishes and--"

"It's all right. I can eat in here tonight." She took the tray, trying not to think about how much she hated to eat alone in her room. But that was how it was supposed to be for a governess. She was lucky that Mrs. Morton had taken a liking to her and invited her to sup with her most nights.

"I'll be so happy when that man's gone back to Exeter."

"So will I." She smiled at Mrs. Morton, then carried her tray over to the little table by the window and ate quickly.

She was reading when she heard the pounding of feet on the main stairs, then loud voices. Opening her door a crack, she thought she heard Marcus directing the servants to call the doctor. She hurried into the hall and down the stairs toward the source of the sound.

Marcus looked over at her as she walked up. Rose and Lily were at the end of the hall, being kept back by a maid.

"What's happened?"

She realized they were standing at a guest room door and moved so she could see what was going on inside. Mister Masterson lay on the floor, his face fligid, eyes open and staring. "Is he...?"

"Yes." Marcus pointed to his daughters. "Stay with them? They'll feel better with you or Tressa-- Mrs. Morton, and she's busy helping me."

Mrs. Morton looked up, meeting Arabella's eyes as if telling her not to blame Marcus for the familiarity of using her given name. "He's had a shock. We all have. But the man wasn't healthy, if you ask me. Ate too much rich food."

"I'm sure that's what the doctor will say," Arabella murmured. As she passed Marcus to go to his daughters, she let her hand brush his.

He jerked away as if she'd burned him. She got an impression of suppressed rage. And of relief.

She suddenly wondered if Masterson had heirs of his own. And if not, would the house--and all his other possessions--revert to Violet?

She met Marcus's eyes. Realized for all the attraction she felt for him, he was still a stranger to her.

"Please," he said, his voice taking on a desperate tone. "Stay with my daughters."

She hurried away, relieving the maid of Rose and Lily and urging them back to their bedrooms. They all ended up in Rose's room, sitting on the window seat and watching as the doctor arrived on horseback, followed a while later by a wagon.

"I never really liked my uncle," Rose said softly.

"He gave me presents." Lily curled up with her head in Arabella's lap.

"But you never liked him. You just took his presents."

Arabella had a feeling Rose had thrown his presents back in his face. She was so like her father.

"He's been sick before when he visited here."

"Really?" Arabella saw them load Masterson's body into the wagon.

"He ate too much. Mrs. Morton always had to lay in extra fine things when she knew he was coming. And he drank and smoked a stinky pipe."

"Did he have a family back in Exeter?"

Lily nodded, the movement barely felt against her skirts. "My aunt Elizabeth. And cousins John and Richard."

Arabella felt herself relaxing. There were other heirs. Masterson's death would have gained Marcus nothing.

It pained her to realize how much that meant to her.

\* \* \*

Mrs. Morton seemed to be walking on air. She'd been so tense since Masterson's death, nothing like the cheerful woman Arabella had enjoyed being with. But now she found the housekeeper humming softly as she did her accounts. She looked up as Arabella entered and beamed at her.

"What's happened?" Arabella waved her back into her seat and fixed them both a pot of tea.

"I shouldn't tell you, but I know you'll keep it to yourself." Mrs. Morton waited until Arabella had sat down, then leaned forward. "The house is ours."

"I don't understand."

"Mister Masterson left it to his sister in his will. With her incapacitated, the master has control. I've been so worried we'd end up in the cold."

"Did Mister Landham know?" She felt her stomach clench at the thought.

“Know what?”

“That the will was written that way?”

Mrs. Morton gave her a searching look. “Why, I can’t imagine how he could have.”

“Of course not.” But what if he had? What if Violet had known and had said something about it, thinking she was talking to her dead father or her brother? Arabella rose, no longer able to sit and make cheerful small talk. “I need to prepare my lessons.”

“Are you all right, my dear?”

“Why wouldn’t I be?” She gave her the most brilliant smile she could, then walked away as if she hadn’t a care in the world.

But she did have a care, and her control wasn’t what it should have been. Marcus found her in the library, staring numbly at the same page she’d been looking at for minutes.

“What is it? Your magic is leaking all over.”

She turned, studied his face. “I heard.”

His face fell. “Damn Tressa.”

“Don’t blame her. She was just so happy for you.”

He moved closer, his magic crawling freely all over her. She knew he could tell what she was feeling, how conflicted she was.

“Arabella, do you think I did this?” He sounded utterly betrayed.

“Of course not.” But she looked down and could feel his magic retreating.

He sighed. “You’ll excuse me, my dear. I’m expecting the doctor. Violet is quite agitated. If I didn’t know how disconnected from life she is, I’d swear she understood that her brother was dead.”

“Agitated.” She tried to reel in her feelings, not let him see how much she doubted him.

“You think I’m behind that too, Miss Carruthers?” His voice had gone cold, colder even than the way he’d said her name so formally.

She had no answer for him, so she just fled.

\* \* \*

The wind blew like a thing possessed, slamming leaves and small twigs against the house. Arabella sat in her room, shivering, remembering the storms that used to come up in Martinique, the way the sand had been blown all around, filling the house, making them sweep for days to clear it and the palm fronds littering the courtyards.

A soft knock sounded on her door. She opened it, expecting to see Mrs. Morton with an extra lamp or perhaps a glass of warm milk, but it was Marcus.

"I did not like how things ended between us this morning." He pushed her gently out of the way, came into her room, and shut the door.

"You should not be here."

"I know that." Running his fingers down her cheek, he stared at her with the most helpless expression she had ever seen him wear. "Are you going to leave me?"

She pulled away, just enough to free herself from his touch. She couldn't think when he was touching her that way. Even if he seemed to be making an effort to keep his magic contained.

"Arabella?"

"You should go. At once."

He moved closer and freed his magic. It licked at her in a concerted attack, wearing down her resistance, until she let it in and felt as if she might fall from the sensation. He steadied her, his hands warm on her back.

"I need you. I have not let myself need anyone for years, but you are so strong, and I cannot resist what you offer."

"I have offered you nothing," she murmured, but she was pulling him to her, mirroring what their magic was doing as she kissed him, as she wrapped her arms around him and gave in to feelings she did not entirely understand.

He lifted her, carrying her to her small bed. "You must not leave me." He began to undress her, tossing her garments to the floor.

She knew she should tell him to stop, tell him to leave her in peace. And then she should go. She should flee this man and his house on the cliff.

Moaning, she began to tear his clothes from him. They fell onto her bed, and she felt as if the magic controlled them instead of the other way around. She was doing things to him that should have made her blush. He was doing things to her that should have left her just as embarrassed. But she did not stop, and neither did he.

They finally lay still, pressed together on the small bed, and he kissed her forehead and held her tightly. She looked up at him, and he gave her such a sweetly lost smile that she had to pull his face to hers, had to kiss him again.

It was light out when they finally stopped making love.

