Fanfic

Fantasy Faction Monthly Writing Contest Anthology, January 2017

Various Authors

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### Fantasy Faction Monthly Writing Contest Anthology, January 2017

[ Didn't find a fitting image on time, will probably add one later. Sorry. ]  
  
This is the fourth year we do February and we weren't sure if it would be boring by now or not. We got a great idea to give the topic a nice spin, so we don't think it is!  
The first year you could write whatever you wanted, the second year we limited the books you could choose from. The third year you had to stage a fight between two main protags (or groups of main characters) from different books/series and this year...  
  
... the main character(s) of one book or series fell out of their book and landed in another book.  
They could be messing up the other book's story, take the place of the other book's MCs or just walk around and try to figure out where they are. Kelsier and Vin meeting the Fellowship of the Ring and decide to join the quest? Rincewind finding himself in the Broken Empire, trying (as always) to survive? Eli Monpress teaming up with Hadrian Blackwater (instead of Royce)?  
The possiblities are endless but none will be easy to write.  
  
I'm not limiting you to special books but remember that it's more fun for your readers if they know the characters. So if you choose something obscure, not everbody will get the jokes in or the awesomeness of your story.

*All content originally appeared on the Fantasy Faction Forums in the Monthly Writing Contest. You can see more information (and even participate in the forums!) on this particular contest by visiting the site.*  
<http://fantasy-faction.com/forum/(feb-2017)/(feb-2017)-fanfic-submission-thread/>

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# Summoning Circle

“That,” Eliot said, pointing with the finger not wrapped around his wine glass, “is one handsome lion.”

This particular handsome lion sat placidly in the middle of a summoning circle, in the middle of the secret abandoned study everyone at Brakebills knew about. Its larges eyes passed over each of them in turn.

Quentin Coldwater pumped his fist. “Holy \_\_\_\_, you guys, it worked! ” He frowned. “\_\_\_\_. \_\_\_\_?”

“\_\_\_\_!” Janet glared at the lion. “It’s using a suppression spell on us!”

“Perceptive,” Alice said. She didn’t look up from her desk.

Janet flipped her the bird and frowned at Eliot. “How can a lion do magic?”

Eliot pushed with both feet and tipped his chair back dangerously. “It’s a magical talking lion, dear. Ask him yourself.”

“Mighty Aslan,” Quentin said, falling to his knees before the lion, “we need your help.”

The lion watched him. It raised one paw and licked it.

“Not a talkative sort, is it?” Eliot said.

“He,” Alice said, gaze still buried in her spell book. “You capitalize He.”

Quentin made his pensive face. “Alice, aren’t you at least going to ask him something? It’s Aslan! A legitimate \_\_\_\_ing Narnian!”

“Great,” Eliot said, in a way that suggested it was most definitely *not* great.

“Okay, fine.” Janet fluffed her hair and stepped forward. “Oh, great Aslan, we beseech you! Tell us how we can defeat The Beast! Shower us with your golden knowledge!”

Eliot snickered, so Alice slugged him. “Ow!” he protested.

“Look, Aslan.” Quentin rose. “You’re on Earth now, or…” He scratched the back of his head. “I guess you would call it, um...“

“The land of Adam and Eve.” Alice flipped another page of her spell book.

“Right!” Quentin shot her twin fingerpistols. “Now, what can you tell us about The Beast?”

“Not to be a Debbie downer, Q,” Eliot said, “but your talking lion isn’t talking.”

“Perhaps He’s shy,” Alice said, more deadpan than anyone expected.

Quentin threw up his hands. “Look, if we did the spell wrong, we wouldn’t have a magical \_\_\_ing lion suppressing our naughty words, would we?”

Eliot shrugged. “Has anyone checked with the zoo?”

Quentin turned back to the golden lion. “You must help us. We face an evil magician on par with the White Witch.”

“Isn’t that a bit racist?” Janet asked.

“Not helping,” Quentin said through gritted teeth.

Alice sighed from her table. “Have any of you considered that Aslan can’t speak to us because He’s not in Narnia?” She lifted her book and stared at it. “Here it is.” She set the book down, turned in her chair, and tutted four quick finger motions. “Localization spell.”

The mighty lion cleared His throat. “Greetings, children of Adam and daughters of Eve.” His deep, rich voice filled the room. “Thank you for the spell, Alice.”

“You’re welcome.” Alice went back to her spell book.

Quentin hopped up and down. “Talking \_\_\_ing lion!”

“Who sounds like Liam Neeson,” Eliot added, “which I did not expect.”

“Aslan,” Quentin asked, beseeching the lion with joined hands, “how can we defeat The Beast? Unless we stop him, he’s going to destroy Fillory.”

Aslan brushed His glorious mane with His glorious paw. “I do not know this place. You call it Fillory?”

“It’s like Narnia,” Janet said, “except less stupid.”

“Jesus, you guys,” Quentin said, before he blinked. “Wait. I can say Jesus, but not \_\_\_\_?”

“He is a Jesus lion.” Eliot waved his empty glass. “Can I get me a refill, please?”

“Forget about your \_\_\_\_ing wine for a moment,” Quentin snapped.

“Child of Adam,” Aslan said, and His lion lips parted in a comforting smile, “you must let go of your fear. Trust in yourself, trust in your friends, and no evil can defeat you.”

“Comforting,” Eliot said. “That’s comforting.”

“That’s bull\_\_\_.” Janet stomped forward. “Look, Aslan, you have to eat, right? Rabbits and things? Well, the Beast eats too, but he eats *people*, actually.” Janet flounced. “I will not be eaten, so tell us how we can kill the Beast and we’ll send you back to Candyland.”

“Entirely different reference,” Quentin muttered.

“I cannot help you,” Aslan said. “I have no influence outside My realm, and no knowledge of this ‘Beast’. I can offer you refuge, if you wish.”

“Wait,” Eliot said. “Did a magical Jesus lion just offer us asylum?”

“If you fear this creature,” Aslan said, “return with me to My lands. I will protect you, as I protect all my children.”

“That caps thing is bizarre,” Janet said. “Like, I can hear it when he says it. You guys hear it, right?”

“Okay, so.” Quentin raised one hand. “Who’s up for going to Narnia?”

“Veto.” Eliot shook his head. “That place is lame.”

Quentin huffed and glared on him. “You want the Beast to rip your heart out?”

“I’d prefer not to live in a child’s book for the rest of my life,” Eliot said. “We can’t even curse, Q. Do you think Aslan is actually going to let us drink and \_\_\_\_?”

Quentin blinked at him.

“Fate worse than death,” Eliot added.

Aslan looked back and forth between them. His lion smile faded, and the glow on His mane did too. If it was possible for a lion to look uncomfortable, this lion actually looked uncomfortable.

Janet smirked in Eliot’s direction. “I think you offended our Jesus lion.”

Alice stood and kicked her chair over. “God, it’s just an allegory. It wasn’t funny the first time!”

“Children,” Aslan said, raising one paw to calm the room, “I can see that you have much you must discuss. If you would be so kind as to send me back—“

Quentin snatched a handful of golden mane. “You’re not going anywhere until you tell us how to defeat The Beast. He’s killed us twenty times already. He always kills us!”

Aslan stared placidly at Quentin. “I cannot help you, child of Adam. I must return to My lands before others who seek to corrupt them gain power in My absence.” He shook his mane. “Release me.”

“Told you He couldn’t help,” Alice said.

“Seriously,” Janet said, “nobody else hears the caps thing?”

Aslan breathed in, sides swelling as he closed his lion eyes, and then breathed *out*. Quentin’s eyes fluttered first, being closest, and he settled gently to the floor. Janet and Eliot went next, fainting and slumping, respectively. Only Alice seemed unaffected, watching the others with wide eyes.

