

# **WORLDS FANTASTIC**

**A Collection of Two Fantasy & Sci-fi Short Stories**

**by Isabella Amaris**

**Worlds Fantastic:  
A Collection of Two Fantasy & Sci-fi Short Stories**

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***Ebook Description:***

*A collection of two fantasy/sci-fi short stories.*

*In ‘**The Story-Catcher**’, a girl falls into a river in a Welsh forest, only to enter the magical world of the Story-Catcher, a mysterious wizard who might just have an unexpected reason for her presence in his realm.*

*In ‘**Amnipur**’, cities and science and libraries are built on the theft of other species’ evolution. But when everything you do is a mere echo of someone else’s hard-won culture, what can an imaginative Amnipurian contribute to his quiet and efficient copycat world? Perhaps the newly discovered species called ‘humans’ holds the answer...*

## **Table of Contents**

[1. The Story-Catcher](#)

[2. Amnipur](#)

[Back to Top](#)

## **The Story-Catcher: A Fantasy Short Story\***

*\*This is a revised version of 'The Story-Catcher' previously published in the anthology 'New Writing 4' (Silverfish Books, 2004).*

Now, this might be very hard to believe, but what I am about to tell you is the truth.

Yes, the whole truth, with neither embellishments nor unnecessary summarizations.

So listen very carefully, and I shall tell you the story of what happened to a foolish young girl on the bank of a sparkling, Welsh river, when the world was still asleep to all but the fey.

My name is Elvira. Yes, it's a hideous name, isn't it? I live, well... somewhere that's quite unimportant. What *really* matters is my cousin Simon's cottage.

Simon told me he'd bought the place after glimpsing puffed trails of smoke escaping its small chimney. At the time, I'd thought he was being absurdly dramatic, but after seeing his gem of a cottage one summer, I think I understand why he fell in love with it.

My story begins that first summer, the summer that Simon invited me and two friends to visit his little hideaway.

These very same friends often describe me as being a rather 'dreamy' individual - you know, someone who's always appreciated the romantic nature of all things wild and picturesque - so you can guess that I was bursting with anticipation at finally seeing Simon's forest sanctuary.

I wasn't disappointed.

The crooked cottage was built right in the middle of the most old-fashioned bit of forest ground that I'd ever seen, knee deep in the glades of Wales. It was very old, its small structure all stone and timber, with a thatched roof and an earthen floor. Green creepers with tiny white and purple flowers climbed its old walls and white latticed windows looked out on its forest home.

There hung a sense of history and time passing by unnoticed within the shelter of its solid, rustic frame. Very enchanting, to be sure. But there's really nothing worse than being cramped into a small space with the whole of Wales surrounding you. And besides, I'm adventurous by nature.

Two days after arriving at Simon's cottage, a break from my friends was all I could think of. You guessed it; I went off on a foray of my own, right into the heart of the surrounding green forest.

In case you're wondering, I am not *really* as stupid as I might seem. I had things all figured out; to prevent myself getting lost during my little excursion, I would follow the path of a bubbling river that led right past Simon's cottage into the rest of the woodland.

There was just no way I could get lost if I kept to the river.

Ah, how the most simple of plans can go awry.

I set off pretty early, leaving a note behind to tell the others what I was up to. Very soon, I'd lost sight of the cottage, and was basking in my newfound sense of freedom. The bright morning air rushed through my lungs, refreshing and clean, carrying with it scents galore from this part of the forest. I felt like I was dipping my toes into a wild, fey world untouched by human intrusion. The clear sight of the river guided my way with its winding, rippling beauty. Time turned into an outside force that couldn't interfere with my small, enchanted world.

But then, when I'd come to the conclusion that my little adventure was turning out just fine, I took the first steps to a – how shall I put it? - more *unusual* destination.

Just ahead, peeping at me through the trees, was what looked like a horse-shoe curve in the river's path. I came up to it, and could feel something inside myself pause. Adventurousness? Recklessness? Foolishness? I suppose I can't say for sure. All I know is, there beckoned before my eyes a most unexpected path. A path across the flowing river to the other side of the forest. A path made up of very big rocks that one merely has to jump over without falling off of them.