He dressed slowly, staring at her as she lay naked on the bed. She knew she should cover herself. That only a wanton would lie as she was, letting him enjoy the body he'd possessed all night. But she was too tired to move--and she liked how it made her feel to let him look.

Sitting on the bed, his back to her, he pulled on his shoes. "Are you going to leave me?"

She knew he'd saved the question till now so she could answer without the press of his eyes on her, without so much of last night intruding. "I don't know."

He nodded, and she wished she could see his face. Without turning to look at her, he got up and headed for the door.

"Marcus?"

He turned then.

She slipped off the bed, walked to him naked and aching and lost in the delicious and base combination of pleasure and guilt. He smiled, and she saw her emotions reflected in the twist of his expression.

"I love you," she said. It wasn't a promise not to leave. But it was something.

He took her in his arms, kissing her with more tenderness than passion. "I love you, too, my Arabella." Then he let her go, gently pushing her out of sight of the door as he opened it carefully and snuck a look into the hall. The coast apparently clear, he slipped out, closing the door softly.

The room felt empty without him, and she was suddenly chilled. Slipping on her nightdress, she crawled back into bed, trying to get warm.

She woke hours later, still cold.

\* \* \*

Standing at the sitting room window, Arabella saw Marcus out by the stables with Rose, working with what seemed to be an unbroken horse.

"He has a way with them. A magical touch to put them at ease." Mrs. Morton was as bad as Marcus, slipping in with no warning.

"Rose seems to have inherited that touch."

"She's very like him. Lily is more like the mistress." Mrs. Morton closed her eyes for a moment. "Only not in that sense, please God."

Arabella sighed.

“What’s wrong, my dear?”

“I’m just tired. I didn’t sleep well.” At least she’d finally warmed up.

“This house is a different place since you’ve been here, Arabella.”

She looked up, surprised at the woman’s informality. It had been Miss Carruthers and Mrs. Morton up to now. She wondered how long it had been since someone called the housekeeper by her given name. “I don’t know that I’ve done anything special, Tressa.”

The woman beamed at her. “Of course you have. You’ve given them something to smile about.”

Arabella wondered if Marcus was smiling today. Was he remembering their night together? With pleasure or regretting it?

Tressa took her hand, held it lightly. “This place has been a dark house. And then you blew in here like a breeze from that tropical land you love so much. You brought light and hope.” Her smile faded, and she stared hard at Arabella. “Whatever happens, you need to stay with them.”

“Really, Tressa. Eventually the girls will outgrow me.”

“They’ll outgrow their governess. But they won’t outgrow their friend.” She let go of Arabella. “And the master’ll never outgrow you. He’s met his match in you, I think.” With a wink, she left Arabella alone.

Images of the night before flooded through her. The way he’d learned her body. The way she’d traveled over his, exploring with lips and tongue. He had indeed met his match. But was that anything to be proud of?

\* \* \*

Marcus was in her bed again, making love to her in the agonizingly slow way he seemed to like best, making her squirm and beg him to finish what he was doing. He settled down beside her, kissing her and running his fingers down her body, easing her back into the life that existed outside of this heady pleasure.

“You are my world,” he murmured, as he pulled her closer.

“As you are mine.” She hated that it was true. Hated that she could not say no to him. She hated herself for being so weak, but she didn’t hate him. In fact, her feelings for him grew with each touch, with each blending of their magic.

“I know this is hard for you, Arabella. The secrecy. The hiding. It will end, I promise you.” But he sounded defeated, as if he wasn’t convinced of the truth of his words.

She was about to pull him to her, to kiss him and tell him to stop trying to make their situation better, when a scream rang out. It was terrified and had the high-pitched sound of a child’s fear.

“Lily,” he shouted, flinging the bedclothes off and pulling on the nightclothes they’d scattered all over the room.

She grabbed her nightdress and robe and followed him out, not caring who saw them.

But no one did. The hallway was deserted.

Then the scream rang out again and Marcus ran for the stairs, heading for the main bedrooms. She followed him, felt a moment of panic when she saw Violet’s door standing open. She reached out, sensed how the magical barrier was shredded. Felt something...familiar in the feel of the damage. But she didn’t have time to stop and assess it because Lily screamed again and there was an answering cry, more wild beast than human.

She nearly crashed into Marcus as she rounded the corner to the girl’s room. He was standing stock still as Violet stood between them and Lily. They were all frozen in this strange tableau, the silence broken only by Lily’s frightened whimpers and the sound of harsh breathing from Violet and from them.

Rose’s door crashed open, and Rose walked out, putting herself between her mother and Lily. She was holding a long knife she must have taken from the kitchen. Arabella wondered how long she’d had it in her room.

“Go back to your room, mother.” Rose sounded far older than her years. Her voice came out as a growl, and her eyes were dead and dangerous as she added magic to the threat of the raised knife.

Violet slapped at her head. “Get out. Get out of me.”

Arabella frowned. Rose was strong, but the warning shot of magic she’d just sent didn’t warrant Violet’s reaction. Glancing at Marcus, Arabella saw he looked as confused as she did.

But he was quite a good dissembler. She had reason now to know that. Every time they met in the hall, for instance, with witnesses present was evidence that he could pretend one thing and feel something very different.

But she didn’t sense any magic going out of him to make Violet act that way. And she knew the feel of his magic at a soul-deep level now.

Violet sank down to the carpet, crying softly. “I’ll be good, Mother. Please, I’ll be good.”

“Rose,” Marcus said very quietly, “get your sister into her room and lock the door.”

Rose didn’t stop to argue. With a last angry glare at her mother, she turned and hustled Lily into her room. Arabella heard the click of the lock.

“The wards you put up on her room were ripped through, Marcus.”

"I know." He was staring at Violet as if he was unsure how to deal with her now that the immediate danger was over.

"There are only three of us who could have done that." And it had taken Rose an awfully long time to come out of her room. Had Violet reacted that way to an ongoing attack, not to the blast of magic Rose had sent as they watched?

The girl hated her mother. The question was how much and what was she willing to do for hate's sake?

Or was it just easier to think it was an angry daughter and not the man she loved who had freed the weeping woman who lay before them, clawing at the carpet as if she could dig her way out of the house?

Arabella pulled her power around her, tried to block out everything but the need to think clearly about this.

Marcus glanced at her. "You're shielding from me."

"We need to get her back in her room."

"Can I help?" A soft voice. Tressa behind them. Had she been there all along, afraid to move for fear of upsetting the delicate balance of their standoff? And how much had she heard?

"Tressa, thank God. Yes, please help." Marcus pushed past Arabella, dragging Violet up.

His touch set her off, and she began to scream and kick. But Tressa was there, surprisingly strong, and she grabbed Violet's legs and hefted them up. She looked at Arabella and said, "There's a bottle of laudanum in my pocket. Take it out and go on ahead. The small glass on the table, fill it halfway."

Arabella did as she said, hurrying into Violet's room, which smelled musty and of unlaundered clothing. She found the glass and filled it half full, holding it to Violet's lips once they brought her in.