“Daughter of Eve,” Aslan said, “it is time for me to go now.”

Alice sniffled. “Okay.” She set down her spell book, walked over, and scuffed the summoning circle with the tip of one open-toed shoe. “I would go with you, you know. I’d like to. Narnia sounds nice.”

Aslan watched her with His impassive gaze. “I will take you, if you wish it.”

“I can’t.” Alice rubbed her nose and blinked back tears. “I mean, I know we’re all going to die if we stay here, but they need me. I hate them sometimes, and I hate dying, but they need me, so I’m going to stay and help them.” She shuddered. “I hope your lands are still okay.”

Aslan raised one great paw. As Alice’s eyes widened, He set it upon her shoulder, gently, and it weighed much less than she expected. He lowered His maned head.

“You are stronger and braver than you know, Alice Quinn. Though your friends think otherwise, I do not offer platitudes. I can see something of the future, and I see that you have the ability to defeat this Beast. Your victory is not certain, but neither is your defeat.”

He removed His paw, stepped out of the summoning circle, and vanished like a shadow at first light. One moment present, one moment gone. Alice dried her tears, broomed away the circle, fixed her chair, sat down in it, and opened her spell book. She read until the sun came up.

Eliot was the first to stir. He groaned in his chair, stretched his arms, and yawned messily. “Why am I hungover?”

“Spell didn’t work,” Alice said.

Eliot focused his bleary eyes and looked around. “Called it.”

Janet rose next, and Quentin last. Both looked confused and disappointed. Alice knew they didn’t remember. She suspected they never would.

“Well that worked out terribly,” Janet said. “What now?”

“Sorry, guys.” Quentin sighed. “I really thought I had the spell down.”

Alice remembered Aslan’s paw on her shoulder, remembered the warmth in His voice. If He thought she could defeat The Beast, maybe she could. She wasn’t giving up.

She stood and turned to her friends. “Breakfast time.”

Quentin frowned. “Really?”

“We’ll think better with a full breakfast,” Alice said. “So. Eating. Let’s do that.”

“Right.” Quentin stood and nodded. “We’ll figure this out.”

The others filed out is disorderly fashion. Before she left, Alice took one last look at the empty room and sighed. Meeting talking beavers might have been nice.

She hurried after her friends.

THE END

# Armchair Philosophy

*Why do I do this?* Inquisitor Glokta asked himself for the thousandth time as he limped down the stairs. Bump, bump, bump. If Glokta could torture one person in the world, it would be the inventor of carpet for stairs. The man clearly thought carpeting would soften things, make them warmer and easier. Ha. Carpet only softened the spirit, fooled the soul, while pain leaped from the heel at each step, into the knee, and up, finding its final glory in a bone-grinding thrum in the back molars of what was left of Glokta's shattered mouth. Carpeted stairs, indeed.

Glokta dragged his latest prisoner - *excuse me*, thought Glokta, *customer* - behind him, the cloth around the creature's brainpan striking each stair tread with an unsatisfyingly dull thump. *At least I have strength enough left to deal with this unfortunate by myself. Won't Frost be surprised about that?*

"Where are we going?" asked the customer in a growly voice.

"I greatly suspect you know, my friend," Glokta answered.

"Do I know your friend?"

Glokta ground his remaining teeth into his aching gums.

They reached the bottom step at last, and Glokta stared at the damp dungeon hallway stretching before him. Who would have thought, before the great calamity of his life fell upon him like a phalanx of knives soldered to the underside of an anvil, that a simple walk down a stone-clad corridor could be an accomplishment worthy of a thousand tales? *I am a true hero*, Glokta laughed bitterly to himself. All his customers said so. After sufficient encouragement.

They reached Glokta's room without incident. Practical Frost opened the iron-bound portal at his superior's knock, his enormous bulk filling the door in a manner somehow both imposing and embarrassed. It must have been the contrast between Frost's sharply-studded fists and the leather mask that hid the giant's nose and mouth like an apology.

Glokta passed his prisoner to Frost, who attempted to immobilize the creature in the chair that faced the inquisitor's desk. Glokta listened impatiently as the albino sighed and grunted as he fussed with the straps and buckles. But the prisoner was simply too unusual in size and shape to fit properly.

A minute stretched by.

"For pity's sake," Glokta said. "Just sew him in, then." He'd brought a thick needle and rough string and handed them to Frost. Another few minutes passed in further grunts and sighs as the Practical attempted a few sloppy stitches. "Stop!" Glokta put his face in his hands. The morning was not going well. "Just leave it be, Frost."

The giant looked apologetic as he took his place standing ready against the far wall. Glokta waved a hand wearily and turned to his customer.

"Now then," he said, "Do you know why you are here?" His customers always did know, even if they didn't want to admit it to themselves. It didn't matter if they were guilty or innocent. It only mattered that they'd done something, had something, or knew something that interested the Ministry. Or perhaps could be **persuaded** to know something - and swear to it under oath. *Why do I do this?* thought Glokta. He no longer knew.

"Why?" asked the creature.

"Yes, do you know why you are here?"

"Oh, well." The customer huffed an embarrassed laugh. "I haven't the foggiest idea."

"No?" Glokta narrowed his eyes, and Frost cracked his great knuckles in a way that usually brought terror to the faces of the customers they attended to in this room.

"But then, I haven't, usually."

"Haven't what?" asked Glokta. He received a blank look in return. "Haven't usually what?"

"Oh! The foggiest idea. At least that's what Christopher Robin says. 'Silly old bear', he says. 'You really haven't the foggiest.' And it might be a very sunny day, without any fog at all, but Christopher Robin will say I haven't the foggiest."

Glokta stared at the stuffed toy and felt as though his own brain had been rendered foggy. He shook his head, which caused his tortured muscles to scream. *Why do I do that!* Black pain spread like ink in water, battering at the backsides of his eyes, making him wish for a dagger between the ribs just to distract him from the agony in his skull. His old injuries, signs of two years of torture at the hands of men more diabolically inclined than any Practical could ever hope to be, left Glokta routinely wrung out and gasping. Today was no different.

Glokta gathered his breath at last. "You are here because you are a thief, my friend."

"I do hope we are friends," said the bear.

"We certainly will be by the end of this interview, won't we be, Practical Frost?" The giant albino emitted a high pitched, breathy giggle that could have come from a steaming kettle. "Oh, yes, very close friends," Glokta continued. There was indeed something very intimate about the relationship between an inquisitor and his customers. It made Glokta quite philosophical at times. Right now, he resisted that temptation.

"Now." Glokta slid a piece of paper out of a file on his desk and pretended to read it closely. It was blank, of course. These things always were. "You were seen removing a jar of breakfast spread from an officer's quarters. What do you have to say for yourself?" Glokta gave his most penetrating stare.

The bear looked back at him with a puzzled expression. "Hmm," it said. "Breakfast spread?"

"Yes," said Glokta. "A valuable breakfast spread. I understand it was sent to the officer from his home and had great sentimental as well as -" Glokta consulted the blank paper, and frowned "- financial value."

The bear sat in apparent deep thought, which turned out not be either very deep or thoughtful. After a few moments and a spot of humming under its breath, it's face cleared and broke into a shy smile. "Honey?"

"Yes, honey!" Glokta exclaimed. "Yes. Honey indeed." It struck him how ridiculous the whole conversation was, but orders were orders, and he'd been ordered to get the truth from this bear.

"Well, it didn't seem that there were any bees nearby, so..." The bear stopped and looked at Glokta with a satisfied expression.

"Go on."

"Oh, thank you," said the bear and hopped off the chair to leave.

"Stop!" ordered Glokta. He raised a finger and Frost plucked the bear off the ground with a studded glove and pushed it back into the chair. "You are not leaving this room until I am satisfied with your answers."