Violet thrashed with her head, nearly knocking the glass from her hand. Then Arabella felt Marcus's magic reach out. There was anger in it, and fear, but also some remnant of the love he must have felt at one time for this woman.

Violet calmed and opened her mouth, and Arabella poured the contents in slowly, not wanting her to choke. When Violet had taken it all, Arabella moved away, letting them get the woman back into bed. She found herself near the door, and closed her eyes so she could examine what was left of Marcus's shields. There was something so familiar about the remnant of power. She began to follow it and--

"Are you all right, Arabella? Do you need to sit down?" Tressa was staring at her in concern. "You're swaying on your feet."

She was, but it was the magic making her do it, not fatigue. "I'm all right." Looking over at Marcus she saw that he was watching Violet closely, his hands clenched. She knew he would stay until his wife fell asleep, so that he could build the wards back up again.

“Good night, sir,” she murmured, as she followed Tressa back to the part of the house they shared.

If he heard her, he did not reply.

\* \* \*

Arabella sat outside with the girls and tried to divert them as the doctor rode up.

“Afternoon, miss,” he said seeing her. “Girls.”

They echoed pleasantries, but Lily moved closer to her, her hand tangling in Arabella’s hair in a way that was almost painful. “Is he here for Mother?”

“Yes, dearest.” She glanced at Rose.

“They should lock her up now. Father can do it now that Uncle Charles is gone.”

Lily perked up. “Would she not be our mother anymore?”

“She’ll always be your mother, Lily.” And always present, in some sense, for Arabella and Marcus. They would never be able to come out of the shadows as long as she was still his wife.

She realized Rose was staring at her. “What?”

“You feel different. Have for some time. More...sure of yourself.”

Arabella could feel herself flushing. “I’m just getting used to this place.”

“Oh. Is that it?” The look Rose gave her was far too knowledgeable.

Had Marcus been seen coming out of her room? Had Rose heard some gossip from the servants?

“I’m glad you’re happy,” Rose said, surprising her with a kiss on the cheek. “I’m glad you came to us.”

Arabella smiled at her, but she wondered if happy was the right way to describe how she felt.

\* \* \*

“She’s getting worse,” Marcus murmured as they lay spooned together on her bed. “The doctor thinks an institution may be the best option.”

She knew she’d tensed at his words by the sigh that escaped him.

“I’m sorry, Arabella. I don’t know what else to do.”

“You must do what’s right for her. And for all of you.” Nathalie had taught her that long ago. That hard choices sometimes had to be made in order to do what was right. That what you wanted might not be what you got, not even with magic on your side.

“What’s right is being with you. This: the way I feel when I walk with you and the girls on one of your little nature lessons. I look at the spot you should be sitting at the dinner table and feel an emptiness I’ve never known. I want you with me, Arabella. In every way that you could be with me.”

“You want me as your wife?”

“More than anything.”

She turned and snuggled into his chest. “That’s a problem, my love, as you already have one.”

“I know.” His voice was muffled by her hair. “I know that too well.”

She felt a surge of nausea, said, “Let me go,” and slid off the bed, pulling out the chamber pot. She threw up several times, felt him run a cool cloth over her forehead.

“This is not good,” he said, worry clear in his voice.

“I must have eaten something that didn’t sit well. That’s all.”

“When was your last monthly flux?”

She colored at the frankness of his question, then looked down at the chamber pot and felt horror fill her.

“I don’t remember it impeding our joining.”

She met his eyes. They hadn’t spent every night together, but he was right. Her hand seemed to find her belly by instinct, and she swallowed hard.

Had she thought magic would protect them from this eventuality? They’d taken no precautions, caught up in the passion and fire.

“We will sort this out,” he said softly.

“I don’t think there’s anything to sort out, is there? In no time at all, our child will make an appearance.”

It was his turn to swallow hard. “I will divorce her.”

She went on as if she hadn’t heard him. “There may be something I can take.” People had gone to an old former slave for that in Martinique. The woman would make them a packet of herbs to steep into tea. A few days later, the people looked much relieved.

But did she want that? Her hand curled protectively over her belly, and she brought her other one up to lie over it. She met his eyes. “What are we going to do?”

"I will divorce her, Arabella."

"Masterson was smart. He may have left the house to Violet, but I imagine he put some caveat on that, didn't he? That if you left her...?"

He looked down and she knew she was right.

"We'll make this work," he murmured as he pulled her up and eased her into bed, as if she was fragile now and needed to be protected. His magic settled around her like a mystical coat of armor, and she sighed at how safe she felt.

Even if she knew it was an utterly deceptive security.

\* \* \*

Tressa sighed as the doctor rode away from the house. "He's here more and more."

Arabella knew that soon she might be needing his services.

"My mother used to tell me not to borrow trouble," Tressa said, taking her by the arm and leading her to the table. "And I am going to follow that fine advice."

Arabella wished with all her heart that she could do the same. But hiding her head in the sand wasn't going to help things. In fact, failing to plan for herself and her child would undoubtedly make her situation even worse.

"Here, I saved you some lunch." Tressa pushed a small plate with a roll, some cheese, and an apple on it.

The tangy smell of the cheese hit her nose immediately, making her stomach clench. She ran for the privy, barely making it before her guts started to heave. She escaped as soon as she was done, the smell of the privy almost worse than the nausea.

Tressa was standing outside. Without a word, she put her arm around Arabella and helped her back inside.

"Something you ate?"

"Yes," Arabella barely got out. She noticed Tressa hastily removing the plate of food.

"Nothing to worry about, then." Tressa gave her a searching look.

She tried to answer her, but the words would not come. For a moment, she was dizzy, as if something was pressing in on her. She felt if she didn't tell someone else the truth, she'd explode. She heard herself whispering, "Not for eight months or so."

Tressa was staring at her in confusion. "What did you say? You mumbled."

Breathing a sigh of relief, Arabella shook her head. "I was agreeing with you. Nothing to worry about."

"Good." Tressa got up and put the kettle on. "I'll make you something to drink. Plain, weak tea always helps me when my stomach is upset."

She sounded so like Nathalie that Arabella almost started to cry.

\* \* \*

Arabella lay awake, tossing and turning in her bed. Marcus hadn't come to her. He'd been busy with the doctor, and then she'd seen another man show up. A stranger.

The door opened, and she turned to see Marcus. Reaching out for him, she smiled as he came to her quickly, shedding his nightclothes as he walked.

He crawled into bed, pulled her close.

"Who was that man with you today?"

He kissed her cheek, his hand coming to rest on her slightly swelling belly. "My solicitor. I wanted to know my--our options."

She could feel herself tense, heard him sigh, but he didn't say more.

"We don't have many, do we?" she finally asked.

"No. We don't." There was an odd note in his voice.

"What?"

"We might do fine on our own. America is a place to start over, from what I've read. For those who might not have much."

"No. I won't deprive the girls of their birthright just to make this better for us." She sighed. "There are stories that could be put out. I could be a girl who made a mistake. You the kind master who did not turn me out for lack of discretion with one of your servants."

His hand tightened on her belly. "You're talking about my child. Not some by-blow of the stable boy."

"The story would let me stay. We'll just have to be more careful in the future."

"I won't live that way. I won't have my child go unacknowledged."

"I could leave, you know. Take on a new name. Be Mrs. Someone or Other--the widow of a low-ranking soldier. Perhaps one in India--who would check that? And it might be for the best, I--"

He shut her up with a kiss. "Go to sleep, Arabella. We will sort this out. And soon. I promise."

She didn't think she'd be able to sleep. But between his baby making her sick and his body keeping her safe, she soon fell asleep and slept till morning.

He was gone when she woke.

\* \* \*

She went down for breakfast, truly hungry for the first time in a while, but was surprised to find no one in the kitchen. She went upstairs to look for the girls, but they weren't in their rooms, either. She walked down the hall and stopped in her tracks, dread filling her.

The door to Violet's room stood open. The magical barrier hung in tatters, destroyed again.

The girls. Where were the girls?

She turned and ran down the stairs, found Tressa just coming in. "Where is she?"

"We don't know."

"And the girls?"

"Rose is out looking with Marcus." If Tressa was upset enough to call Marcus by his given name, Arabella knew things were bad.

"And Lily?"

"We don't know." Tressa took her hand. "I was just coming in to get you. We're all out searching, and the doctor is on his way with more men. We'll find them. I saw Lily at breakfast, so if she's with Violet, they could not have gone far."

"How could she have gotten out of that room?"

Tressa shook her head. "It's an old lock. Not that hard to pick if one has time and patience. She never had the patience before."

But she'd gotten through the barrier, too. For the second time. Was Marcus absolutely certain that his wife had no talent?

The last time there'd been a remnant of someone in the web of magic. Maybe this time there would be too. Arabella pulled free of Tressa. "I need to put on different shoes. I'll only be a moment."

Tressa nodded.

Arabella hurried into the house and up the stairs. She did stop to put on sturdier shoes, then she went to Violet's room and stood by the door, holding onto it, trying to find the echo she'd sensed before.

There! Again the hint of the familiar. Magic from someone she knew. But it was too faint to get a true signature from. Only the tantalizing hint of something she knew she should recognize.

She hurried back outside, walked with Tressa, combing ground. A bit later they heard the sound of horses, and the doctor rode up with a group of men. "No luck?"

Tressa shook her head.

"Mrs. Landham's been in such a state lately. But I never expected her to do this."

"None of us did, Doctor, or we'd have had her removed to a safer location." It was bold of Arabella to speak that way, but the doctor seemed to accept it.

"We'll send someone back for you if we find them."

Tressa nodded and seemed to sink into herself. Arabella could feel Marcus from far off, the touch of his magic infused with panic. She searched for Rose, could feel her, no longer bothering to shield. Pure emotion filled the girl. Hatred for her mother and the utmost concern for her sister.

"They're up ahead."

"I know." Tressa met her look. "Where else would they be?" There were cliffs on one side, the empty heaths if they went far enough on the other. Only by going straight ahead would Violet find cover.

Arabella reached out for Marcus, realized he was closer than she'd thought. His panic had grown exponentially, and she started to run, Tressa close behind.

They came out of the trees into a clearing. Violet was holding Lily and was standing dangerously close to the cliff edge.

"Put her down," Marcus was saying, and Arabella felt him unleash his magic, pressing on Violet, trying to make her do what he said.

The stream of power got stronger, and she realized Rose had joined her father, their magic so alike it was almost impossible to tell the streams apart.

Violet dropped Lily who scuttled away, running to Rose, who ceased her magical attack on her mother and picked up her sister, retreating to where Arabella and Tressa stood.

"What do we do now?" Rose asked, and Arabella was about to answer when she realized Rose was talking to Tressa, heard her friend say, "We wait for the doctor to get here."

"How will he know where we are?" Arabella asked, but then she felt it. A distinct tingle of magic going out toward where the doctor and his men had ridden, calling the men back to them.

A trail of magic leading straight to Tressa.

Arabella stared at her. Then at Rose. She'd known that learning to hide magic the way Rose had done wasn't usually something a person could discover by trial and error. She'd known it and she'd let it go because...

She felt something pressing down on her, the same way as the other day, when she'd blurted out words that could only be taken one way. She'd thought Tressa hadn't heard her, but realized the other woman had only pretended not to hear.

"This is for you, Arabella," Tressa said, a gentle smile on her face. "For you and the child you carry."

Rose looked at Arabella in shock.

"And for the man who is like a son to me. For my dear, dear girls." She ruffled Lily's hair, let her hand settle on Rose's shoulder. "Violet is just in the way at this point."

"You killed her brother, didn't you?"

"His appetite for rich things would have killed him eventually. I just hastened the process. We needed him gone, for this to work."

The doctor rode into the clearing, dismounting and saying, "Mrs. Landham, please let me help you."

Violet screamed, and Arabella felt Marcus let go of the magic that had been keeping her in place. He backed off, and she could tell he didn't want to panic his wife into jumping.

Then new magic went screaming past Arabella, magic intended to hurt, magic that probably felt to Violet like a swarm of bees.

"Don't, Tressa. This is wrong." She put a hand on her belly, apologized to her child, but knew that she was right.

"She stands in the way of your future. No one will question that she is mad when she jumps."

"I will always know what you did." She turned and met Rose's eyes. Calm eyes now that her sister was out of danger. Arabella didn't think Rose would shed a single tear if her mother danced off the cliff.

And Violet was getting closer to the edge, clawing at her hair as Tressa's magic did its work.

Marcus frowned, strode over to them. He stared at Tressa as if he'd never seen her before. "You're the one who broke through the barriers."

"I'm the one." Tressa touched his cheek. "I love you, Marcus. You know that, don't you?"

"She's going to kill her," Arabella said, and she saw Marcus look out at his wife. He looked like a man torn between what was right and what would make his life begin again. She knew how he felt.

For a moment, it seemed like he was going to do nothing. Then he turned and looked at Arabella. "Promise you won't leave me. Promise that we'll start over, all of us."

"I promise."

He sent his magic toward Violet, enveloping her in it, calming her.

Arabella looked at Rose. "She's your mother."

"I don't care."

"Then do it because I'm asking you to. Because your father wants this."

Rose looked at Tressa. "I'm sorry." Then she added her power to her father's.

Violet was still inching backwards.

Arabella added her own magic--felt as if it was coming from a place of pain and loss and guilt. She was giving up her future for this woman's. She wasn't sure it was fair, but she knew it was right.

Violet stopped moving, stood sobbing, finally letting her hands drop from her bleeding scalp.

Arabella felt Tressa's hands on her shoulders. She whipped her around, and Arabella's magic was cut off.

"You're a good person, and I will honor your choice," Tressa said. "I have no right to demand her sacrifice so that those I love are happy."