"Oh," said the bear. "But I thought -"

"Never mind what you thought!" Glokta caught a surprised look from his practical. Glokta was known for his self-control. He took a deep breath. "Tell me about this 'Christopher Robin.' Who is he?"

"Well," laughed the bear. "That's very simple."

"Yes?"

"Yes?"

"Yes?"

"Yes?"

"Yes?"

"Which one of us is speaking?"

"I've quite forgot."

Glokta and the bear turned their heads and looked to Practical Frost, who shrugged his shoulders.

"Christopher Robin?" prompted Glokta.

"Yes," said the bear.

At which point, any semblance of sanity departed the inquisitor's mind. He was back in the dungeons where he'd been separated from his human soul through the mystery of pain, but this time it was he asking the questions.

After an unknown time lost in the past, Glokta rose back to awareness like a drowning man grasping a line. His instrument case was open, and hooks, pliers, scalpels, and thumb screws were strewn madly about the room. His heart raced, his joints ached, sweat drenched his clothes, sending a sour funk into the fetid air.

Frost stared at him in abject horror. "You dethtroyed him," the giant lisped. "I'th nether theen thomething tho howwible."

Glokta cast around for the bear. It wasn't obvious at first where it had gone, but then a cloud of sawdust caught in Glokta's nose. A sneeze gathered, and with it, terror. *No*, thought Glokta. *I won't. I can't.* But the sneeze was inexorable. It crescendoed to a curse crouching on his shoulders that could only

be banished by its full realization into white hot fire.

"ACHOO!!!!!!!!!!!!!"

"Gedsthundhithe."

His eyes swimming, his entire body screaming, Glokta stared about the room at the carnage. Sawdust stuffing floated miasma-like; shreds of brown cloth lay over every surface. Two button eyes squatted in the center of Glokta's desk. He looked for accusation in the eyes, even forgiveness, though the idea revolted him, but found only... philosophy.

*Why do I do this*, Glokta asked himself yet again. *Why?* The button eyes didn't answer, but Glokta desperately needed to know.

"Fetch me some thread," he ordered Frost. "And a new needle. And some sawdust."

Frost stared in confusion.

"Just do it!" Glokta put on a frown of such fierceness that Frost fled the room.

Glokta spent the night sewing and stuffing. *What do you expect the bear to say, Glokta?* he asked himself. *Whatever do you expect?*

# Foundation and Final Empire

*SCADRIAL . . . An isolated world some way beyond the fringes of the Galactic Empire, almost unheard of in Imperial records. Were it not for the arrival of the MULE during his search for the near-mythic SECOND FOUNDATION it is likely that Scadrial would have remained totally unknown to Galactic scholars. However, it was during the aforementioned search that the unique properties of Scadrial's inhabitants were first noted. In particular, the MENTALIC abilities of the . . .*

-Encyclopaedia Galactica 117th Edition, 1054 F. E.

The Mule found Luthadel to be charmingly like the old microfilm images of Trantor, after a fashion. A single urban sprawl to which all civilisation was inexorably drawn. A concentration of wit and intellect at the expense of the outlying backwaters. Though of course, everything on Scadrial was on a far smaller scale than the Galactic Empire at its height. Precisely how the fertile world had remained so isolated from the Galactic community remained a mystery to him, but it seemed as though the Scadrians themselves had little to no interest in exploring the stars for themselves.

The Mule remarked on this social quirk to his dinner companion, who laughed coldly.

"My dear Mule," said the Lord Ruler - a title he had no doubt chosen for himself. "The people here are simply not suited for stellar exploration. Not yet. Perhaps in several centuries, but for the moment they can barely organise an empire without my influence."

The Mule pondered this, rolling a coin over his dextrous fingers. The coin, he believed it was called a boxing, had been a gift from the Lord Ruler. The people of Scadrial invested a great deal of superstition in metal objects. Primitive really, but as quirks went it was a tolerable one. Not nearly so backwards as the old nebular Kingdoms . . .

"You certainly appear to have a stable world, Lord Ruler," the Mule said, laying the coin flat on the table. "My Foundation could certainly learn a lot from you."

The Lord Ruler smiled. A more calculating smile the Mule had never seen, not even while practising in the mirror. The Lord Ruler said, "I have had a lot of time to perfect it."

"Ah yes," replied the Mule. "I have heard it said that your reign has lasted any generations. At first I chalked it up to fear of the ruling elite, and I suppose, the short lives of your slave population. What is it you call them - Skaa?" The Lord Ruler nodded, and the Mule continued. "Simple enough to dominate one mind, trickier to rule a world in such a fashion."

"As I say, I have had a lot of time."

The Mule reached for a glass of wine. "Still, I would dare say that such an endeavour is too great even for one such as yourself. You presumably have a large number of mentalics working to placate the population."

"Mentalics?" The Lord Ruler frowned. "I am unfamiliar with the term."

"Perhaps you know them by a different name, then. A mentalic is an individual such as ourselves. One with the ability to manipulate the emotions of others."

The Lord Ruler barked a laugh. "Ah of course. Why yes, I have many such individuals. The city is crawling with Rioters and Soothers. More of a pest than a boon, I'll have you know. Why, it takes an army of Inquisitors just to keep them in line."

"I have heard tell of these Inquisitors," said the Mule. "A fascinating invention. I should very much like the opportunity to study one."

The Lord Ruler was silent for a long time, a frown on his face. The Mule gently nudged him with a mentalic burst. Nothing noticeable, he hoped, just enough to make the Lord Ruler view him a little more favourably.

"I am sure," said the Lord Ruler, leaning forward with a smile, "that something can be arranged."

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The Mule was not a strong man. Nor, truth be told, a particularly brave one. Indeed, his greatest asset (the brain) often directed him to flee when confronted with something beyond his comprehension. And yet . . . And yet he found himself fascinated by the being before him.

The Inquisitor had the general appearance of a man, and had in all likelihood been a man in the not so distant past. But now it was something else. Two great spikes of steel had been driven through the thing's skull. One in each eye. Surely such an act would have killed the poor man, the Mule thought. Apparently not though, for the Inquisitor took a step towards him.

"Perfectly harmless," assured the Lord Ruler. "Unless I command otherwise."

"Most impressive," said the Mule. "Though I cannot help but wonder why such creations are necessary. I have heard it said that your Mentalics have some influence over the behaviour of metals. Is it not then foolish to make your warriors of the stuff?" He gestured at the spikes.

The Lord Ruler nodded his head. "Your understanding of Allomancy is incomplete, Mule," he said. "Even the strongest Coinshot would be unable to Push on the metal in that Inquisitor's body. And besides, the addition of those spikes grants them rather unique abilities."

The Mule raised a questioning eyebrow.

"Try to Soothe his emotions, Mule. Surely you can feel the anger radiating from him." The Lord Ruler waved a hand dismissively. "Strip him of it. Use your Mentalic talents. It will be quite safe, you have my word."

The Mule took a step back from the Inquisitor and studied his foe. The thing had the strength of ten men, and the rage of twenty. Despite his blindness, the Inquisitor was clearly aware of his surroundings. The Mule assumed it was some form of echolocation. After all, he knew the thing had heightened senses. Or was it something else? Word among the Skaa had it that an Inquisitor could see metals. Most would have laughed at such superstitions, but the Mule was more tolerant. Even if untrue, there was certainly something to the rumours, he was sure of it. All legends stemmed from some fact. After all, even Mentalics and Psychohistory had once been the fields of mystics and eccentrics.

Focussing on the task at hand, the Mule took a calming breath. He reached out with his mind, grasping for a handhold on that great swell of rage. He could almost see it before him, twisting and writhing like a bucket of eels. He just had to -

Impossible!