Arabella sagged in relief.

"But I do have the right to sacrifice myself for you." Tressa leaned in and kissed her cheek, laying her hand on Arabella's stomach and whispering something that sounded like a blessing. "It would be nice if you called her Tressa."

She turned, and Arabella reached for her sleeve, but the wind came up and whipped it the other way. The crash of the waves seemed to intensify, and she heard Marcus roar, "Tressa, no!" as Tressa ran across the clearing, slamming into Violet and carrying her the short distance to the cliff's edge.

Violet screamed, and the sound echoed as she fell. Tressa made no sound, but Arabella could feel the jolt when she hit the water, as every bit of her magic was snuffed out in the cold sea.

Rose fell to her knees, gasping and then crying--Arabella knew it was for her teacher, not for her mother. Marcus seemed to be holding himself like a column of marble, as if he would break apart if touched or talked to.

Lily just stood, staring at the place where her mother and the woman she had loved like a grandmother had gone over. Arabella picked her up and murmured to her, but she didn't know which of them she was trying to soothe.

The doctor looked at Marcus. "We'd better get down there. Tide'll change soon."

Marcus nodded stiffly. "I'll just get my girls and Arabella home first."

Arabella. Not Miss Caruthers. The doctor didn't seem to notice, just said, "Of course. We'll wait for you."

Rose pushed herself to her feet and walked over to Arabella. She held her hand up, let it hover over Arabella's stomach. "May I?"

She nodded, felt the girl's hand press down. "Your brother or sister?"

"It'll be a girl." Rose looked up at her. "Will you call her Tressa?"

Marcus was looking at her, waiting for her to answer. She realized he wouldn't press the issue if she said no.

"I think that might be a nice way to remember her." She glanced back at the cliff, afraid that it would take a long time before she remembered Tressa as anything but the woman who'd taken such a drastic step to free them all.

Would it have been better to let her just push Violet over with her magic? Had Arabella been wrong about what was right?

Marcus took Lily from her, and led them off. Rose held her hand tightly, hanging back a bit.

Arabella let her slow their pace enough to put some distance between them and the others. "What is it?"

"When I was four, my mother made Father take us to a farm in Dartmoor for me to pick out my first pony. She and Father were laughing. They were happy once."

"Yes, I know they were."

"I loved her back then." She looked up at Arabella, her eyes dry. "I should try to remember those times, shouldn't I?"

Arabella nodded. "The last few times she tried to hurt Lily, I think it was because Tressa was pushing on her."

"Maybe. But not the first time." Rose touched the sleeve that covered the burn scar. "The first time was all her."

\* \* \*

Arabella waited in the library, sitting at the piano and picking out the melody of a song Nathalie had taught her.

She caught a taste of Marcus's magic; he was exhausted, emotionally and physically. She could sense him coming back to her and waited for him, her hands in her lap.

The main door opened, footsteps clomping down the hall. The doctor followed Marcus in and came to stand in front of her. "Miss Carruthers. I'm Doctor Penwhite. Gordon Penwhite. I don't believe we've formally met."

"I don't believe so." She took his hand.

"Gordon's an old friend, Arabella," Marcus said. "I told him you'd be needing his services before too long."

She looked down.

"I'm not one to judge, my dear. I know the hell Marcus has lived through the last few years." He patted her hand, then let her go. "I'll leave you two alone."

Marcus sat down next to her, his shoulder pressing against hers. "Even if he weren't my friend, we need him on our side. We'll have to wait a short while to get married. I want this to look respectable."

"As respectable as it can," she said, putting her hand over her belly.

"The child will be born early. He'll put that on the documentation."

She nodded, knowing he was right to worry about such things.

Turning, he pulled her into his arms, holding her tightly. "Tressa was like a mother to me. I can't believe she's gone."

"You found her body?"

"We found them both."

Arabella drew a ragged breath. "It's my fault, Marcus. I wouldn't let her use her magic to push Violet."

"No, my love. We wouldn't let her use her magic to push Violet. Even Rose helped stop her. It wasn't just you." He put his hand over hers, pushing lightly. "We don't have to name her Tressa."

"I was thinking Nathalie Tressa. If it's a girl."

"That would be nice." He kissed her forehead. Then leaned in again and kissed her long and hard on the lips. "I love you so."

She pressed against him, her arms around his waist. "Play something for me. Something sad."

“I wish you wanted something happy. I wish I wanted to give you a happy song. But tonight..”

He began to play, a haunting melody that seemed to sink inside her and rip the pain out. She realized she was crying, felt him cradle her in magic even as he played on.

“Are you sorry you came here?” he whispered when he finished.

“No.” She met his eyes, smiled and shook her head. “No, I’m not sorry.”

She heard the wind whipping up, the sound of leaves hitting the window. “Storm’s coming.”

He nodded. Then he looked at the stairs, and she could imagine what he was thinking.

She rose. “I’ll ask Cook to bake some cookies and warm the milk. So the girls aren’t scared.” She took his hand. “We can sit the storm out together.”

They had weathered much worse together, what was one storm?

## THE AUTHOR

Gerri Leen is celebrating the release of her first book, *Life Without Crows*, a collection of short stories published by Hadley Rille Books. She has over fifty stories and poems published in such places as: *She Nailed a Stake Through His Head*, *Sword and Sorceress XXIII*, *Return to Luna*, *Sniplits*, *Triangulation: Dark Glass*, *Footprints*, *Sails & Sorcery*, and *Paper Crow*. Gerri lives in Northern Virginia and originally hails from Seattle. Visit [www.gerrileen.com](http://www.gerrileen.com) to see what else she's been up to.

## Rosemary For Remembrance

*by Annette Bowman*

Skirting the mud marsh edge of Muskrat Lake  
My horse's hooves press into the soft ground.  
We move through cattails whistling in the wind.  
Birds sing and mosquitoes buzz all around.

Pale ghosts of time past move through this forest.  
Branches sway, dry twigs shush, and green leaves flap,  
Float, slowly down. I look to the sunlight  
For tales of shadows, mischief, and mishap.



*Illustration: Teena Faye Kingswell*

She told me rosemary for remembrance,  
Graveyard dust to raise the virtuous dead,  
Seven silver coins, and moonshine whiskey  
for the spirits to be appeased and fed.

Nearing Silver Sands Beach where we first met,  
I shiver and feel eyes lock onto me.  
I look around and then hear a crashing  
Of movement near an old, split hemlock tree.

You'll come back to me from the other side,  
If I cast the circle, just as she said.  
I have been lonely without your kisses,  
The sound of your voice, and you in my bed.

But will your warmth rise from the too cold grave?  
Will you be my love? Or a half live thing?  
Am I doing right by your memory?  
I sense Observers watching and waiting.