The Mule's eyes opened in a flash. "How can that be?" he asked in shock. "I can see the hate, feel it. But I - It's like grasping oil."

The Lord Ruler's face was triumphant. "They are not so easy to tamper with as you thought, hmm?" He smiled. Laughed. "They are loyal only to me Mule, and not even your precious Mentalics can sway them. Do you wish for a further demonstration?"

The Mule shook his head with vigour. He had seen quite enough here already.

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Having made his excuses to the Lord Ruler, the Mule returned to his shuttle - hidden some distance from Luthadel - and made his preparations to leave. It was clear to him now that the Second Foundation was not on Scadrial. If it were, the Lord Ruler would know of it, and what the Lord Ruler knew, he seemed only too eager to boast of. With good reason, it would seem. He had a population of Mentalics, abilities even the Mule found it hard to fathom, and he seemed able to turn the average man into a deadly machine. And then there the prophecies. He had been understandably vague about those, but the Mule gathered there was some basic psychohistory at work. How else could the Lord Ruler so deftly manipulate an entire planet into adapting according to a certain schedule?

Even though he commanded only a single world, the Lord Ruler was definitely a man on whom the Mule would have to keep a firm eye. But for the immediate future, the search for the Second Foundation took priority.

# The Woman from Oxford

“Do you remember what Xaphania told us about traveling, all those years ago?” Lyra lay back in her plush armchair in her room in St. Sophia’s College, the alethiometer on her lap.

“Lyra…we’ve been over this.” Her pine marten daemon perched atop the armchair, resting his head on Lyra’s shoulder.

“I know we can’t travel to see Will and Kirjava, but we’ve been having such trouble with the Republic of Heaven, and Xaphania called it a ‘form of seeing.’ Maybe we could see something from another world that would help us.”

Pan held still, letting Lyra know he was thinking about it.

She continued. “Lately, when I’ve been working with the alethiometer, I’ve been able to enter a sort of trance, almost like in the old days. I want to see if I can use that state of mind to travel, in the sense that Xaphania used it.”

Pan climbed down to nestle at her side, and Lyra scooted over to make room for him. He said, “Be careful, Lyra. I agree that we could use some help with the Republic of Heaven, but I don’t want you to do anything reckless.”

“I would never do such a thing,” she said with mock outrage. Closing her eyes, she added, “Not anymore.”

Lyra placed one hand in Pan’s fur and the other on the alethiometer, relaxing and searching.

\*

Jasnah stood in the prow of the boat as it sped across the ocean of beads.

“They are coming,” said Ivory. He sat in the stern, watching for pursuit. “We should leave.”

“I will not leave until absolutely necessary.”

“I would argue that we are at that point.” Jasnah glanced back. The boats had doubled in size since she last looked. Unfortunately, Jasnah and Ivory were still far from Alethkar and could travel much faster in Shadesmar.

“We wait as long as we can.” She tightened the bandolier around her chest and the pack on her back. Ivory hunched over, fondling his sword. The stern darkened, the color of fresh ink.

Jasnah watched their pursuit. She had hoped to have more time before some of the highspren decided to punish Ivory for bonding her. Regardless, now she knew. The Desolation was coming.

“Jasnah…” The highspren had halved the distance to them.

“Wait.” Every minute traveled here saved them hours of walking in Roshar.

She mentally reviewed the process for Transportation. As she checked her spheres – she would have just enough – a splash interrupted.

She spun to starboard and saw a woman sinking. Beside her floated the strangest spren Jasnah had ever seen. It was a reddish-brown color, long, and looked kind of soft. What kind of spren was that? It wasn’t an inkspren or a Cryptic – was this woman a Willshaper? It didn’t match any descriptions she had found in the archives.

“Ivory! To starboard!”

“Jasnah, the highspren-“

“Do it!”

The boat turned hard to starboard, effectively stopping them, spraying beads everywhere. A few smacked her arms, sending images into her mind. Jasnah tried not to slip as she reached a hand out to the woman. Her spren followed, hauling itself up the side of the boat.

“Thank you!” said the spren. The woman slumped against the side of the boat, coughing.

“What are you doing here?” asked Jasnah.

The woman started to speak. “I thought…I thought I would just be looking. Pan! Why didn’t Xaphania tell us we could physically travel?” Did she think she was Soulcasting? That was an odd description of it, if she did.

The spren – Pan – sidled up to the woman and leaned his head on her. “Probably because it would take us so long to learn. She did not want us to waste our time looking for Will; we had to focus on building the Republic of Heaven.”

“Jasnah!” She spun around. Now she could make out individual highspren.

Jasnah whispered, “You need to leave. The highspren are coming, and they do not appreciate our presence.”

“Highspren? Are they like angels?” Angels? Jasnah would need to look into that term.

Pan twisted to look behind the boat. “They don’t look like angels.”

“You don’t look like a spren,” said Ivory, glancing at the interlopers for a moment.

“What’s a spren?” asked Lyra. “Is it this world’s name for a daemon?” Pan climbed into the woman’s lap. Jasnah blinked. Was he…paler…than before? She shook her head, speculating that spending so much time in Shadesmar was affecting her mind.

“You’re not from Roshar,” said Jasnah. A statement, not a question.

“No, we’re from Oxford.” Another name to research.

“You should go back. Now.” Ivory had drawn his sword.

“We will,” said Lyra. She dug in her pocket, extracting a small golden instrument.

“Is that a fabrial?” Jasnah found herself asking.

“I don’t know that word.”

“A fabrial is an object powered by stormlight.”

“This is powered by a particle we call Dust. Perhaps you call it stormlight.”

“Interesting. May I see it?” Jasnah held out a hand.

“Lyra,” said Pan. He jerked once, then slumped to the deck.

“Pan!” Lyra grabbed her chest. “What’s wrong?”

“I don’t know.” Jasnah watched and concluded that the daemon had indeed lost some of its vibrant color.

“You need to leave,” said Jasnah. “Pan is fading.” Facts, with no explanation.

“He…he can’t…he’s part of me!” shrieked Lyra. She threw herself at Pan. The spren collapsed a little under her weight.

Was there something Jasnah could do? She could try to transport them to where they had come from, but then she wouldn’t have enough stormlight to get her and Ivory out of Shadesmar. She glanced at her bandolier out of habit, knowing she did not have enough stormlight.

Her eyes widened in shock. The gems were full.

She looked at the dwindling spren, hypothesizing.

Jasnah hurried to Pan’s side and placed a hand on him. Lyra shrieked louder, if possible.

“Get your hands off him!” She thrashed on the deck.

Jasnah ignored Lyra and focused on Pan. Could she Soulcast a being made of stormlight? She closed her eyes, envisioning the transfer of stormlight from her gems to Pan, willing the light to become Pan.

She felt him stiffen, and then her hands clasped short, soft hairs. Exhausted, she opened her eyes, and released him.

Lyra shuddered, taking gulping breaths. “That was...” Another deep breath. “Pan, are you OK?”

The spren rolled over. “I feel…better…but still odd. What did you do?”

“I Soulcasted you, in a sense. You must be constructed of what we called stormlight, and it was leaking from you. So I forced it back. I don’t know how long it will hold.”

Pan crawled over to Lyra, and she embraced him. After a moment, she looked over at Jasnah. “Thank you. We will leave, but I wish to do something for you first. She held the golden instrument. “This is called an alethiometer. It answers questions. I can try to answer one for you, although I don’t have my books here.”

Jasnah held up a hand, forestalling Ivory from protesting.

“Ask it this. Should spren bond humans?”

Lyra sat with her back to the hull of the boat, knees up. She grasped the alethiometer in her hands, resting her elbows on her knees. Pan curled next to her.

She flipped up a cover, and Jasnah could see moving hands, surrounded by dozens of symbols.

Lyra gasped.

“What did it say?” asked Jasnah.

Lyra ignored her. “Pan, I can read it! Just like I used to be able to, without the books and everything.”

“Really? I wonder if that has to do with the traveling. Or with the amount of Dust in this place.”

Jasnah waited, and Lyra quieted, focusing on her instrument. It seemed to be a very powerful fabrial.

Moments later, Lyra let out a sigh, leaning her head back. “Yes.”

Ivory let out a long breath. Jasnah felt the satisfaction of proving a hypothesis. “Thank you,” she said.

Lyra nodded, and closed her eyes. Her breathing slowed, and soon she and Pan faded from the boat.

“Stop!” The highspren had arrived. Jasnah could see the beads around their boat transforming.

But she had already grabbed Ivory and seized her remaining stormlight. A streak of light surrounded her, spinning into a vortex.

It faded, and the afterimage blinded her momentarily. She groaned a long groan, then looked to the side, where Wit stood.

# Covenant's Need

Thomas Covenant ran through the woods with the girl in his arms. Adrenaline and snake venom coursed through his body, making his vision blur and heart pound. The girl coughed weakly as he exited the woods, her pale skin a clear indication that the tourniquet wasn’t stopping the venom. *He had to hurry. He had to save her.*

Covenant saw the red pickup heading towards him and stopped in the middle of the road. “Please! Stop! She needs help! Please save her!” *Please save me!*

The pickup stopped and the door flew open. A heavy-set man threw open the door and ran towards them, his eyes widening at the sight of the blood that covered them both. “What the hell. . .” the man began. “What did you do to her, you sick—”

“She was bitten. A rattlesnake, in the woods. Please, save her.” Covenant’s vision blurred again and he felt faint. The man took the girl from Covenant’s arms as the last of his strength left.

Covenant could feel his body falling backwards as everything faded into blackness. The Land’s call was strong, and Covenant wasn’t strong enough to resist any longer. *Take me, Morham. I’m ready.*

~~~

Geraden knelt over the huddled figure, disbelief clear on his face. *He had done it! He had brought Terisa back!*

The figure groaned, causing Geraden to draw back in surprise. *It’s a man?* He watched the figure roll to his side; he could just make out the man’s clean-shaven face in the dim torchlight. His mouth was covered in blood, though he couldn’t see a wound. *What have I done? Of course, I can’t ever do things correctly.*

“Thank you, Morham—” the man began before a bout of coughing interrupted him. He looked up at Geraden and his eyes widened. “You’re not Morham. Who are you?” He reached out with a three-fingered hand.

Geraden helped the man stand as he explained. “I’m Geraden. I. . . I translated you here. I thought you were someone else.”

The man laughed, a harsh sound to Geraden’s ears. “It seems my mind decided the Land was too much. At least the ambiance is a little closer to how I feel. Misery mixed with helplessness. Where is this place?”

Geraden was taken aback at the man’s attitude. “This is Castle Orison of the kingdom of Mordant. We’re besieged by monsters and men sent by Alend. You can help us to throw them back, right? You can be our champion?”

The man stared at a white metal ring on his finger. He shook his head. “I can’t use it. I don’t know how.” He took a deep breath. “Hellfire! Why is everyone always shoving their problems onto me? I’m not some damned hero. I’m a leper! I can’t do this, not again.”

“Please,” Geraden implored, “we need your help. I was trying to bring someone back. She. . . she could have been our hero, but something brought you instead. I don’t know what else to do.”

The man sighed, seeming to come to a conclusion. “Fine, then. Why not? Why shouldn’t I have to save you, too?”

Geraden’s face brightened. He felt like he had finally done something right. His hero had agreed to help. Mordant would be saved. “Hero, what should we call you?”

“Covenant. My name is Thomas Covenant. I’m not your damned hero.”

~~~

Covenant walked the halls of Castle Orison. Geraden followed closely behind, reminding Covenant of a puppy. The first few days had been the worst. Geraden’s constant questions and offerings had driven Covenant insane. He had finally blown up on the man. Geraden’s pain had been evident on his face, and some part of Covenant had felt guilty at the time.

Covenant shot another look backwards at Geraden. *He’s still just as bad, but at least he’s not pestering me.* Mordant was much different from the Land. No hurtloam, no sensation. But the responsibility remained. Just like the Lords, the Stonedowners, the Giants; everyone that passed him had the same look. They expected him—a leper—to save them. He wanted to yell at them. He wanted to tell them all to find a different damned hero.

“Covenant?” Geraden’s voice asked from behind him. “Have you come up with a plan?”

“I told you, I don’t know how to use my ring.” Covenant’s voice sounded bitter. He had tried giving it to Geraden the first day, but the man had declined. Instead, he just kept looking at Covenant expectantly.

They continued walking in silence. Covenant turned a corner into blackness, stopping with a curse. He wasn’t about to fumble around in the dark. He had just started to run through his leper’s mantra when Geraden ran into him. “Hellfire, Geraden! Watch where—” Without warning, Covenant felt something deep inside. *A touch passed through his abdomen, light as a feather, cold as steel.*

“Watch out!” Geraden shouted, grabbing Covenant and launching both of them backwards.

From out of nowhere, rocks tumbled down, cascading down where they had just been standing. Covenant and Geraden watched from the floor as tons of rubble piled up. Another touch, just like the first, passed through Covenant. Geraden scrambled to his feet shouting “There’s more!”

Tiny black creatures, about the size of cats, scrambled from out of the darkness. A mouth, filled with razor-sharp teeth, comprised half their bodies; it was a clear indication of the creatures’ level of threat. Covenant thrashed backwards as one of the creatures jumped on him. He threw up an arm at the last second as the creature lunged towards his face, its jaws closing painlessly on his forearm.

As it bit down, Covenant watched the teeth pierce his skin. He tensed just as a flash of light erupted from his fist, shredding the flesh of the creature as his arm became wreathed in white fire. More of the creatures jumped at Covenant, intent on his flesh, but each of them were incinerated before they could reach him.

Within moments, the creatures were nothing but piles of ash. Geraden swore in amazement. “You killed them all! You are a hero. . .”

*No! I’m not a hero. Don’t pin your hopes on me. I’ll just let you down.* Covenant groaned, the fire on his arm gradually subsided to a bare flicker. The power—his power—filled him with fear. He was a leper. Outcast. Unclean. He shouldn’t have power like this. He didn’t deserve power, and he didn’t deserve the responsibility.

He got to his feet with Geraden’s help, running through his mantra, searching for injuries. He found none. Even the wounds from the creature’s bite had been healed; they were nothing but thin white scars on his skin. Geraden brushed the dust off himself, still staring at Covenant with awe.

“Stop looking at me.” Covenant’s voice sounded strained. “I’m not a damn hero. I’m going to fail, and you’re going to lose everything. You’re looking at the wrong person if you think I can save you.”

“But you stopped them. They couldn’t even touch you. It was. . . amazing.”