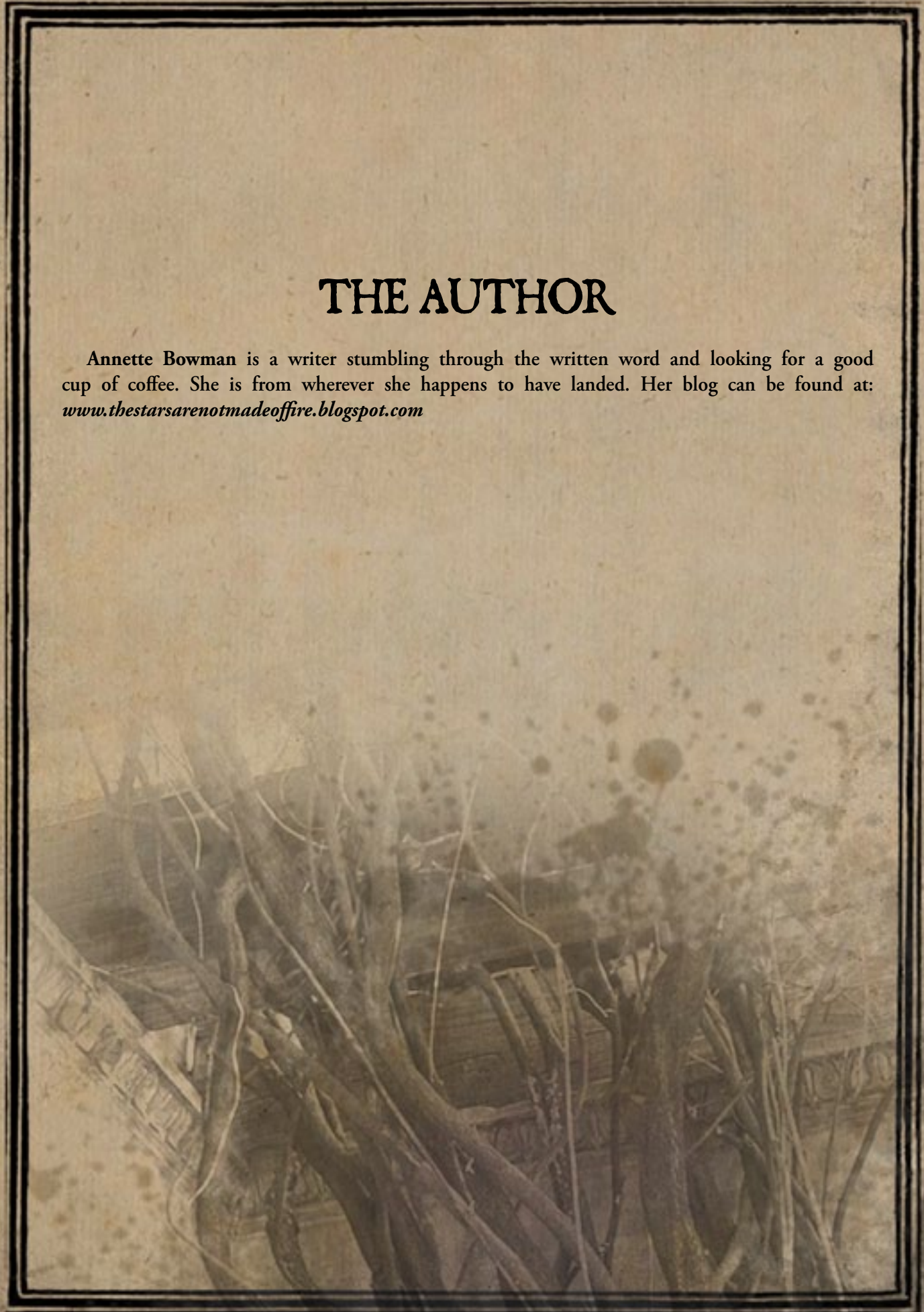
Dragging my heel, I etch in the damp sand  
A clockwise circle. I dig a small hole,  
Dump in shiny silver coins and grave dust.  
The wind howls the pain of a tortured soul.

I say the odd words the witch gave to me,  
Take a long, slow swig of the harsh whiskey,  
and pour some to the corners of the earth  
for the shades without any family.

I pick up the bundle of rosemary.  
Dark thunder clouds are forming in the sky.  
The chill wind grows fierce and bends the saplings.  
First silence, then a voice begins to cry.  
I grip the tied, green sprig of rosemary.  
What will come to me through the undergrowth?  
Rosemary is for remembrance.  
This will be something new. I swear an oath.

## THE AUTHOR

Annette Bowman is a writer stumbling through the written word and looking for a good cup of coffee. She is from wherever she happens to have landed. Her blog can be found at: [www.thestarsarenotmadeoffire.blogspot.com](http://www.thestarsarenotmadeoffire.blogspot.com)



## Bigger Fish

*by Peter Farrugia*

"Late as usual," she thought, "and later than usual in a minute."

Tightening her grip on a bag full of books and burying one hand in her coat, she trundled down the gravel path. The jangle of loose change followed each begrudging footstep and the prospect of a double lecture (something slimy about rhizomes and rootstacks) soured what already promised to be a dour morning.

Fenced in by windowless buildings and nondescript walls, raked with gravel in thoroughly un-Zen like swirls, the Quad was entirely empty. At odd intervals a bird shrieked and somewhere beyond, the sound of early traffic began its monotonous hum.

The fastest route to class was across an overhead bridge but she took a meandering path through the middle of the Quad. A large, round pond dotted the area's gravel grey boredom.

She stopped at the pond and perched on the edge and fished for a cigarette in an overstuffed pocket. One crumpled little stick, covered in fluff, and it refused to light properly.

"I should've got that zippo," she mumbled (a silver framed thing in eggshell enamel, the lighter her ex had offered moments before the decision to break up with him became more necessary than anything she had ever done). "It was such an ugly thing."

A splash in the water disturbed her, the cigarette dangled unlit in her hand. Looking down past the lily pads where the water was less agitated, shadows swam in and out of focus. Large bubbles burst, were replaced. Shapes became clearer, pushing out of the water into sudden view.

All fish, mouths soft and wide and gaping with tender pink insides all flesh. Their open eyes that looked somehow wetter than their dark heads, smacking rubbery lips with a sound like popping bubble gum. Did they expect food? She lowered her hand and waved, excusing herself.

But just as she waved, one fish leapt out in a fantastical arc and latched onto her pinkie. It thrust and tugged, drawn down by the sudden vacuum. The fish's slick black body suckled all the way to the knuckle. Something sharp snagged her skin.

She screamed, "EEK!", and in reply the fish dove back into the water. The morning chill was broken through by sunlit warmth and the smell of pond weed, damp and fermenting, clung to her skin. She stared at the wounded finger, coated in transparent gloop flecked here and there with blood. Without thinking she brought her finger to her mouth, sucked, then leaned over the pond and spat.

The water rippled, twice and three times from the centre outwards. She stepped back slowly. Something was rising out of the pond so gently it didn't seem to be happening at all. A fish's head so large it cast a shadow across the entire length of her. Speckled black on the sticky whiteness of its flesh, sunlight collected in pockets of moisture. She trembled in the shadow of the enormous head.