*But you don’t understand. Nobody ever understands. I’m going to crack under all this pressure, because all anyone ever sees is a hero.*

~~~

As Geraden followed Covenant, he couldn’t help but feel a little saddened. His heart still ached for Terisa. He had always thought that she would have met Mordant’s need. His heart wanted her back, wanted her to be the hero that would have saved them all. But Thomas Covenant was going to save them all. His power was unstoppable.

They made their way back to the throne room, Geraden intent on informing the king that Covenant’s power would save them. Perhaps the others would stop treating him like a lost boy, laughing at him for his failed attempts at imagery and the way that he still pined for Terisa.

Even the thought of her made him ache, but he had to move on. She had chosen to leave, to return to her land where she didn’t matter. He had been searching for a way to bring her back, but instead he had found someone better.

*Goodbye, Terisa.*

# The Significantly More Destructive Wizard of Oz

Munchkinland was on fire and it wasn’t my fault.

“Who killed my sister?” The foul, green-skinned woman hissed as buildings burned behind her. Little Munchkins with firebuckets ran through the square, desperately trying to contain the blaze. “Who killed the Wicked Witch of the East? Was it you?”

I kept my blasting rod levelled towards her and shot a glance back at Dorothy, the young teenage girl hiding behind me. She was visibly shivering as she clutched her little dog tighter to her chest. Behind her stood the so-called ‘Good Witch’ who had been smiling sinisterly throughout this whole encounter. Fortunately, I knew better than to trust a pretty face. Speaking of…

“Well?” The Wicked Witch of the West snarled. “Answer me!”

I looked back at the foul hag with the hideous green skin, the protruding wart on her face and the flaming broom in her hand and said the only thing that came to mind.

“You do realise that you’re supposed to take the beauty mask *off* when you’re finished with it, right?"

My name is Harry Blackstone Copperfield Dresden. Conjure it at your own risk.

A few days ago, I had been hired for a wizarding job that took me out of my usual Chicago stomping grounds and all the way to the dusty plains of Kansas. Apparently, some local land magnate named Almira Gulch had been dabbling in dark magic. With it, she had opened a portal to some unknown part of the Nevernever, a foreboding mysterious place where fae and monsters made their home.

Anyway, after I interfered with her plans, Gulch sent an enormous twister to try and kill me, one I only survived by taking cover in an old house with Dorothy, one of the young farmhands. Next thing I knew, the two of us had been blown to some strange fantasy land inhabited by dwarf-like people named Munchkins. They seemed like relatively nice people, albeit possibly a bit bloodthirsty. Bloodthirsty how, you may ask?

Well, when Dorothy and I had arrived in 'Oz', we’d also accidentally killed a woman by landing a house on her. When we discovered this, the Munchkins burst into a spontaneous 10-minute song explaining how it was cool and that the bitch kinda had it coming anyway.

(I’m paraphrasing slightly, but it was a very catchy song.)

After that, we were interrupted by the arrival of Glinda, the beautiful Good Witch of the North, who inquired as to our identities and gave us a brief explanation of the Land of Oz. Dorothy seemed rather enraptured by her presence but, as mentioned, I didn’t trust her in the slightest. Maybe it was my experiences with Mab, who had a similar regal vibe to her, but I did not trust any beautiful, seemingly friendly woman in the Nevernever. Those types tended to be both the most dangerous and the most subtle.

Subtle, however, was not something I could call her green-skinned counterpart. Appearing in an explosion of fire and red smoke tended to draw attention to oneself. The Witch had cackled for a while and set some buildings on fire before turning her attentions to us.

“W-We’re sorry, Miss.” Dorothy stuttered. “It was an accident! We didn’t mean to kill anyone!”

“Well, my little pretty…” The Wicked Witch cackled. “I can cause accidents too!”

“Really? Have you considered getting workers compensation?” I asked. “I saw some lawyers on the TV who can apparently get you a lot of money for that.”

The Wicked Witch stared at me as if I’d lost my mind. Which, to be perfectly honest, I very well might have. I had just sat through a musical number performed by a village of dwarfs, after all. And that wasn’t even in my top 10 weirdest experiences as a wizard.

“Aren’t you forgetting something?” Glinda chimed in. “The Ruby slippers?

The Witch’s eyes widened. “The slippers. Yes!”

She turned on her heels and stalked towards where the Gale farmhouse had landed on her sister. A pair of legs, ruby slippers adorned, could be seen peeking out from underneath.

I breathed in sharply and readied my blasting rod. I didn’t know why Glinda had brought them up, but drawing the obviously evil witch’s attention to what I could only assume were magical artefacts was never really a good idea.

Suddenly, in a flash, the slippers disappeared from the body of the ex-Wicked Witch of the East. I stared, flabbergasted, as her toes curled up into a spiral and were dragged beneath the remains of the house by some unknown force.

“They’re gone!” The Wicked Witch hissed, obviously as surprised as I was. “The ruby slippers! What have you done with them?”

“Never mind that!” I blurted out. “What the hell happened to her legs? I’m not the only one who saw that, right?”

I looked around, but nobody seemed all that surprised. One of the Munchkins taking shelter near our podium gave me a sympathetic look. I don’t know whether he agreed with me that that was weird or just thought that I was crazy.

“Give them back to me!” The Wicked Witch stalked towards myself, Glinda and Dorothy. “If you don’t give them back, I’ll-“

“Too late!” Glinda pointed with her wand towards Dorothy’s feet. “There they are and there they’ll stay!”

I blinked. Wait, what now?

“Wait, what now?” Dorothy exclaimed. A girl after my own heart.

And indeed, Dorothy’s feet were now freshly adorned with glimmering ruby slippers. The jewel-encrusted footwear fit snugly around her ankles as if they’d been there from the very beginning.

A chill went down my spine.

“Give me back my slippers!” The Wicked Witch hissed.

“I agree.” I said, a coldness entering my voice. “Get those off her immediately.”

“Why Mr Dresden?” Glinda said tilting her head innocently. “Whatever’s the matter?”

“What’s the matter?” I snarled. “You just put an unknown magical artefact on a little girl’s feet! It’s probably dark magic as well, considering its previous owner. For all we know, it could kill her within minutes!”

My mind immediately jumped to old Grimm tales of horrifying curses, shoes that burnt the users feet or mangled their toes or forced them to dance until they died. Thus far none of that had happened to Dorothy, but I was not willing to take chances.

The girl in question squeaked and paled at my suggestion. “That won’t really happen, will it?

“Allow me to put both your fears at rest.” Glinda said cheerfully. “I can assure you those slippers will cause Dorothy no harm while she wears them.”

“You don’t know that for certain.” I said.

“He’s right.” A twisted grin appeared on the Wicked Witch’s face. “You should give them back to me! I’m the only one who knows how to use them anyway.”

I rolled my eyes. “Okay, maybe let’s not go overboard here. We can remove the slippers without handing them over to the evil ninja turtle here.”

Dorothy looked at me with confusion. “Ninja… turtle?”

“You don’t watch cartoons, huh?” I asked. The farmgirl shook her head. “Sheesh. Kids these days. It just ain’t right.”

“Are you quite finished spewing nonsense?” The Wicked Witch asked.

“Lady,” I said with a snort, “if you knew me, you’d know I’m never finished spewing nonsense.”

“Enough of this!” The Witch snarled and raised her broomstick. Around us, the flames began to increase in intensity. “If you won’t simply give back my slippers then I suppose I will have to take them from you by force!”

I took a step to the side, placing myself between the Witch and Dorothy. I still didn’t know who this Wicked Witch was, but she seemed more than capable. However, I’d never been one to back down when a child was in danger.

“Better step away Miss Mossface.” I said, raising my staff. “I’m a fairly capable Wizard myself and-“

The atmosphere changed in a snap. Every head turned to face me, even those of Glinda and the Munchkins. The Wicked Witch, meanwhile, staggered back, her mottled green face turning white… or, well, a more pale green.

I looked around at all the surprised faces. “…I get the impression I’m missing something here.”