The edge of the pond fit like a snug stone collar around the gill-frilled neck. It considered her with trembling black pupils. A yawning sound, inhuman and yet comforting, filled the silence. It opened its large wet mouth, displacing a wave of green-grey water, and unfurled a tongue so pink and soft it made her blush.

She took a step towards the enormous fish head and put her hand on the pulsing warmth of it. Bringing her lips closer she made some kind of contact, with her eyes closed, falling forward into a dark and comfortable abyss. Warmth was everywhere.

She could only remember the taste of something musty, the soundless gaping of a wide hunger. The fact her lecturer scolded her for a full five minutes (and spitefully refused to accept an essay she had spent the better part of two weeks rewriting) seemed less important than the tiny wound on her finger and the uncomfortable feeling in her stomach.

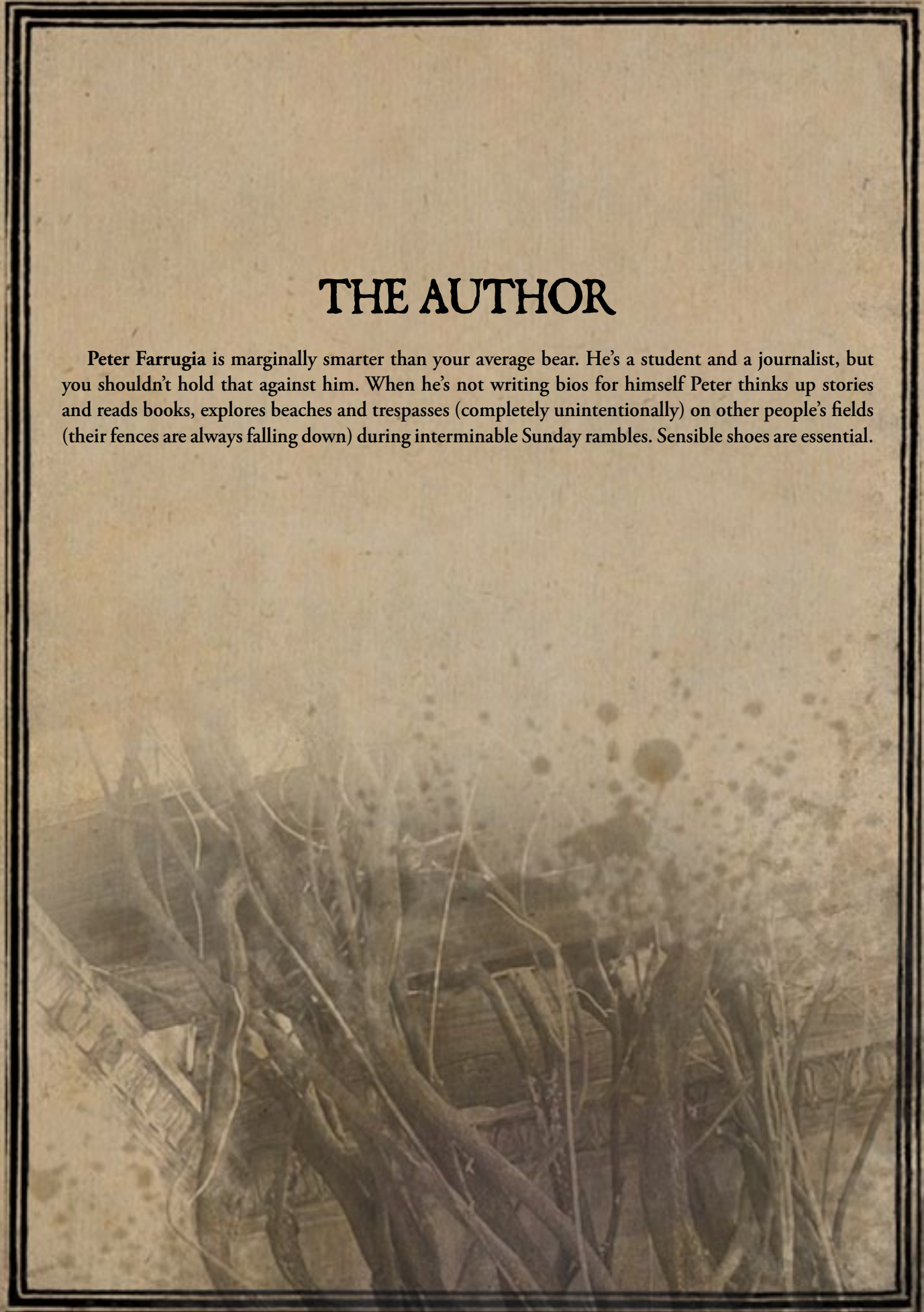
I'll be there soon, she promised, and looked out across the quad at the small stone pond, waiting in the centre of that endless stretch of grey.

*Illustration: Teena Faye Kingswell*



## THE AUTHOR

Peter Farrugia is marginally smarter than your average bear. He's a student and a journalist, but you shouldn't hold that against him. When he's not writing bios for himself Peter thinks up stories and reads books, explores beaches and trespasses (completely unintentionally) on other people's fields (their fences are always falling down) during interminable Sunday rambles. Sensible shoes are essential.



*Audio Version Here*

## The Yardbird's Return (To Cognisance)

*by Teena Faye Kingswell*

- White noise-

A fuzzy brand of consciousness began to bleed into the fore.

Largely restricted to bodily sensations, albeit in disarray. None of her limbs had their usual distinctness, divorced from the memory of waking sensation. A faint perception of stumpy arms, enlarged hands distant from her center, legs which were seemingly unimportant and absent, and a face so vast, it might span across an entire continent.

Or at the very least, reach the next room.

Room?

Let me be clear.

She did not possess, not even a modicum of awareness of her own self, much less the architecture and layout of her surroundings.

So, kindly accept my instruction, to take the word 'room' and the relative notion of it being the 'next' one; and distill, reduce, to an essential primal notion of 'not here, but further away'. As in a dreamworld, where the next stepping stone may suddenly seem to be distanced by a thousand more furlongs than you 'anticipated'.

\* \* \*

Lifting her eyelids yielded little. The hazy blur, all a-chunk with grotty sinewy masses of grey area interspersed with a blinding white heat, which appeared to pain her to dispel. She quickly reacted by trying to rest her eyelids, but what she ended up with was something distinctly unlike resting. Almost as much of an unwelcome effort to keep them closed, as it was to endure the sludgy, bright mess that presented itself before her.

A pain in the back of her head began to boom and echo within its confines of bone, the entire egg-shaped part of her skull seeming to restrictedly pulsate, as though somehow its core had begun to rot and was threatening to distend.