“Y-You…” The Wicked Witch stuttered. “You’re the Wizard?”

“Yeeeesss?” I said carefully, not entirely certain where this was going.

“...On second thoughts then, I really should be going!” The Wicked Witch said, rapidly backing up. She glanced back at Dorothy. “Oh, and I’ll get you, my pretty. And your little dog too, yadda yadda, you know the rest. Bye!”

With a flash of her hands, she disappeared in a cloud of red smoke and fire. I stared blinking at the spot where she had once stood. It wasn’t a trick or a fake-out. She had really fled that easily.

I glanced back at Dorothy and Glinda, the latter of whom seemed to be regarding me with an interesting look.

“So…” I said slowly. “…I’m guessing Wizards are kind of a big deal around here?”

# A Song of Rings and Thrones

**DAENERYS**

The Nazgûl screeched and an entire batallion of Gondor’s finest cowered in fear, dropping their weapons and covering their ears in a futile attempt to block the deafening sound.

But not Dany. She was blood of the dragon and the dragon never felt fear. She and Drogon were pursuing the Witch-King of the Nazgûl, and judging from how desperate he was dodging the firebreaths, Dany could swear he was the one afraid.

Drogon slammed into the Nazgûl and knight and mount crashed into a tower, destroying its upper level and falling all the way to the central square of Gondor. The Nazgûl was dead, but the Witch-King was alive and well. He wore a crown of steel, but no face was visible safe for the deadly gleam of his eyes.

“Impressive, but futile. For I cannot be slain by the hands of men—”

“*Dracarys*!”

The Witch-King was engulfed in flames and fell dead. Even his bones remained invisible, only the charred armor sprawled on the ground confirming he was dead. Gandalf arrived.

“You killed the Lord of the Nazgûl.”

“That was Drogon.”

The black dragon faced Gandalf, who took two steps back. “If the flame of your dragons can even undo the spell that knits the unseen sinews of the undead kings… perhaps we might even destroy the ring without journeying to Mordor.”

But they didn’t know where the ringbearer was.

“He is traveling to Mordor, right? So we might as well go there.”

“I guess we have no choice, dragonlady. And I appreciate your enthusiasm, given the circumstances.”

Dany smiled. A knight reported that the Uruk-Hai army was retreating. Rhaego and Viserion were scorching the fields. People were already celebrating her as their savior. With the king and his heirs presumably dead, some were already calling for her to be queen.

*I could rule here. It’s a nice place. At the very least I surely made allies if I return to Westeros. With a wizard included.*

Dany and Gandalf reunited with the others to discuss the plans for the campaign against Mordor.

**ARAGORN**

They met the White Walkers at Riverrun.

“Tell General Jaime to hold position. If this works we might not have a single casualty,” said Aragorn. Legolas ran to deliver the message.

Aragorn prepared the ritual. The only way to beat such an army of the dead was to have an army of the dead yourself. And if Westeros had something in abundance, it was death.

The magical circle glowed. It worked and now the dead of Westeros would answer his call. They came, from all corners of the Seven Kingdoms, bypassing mountains, rivers and swamps, the green spectres of the dead.

The blue and green armies of the dead collided. But the White Walkers had physical bodies, while Aragorn’s Army of the Dead had not and even the ice blades could not cut them down. For the first time, Westeros defeated the Walkers and regainted territory.

“Those fuckers didn’t stand a chance!” said Jaime. “Thank the Seven for you Aragorn, our armies are as useful as nipples on a breastplate against those things.” Jaime laughed and trotted away. Aragorn cringed at the language.

“I don’t like him,” said Legolas. “I don’t like this place at all. Not because of the enemy, Aragorn. But this is why we elves live secluded and have no contact with humans. Here we have the very worst of what your kind is capable of.”

“Oh, don’t be like that, lord Legolas,” said Varys. Both men startled. Even Legolas with his keen senses was surprised by the Spider’s stealthy approach. “Our lord Aragorn can change all that. An erudite, a just man, and the better, not a man prone to vulgarities.” The eunuch wiped a tear from his face. “You are the king I always dreamed of serving.”

Legolas glared. He didn’t like Varys, specially since the Spider said people thought he was a Targaryen, an old line of rulers. They often said Legolas’ slim frame and pointed ears were deformations caused by Targaryen inbreeding. Obviously Legolas wasn’t pleased and Aragorn was thankful Gimli wasn’t around.

And it wasn’t the first time Aragorn was offered the Iron Throne. People weren’t sure if young Tommen was fit to be king, specially without the queen regent around. Marriage proposals were offered by the dozens. And he also feared for his life. Tommen surely had supporters. Aragorn was useful until the Walkers were defeated, but what then? Would he get murdered? Should he enter this game? He felt he didn’t need how to play it.

For now he would just try to survive until he found a way to return to Middle Earth. If not… he would have to play the game of thrones.

**SAM**

“There he is! It’s the Imp!” yelled a man.

“Yeah, blonde hair and very short, though he seems taller than I expected. He’s also too fat. You sure it’s him?”

“All rich nobles are fat.”

“Fair point. Let’s get him.”

Sam and Frodo ran away.

“Why are they after me, mister Frodo?

“I don’t know. Everywhere is the same.”

They were in Pentos. It was the third city they were hiding from Sam’s relentless pursuers. Strangely, nobody seemed to care about Frodo. And here the ring didn’t have any power. No invisibility or soul corruption. That and Sam being the center of attention made Frodo feel totally useless.

But if Sam was being honest with himself, he was actually quite enjoying this change of roles. Somehow it felt right.

**BOROMIR**

Boromir had no idea where he was and neither did the man called Eddard Stark that he just stumbled upon. They somehow became very quick friends.

“I only remember dieing,” said Ned.

“Me too,” replied Boromir.

“Think we’re gonna live this time?”

“We can only hope.”

**TYRION**

Tyrion Lannister once said that he would like to die at the age of eighty in his own bed with a belly full of wine and a girl’s mouth around his cock.

Now he wanted to live forever.

“Another round of beer!” yelled Gimli. The Hobbits cheered and Tyrion happily joined them.

Ah, the Shire was paradise! Clean air, sunny, green pastures… not White Port’s scent of human piss and horse shit. No heavy working, plenty of meals and drinks a day, singing and playing most of the time, and the most important thing of all, he could actually look everyone in the eye! Seven hells, he was actually taller than some of them!

He forgot the Iron Throne, dragons, politics, money and more importantly, he forgot all about *Cersei*. He only missed White Port’s brothels, but he realized now just how desperate and empty he was for having ever needed such things to feel alive. Dozens of female hobbits were genuinely swooning over his intelligence, wit and charisma!

He held back tears. For the first time in his life, Tyrion Lannister felt joy and peace.

**CERSEI**

She woke in a land of fire. She was brought before the Great Eye of Sauron, who saw all the darkness in her soul. Even him was taken aback by what he saw.

Sauron offered her the position of Witch-Queen of the Nazgûl and Cersei gladly accepted. She received her own ring of power and a Nazgûl to ride. She remembered that Aegon the Conqueror’s sisters rode on top of dragons. This would serve. She chose the stronghold of Isengard to live, previous home of Saruman. She admired the height of the tower.

But she wouldn’t return the One Ring to Sauron. No, she needed all the power in the world to protect her precious children.

If the One Ring controlled all others, then after getting rid of Sauron she would make the whole world wear rings. Babies would receive a ring right upon birth. All would bow to her rule.

And Tyrion… she would find him. And all the horrors she would inflict upon him… for killing Joffrey, father, for every insult thrown at her…

Her laughter echoed throughout Isengard and even her fellow Nazgûl, former fallen kings, cowered in fear.

**GEORGE**

George R.R Martin woke, sweating and breathing rapidly. The phone was ringing.

“Can’t even sleep properly anymore…”

It was 3:00 p.m.

“Hello?”

“George? Progress?”

“I was writing it right now, damn it! I need to go or I’ll forget it.”

“Oh, okay sorry to—”