Her musings led to idle recall of a prominent childhood memory. Of a single dead deer they had chanced upon, back when she was just another carefree, forest-frolicking child. The boys had poked at it with sticks and she had proudly walked away from the whole episode with an oddly inflated sense of self, as she turned out to be the bravest of all the girls present, having ventured the closest to the swollen animal and having generally refrained from making those terrible shrieking noises young girls are prone to making.

She had revisited this memory before, looking it up in a dusty old tome at the local library, and got a smattering of an idea of the reason behind their horribly misshapen bodies.

\* \* \*

The fuzz eventually dissipated, the fleeting moments of utter incomprehension quickly forgotten and tossed aside, never to be dwelled upon - bar some hokey hypnotism forcing the mind down streets lined with shops it'd long since closed for business.

What began to surface now was more tangible, more in line with her familiar mental-picture of her bodily self. Whatever that might be. Suffice to say that she still could not feel her legs. Rather, a tired, heavy and numb pair of pinpricked props, entirely non essential to her upright position.

\* \* \*

Her panties.

She felt the discomfort of too much thong pressed into far too little buttock flesh, their sodden underside bunched up also, double folded, as they were stuck together. Pressed up betwixt her thigh and oyster. Oyster. A term she'd taken a liking to, and used whenever she thought about her special.. place. Incidentally, the originator of the term, Jauffrey - a fisherman's son, had shown her just what depth and breadth of air-exhaling, blinding potential, lay hidden and tucked away behind the strawberry-milk-mound between her legs.

Soon after the processing of what she could and could not fathom about her current bodily configuration, came a quiet, aghast horror, in the face of the collected data. She was fastened to a support of some kind, hoisted high enough to have her legs lying uselessly at rest on the ground. She was not fastened by her wrists, as her brain helpfully tried to suggest at first. That being her poor visual terminology for an imprisoned person.

She had fleeting flashes of people in dungeons in cartoons and stories, dark cavernous walls and dark atmospheres, rats scurrying underfoot and of course, a nice heavy layer of cobwebs. You can't have a good dungeon without cobwebs! These whimsical musings on the

nature of her predicament, struck her as a little on the sick side, but she didn't pay it more than a passing moment's heed.

\* \* \*

When her vision returned, enough to hazard intelligent guesses about what she could see, she was granted none of the cavernous dungeons of lore, no cobwebs (even!), no rats, no scurrying noises.

No.

Matte parquet flooring, a rich dark colour.

Black leather furniture,

heavy dark curtains, which dimmed the room.

She would notice, if it weren't for the blinding spotlight just a little to the right of her field of vision.

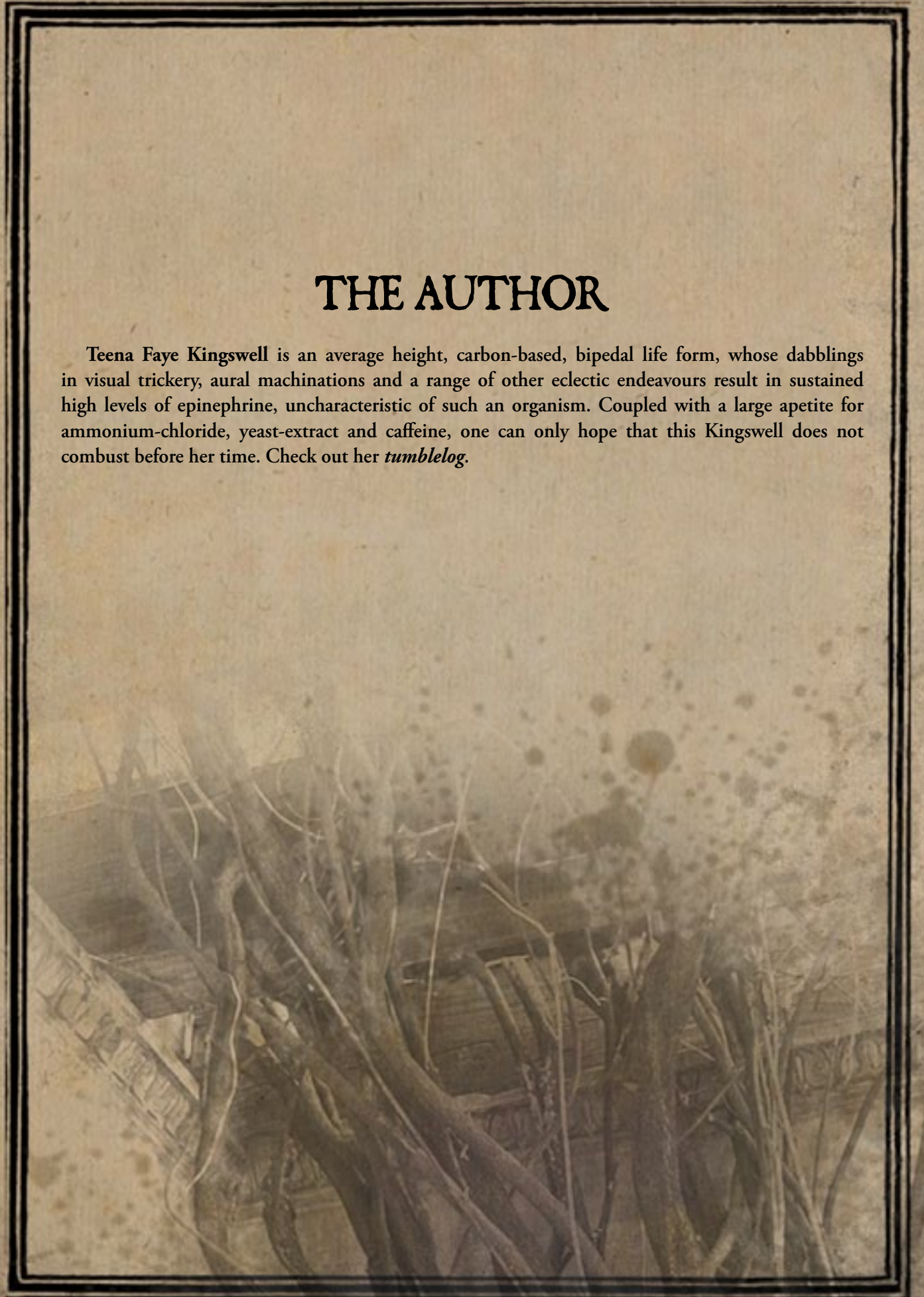
It warmed her face and breasts, and she could feel the occasional tickle travelling down from her armpit, to her waist. And wriggle as she might, she could do little to alleviate the horrid sensation of not being able to scratch an itch.



*Illustration: Teena Faye Kingswell*

## THE AUTHOR

Teena Faye Kingswell is an average height, carbon-based, bipedal life form, whose dabbings in visual trickery, aural machinations and a range of other eclectic endeavours result in sustained high levels of epinephrine, uncharacteristic of such an organism. Coupled with a large appetite for ammonium-chloride, yeast-extract and caffeine, one can only hope that this Kingswell does not combust before her time. Check out her *tumblelog*.



**FIN**

...now goe away...