What a crazy dream he just had. The situations looked promising. But a Sean Bean character who lived to tell the tale? Inconceivable! Nobody died? Infuriating. Tyrion with a happy ending? Absolutely not.

George R.R Martin rubbed his hands together, giggling like a little girl. Oh, the deaths he planned to write!

He set aside his completed thirty pages for Winds of Winter. This was just too important to be ignored by trivial things! He turned on his computer, opened his word processor, and began his Tolkien fanfic.

# Shiny People



Water dripped in the darkness. The sharp rocks skittered away as Logen Ninefingers shuffled along the damp passage, nursing a twisted ankle. He was grateful for the injury, however, as it had been bouncing off walls that had saved his body from absorbing the brunt of the final impact. He’d fallen a long way.

Logen rounded a corner and a cool ocean breeze swirled around him. Up ahead, he could just make out sunbeams spilling across the stony floor. He’d found his way out. Freedom from this dark lay a short hundred paces beyond. Now, he just needed to avoid the Flatheads and get back to what was left of his Northmen.

He paused.

They hadn’t been near an ocean. Where was that salty air coming from? Why was it an autumn chill instead of a biting winter cold?

Less than an hour ago, he’d been perched on a ledge, clutching at the rock, waiting for the Shanka patrol to come around the bend. The loose outcropping below his left foot had given out and he’d fallen, bouncing down the face of the cliff. He’d hit the snowpack and punched through, scraping across rocky earth as he tumbled into a crevice. He was already long forgotten. Assumed fallen back to the mud.

Why did this keep happening to him?

He moved cautiously up where he could peer around the corner, squinted, and struggled to make out the landscape beyond the opening. Tall pine, lightly dusted with snow, thrust up into a cloudy sky creating a patchwork of dark earth amid stark white frost.

It felt like high summer in the North instead of what it should be — The thick, crusted snow drifts of early spring.

Suspecting spirits at play, Logen eased the Maker’s sword at his hip and lurked at the cave opening. He wanted to sit and watch for a while. The world had obviously slipped out from under him.

That was when he saw her.

A chestnut-haired woman plucked her way among the trees, wholly engrossed in her own thoughts. But, It wasn’t her beauty that entranced Logen. It was her clothing. She must have been a city-dweller because she was swathed, head to toe, in form-fitting leather, soft canvas, and what looked like heavy silks, all dyed or painted in strange colors. The quality was like nothing he’d ever seen. Not in Adua. Not in Aulcus.

Grunting and shaking his head to clear the curiosity, Logen stepped out from the cave. The questions crowding his mind needed some answers and this woman looked as if she wouldn’t stab him for asking her for a few. He noisily crunched out onto the path in front of her, loud enough so as not to startle her.

The woman’s head jerked up and she shrieked. Loud. She covered her head with her arms and collapsed, into a pile against a nearby pine.

Logen dropped to the ground, rolled protectively toward her, and leapt up, Maker’s sword in hand, roaring and ready to slay whatever foul beast had been behind him. Whatever monster had terrified her.

At that moment, Logen decided he hadn’t really thought his plan through. What did he think would happen when she saw a hideously scarred, smelly, fur-covered barbarian stomp out of the bushes and onto the path in front of her.

Wincing, he lowered his weapon and turned to apologize for frightening her when a heavy mass of fur and claws blasted him to the ground.

The two forms rolled, swinging and swiping and slashing. Logen shifted to his back and bunched his legs under the snarling monster. He grimaced at the weight on his ankle, but launched the beast over his head.

Cut and bleeding, Logen scurried across the sticks and gravel, struggling to reach the Maker’s sword. His hand closed around the hilt and he brought the weapon around, waving it threateningly at the creature. The distraction allowed him time to scramble up in a crouch.

The beast slowed and circled, eyes locked with Logens. It wasn’t a bear. It was the largest wolf he’d ever seen, covered in rusty-brown fur. Standing there on all fours, it was nearly as tall as himself. He found himself wishing it *was* a bear.

With his free hand, Logen explored the long gouges across his chest from where the wolf had tried to disembowel him. Blood streamed down and across his torso. He needed to end this fight before he ran out of blood.

“Easy there, boy.”

That was the wrong thing to say. The wolf lunged at him, jaws wide and searching for his face. Logen barely had time to get his sword up and between them before they thundered to the ground, woven together in a dark tapestry of death.

Logen grunted and pushed the wolf to the side. They’d hit the ground hard, the force driving the Maker’s sword through the ribcage and out its back. Bits of heart muscle slid free from the tip and warm, wolf blood streamed down the hilt.

Rolling away from the dead wolf, Logen staggered to his feet and wrenched his blade from the boy’s body.

*The boy’s body?*

As he watched, transfixed, the wolf contracted. Slimmed in shape. Shrunk down to the size of a well-muscled youth. Barely older than a child, but with a gruesome hole in his chest.

“What magic is this?” Logen stumbled back in disbelief.

The girl screamed again. Long and shrill.

Spinning, Logen’s gaze flicked around the snowy glade, searching for a quick exit before any more wolf men showed up. He had killed one, but wolves usually ran in packs. There was no way he could fight more than one of these monsters. You had to be realistic.

That was when he spotted them.

Half a dozen figures appeared, circling him and the girl. Pale, beautiful people, standing quiet. Still. Eerily watching in the winter’s stillness.

“It’s okay, friend.” The voice was soft, close by. A whisper. “The werewolf is dead.”

Logen spun again, struggling to find the source of the words. He should just leave. Sprint for the cave.

“What’s your name?” A light hand touched his arm, and Logen grabbed the wrist, whirling on the owner, he brought the magic-wrought sword crashing through pretty man’s shoulder.

The blade carved through the him, splitting the boy from right clavicle to left armpit. It had met little resistance. Like crashing through a still-warm loaf of soft bread. The youth’s head and left arm slid to the ground, splattering messily at his feet with the rest of the mud and blood.

From her spot, still by the tree, the girl cried out, “Edward! No!”

The others, no longer content to watch, rushed forward, hunting for an opening to attack.

A blond woman snarled, showing off sharp teeth set in an exaggerated, sparkling face. These were monsters too. He froze. He should have run earlier. He should have stayed in the cave.

Still propping up the rest of the boy by the arm, the sunlight bouncing off his flesh, Logen felt a familiar surge well up in his chest. These people should have left him alone. The boy should never have touched him.

. . . “You fucking sparkle?”

These small, pretty people glittered. Sparkled. Shone beautiful in the forest light. The Bloody-Nine *hated* beauty. He hated these soft bastards, twinkling and hissing at him like angry little harlots. Mad he’d played rough with their friend.

The Bloody-Nine laughed at their bared little teeth and lifted his own tooth, long and bloody. The Maker’s sword. He tossed aside the limp body and stomped the boy’s head into the ground. Back where sparkly things belonged. Back to the mud.

These pretty fools didn’t understand anger. They didn’t understand hatred.

They would learn. He would teach them.

In the distance, a wolf howled. Then another. It was time to make corpses. They were all corpses. They just didn’t know it yet. He’d add that to their lesson for today.

The Bloody-Nine roared . . .

Logen groaned and pain wracked his body. He lay in a pool of his own blood. At least, he thought it was his. Glancing around at the carnage, it might not be.

He decided the pale ones were vampires. Especially considering they’d kept trying to bite him. The Maker’s sword had sung for their flesh.

But the bare-chested youths? They were definitely werewolves. And they were definitely terrifying. He had to get up and back to his cave before another pack showed up.

He willed his body to stand and walk, but only succeeded in crawling. His twisted ankle was now broken. His other leg, ravaged by teeth. Hopefully, not teeth that would cause him to turn into a werewolf. Or a vampire. He’d heard the stories.

So be it. If standing was out of the question, he’d crawl back to the cave. After all, you had to be realistic about these things.