Unsurprisingly, I was hit by the most awful desire to cross that neat path of boulders.

Now, I'm not what you'd call athletic. In fact, I'm a bit soft and plump and generally lacking in both coordination and agility. But the river wasn't flowing fast, you see. And even if I did fall, it would be a simple matter to swim to shore - or walk to shore really - given how shallow this stream was.

With not a thought further as to what Simon would have said –he is an annoyingly cautious person, for all that he bought his cottage so impetuously – I proceeded to jump from craggy rock to craggy rock with all the grace of a gazelle with a broken leg.

Despite my sad lack of style, all was soon going well. I cleared the first four uneven rock surfaces pretty quickly. With the river flowing before and behind me, I saw that there was only one more boulder to go. A final, rather large leap off it was all it would take to land on the other side.

*I can do that*, was my modest conclusion.

Over I went. I came down perilously close to the edge of hard stone – instinctively, I heaved myself off that final boulder, right into the air, aiming for the riverbank.

I landed in a whirlpool.

*A whirlpool?* you ask. *How could there be a whirlpool directly before me and I not see it?*

To be honest, I don't know. How could I know? This was no ordinary phenomenon of nature at all. The whirling, swirling rush around me was all in a very strange substance - not of water, and not really of air, but a mixture of the two. It was all grey and blue and silver and black all at once. I was hurled around and around with such shocking speed and force that I could not even shout in shock; my breath was used up just in preventing a headache from building up inside me.

And then, plop! I landed quite heavily enough to feel a tiny little trembling in all my poor, jangled bones. A sharp pain slammed through my head, making

me wince. But the pain died near instantly, and I found I could breathe easily again.

Up I rose with a hand to my head, thankful that I had worn the most rough and ready clothes that a gal could wear on a bright sunny morning in the country.

But then, once I looked up, it was all I could do to keep my hand to my head, much less my jaw from dropping open – perhaps it did drop open – for I was definitely not on the other side of that winding forest stream. What was before me was staggering indeed...

It appeared that I was in a room of some sort. Only, it was quite large, and, well ... insubstantial. Almost *spatial*. Yes, it was like a kind of fathomless cavern in space. There were no stars in sight, but an odd feel of timelessness and infinity hit me, made me catch my breath in awe, and a wise touch of fear.

Just as my eyes adjusted to the curious sight before me, my ears detected a spat of muttering from somewhere behind me. I spun around. And discovered an even more interesting spectacle.

There, sitting about seven feet from where I stood, was a very strange person. At least, he looked like a person. He had two arms and two legs. And the muttering was coming from his direction, so I presumed he had a mouth.

I could not be sure, though. That this odd personage didn't seem to know I was there gave me the courage commonly belonging to fools who've just been dunked into whirlpools – I crept closer to him, careful not to make any noise.

The fellow was dressed in the most colourful and voluminous robes I had ever seen in my life, full of purples and oranges and dark blues, with lots of glitter and stars shining off them. A heady mix of colours that would normally have looked terrible on any sane person only looked imposing and rather ceremonial on this fellow. If I didn't know better, I would have thought he was a wizard of some sort, straight out of one of my old childhood fairy tale books. He even had a voluminous hat on his head, as sparkly and colourful as his fantastic clothes.

Now that I was close enough to make out these details of the fellow's dress, I suddenly made out something else as well, something that had melded so well with the sense of space around and above me that I had not at first realized it was there. My eyes widened, and my entire being stilled. I forgot everything but the so very extraordinary creation before me.

It was a most wonderfully intricate net or web of some kind, much like a giant cobweb, only far more involved than any cobweb could ever be. Its circular, veined form shimmered constantly with a touch of muted softness and delicacy just as tangible as the most sparkling dewdrop to fall on a blade of grass. And its colours! Why, I do not think I could describe them to you and do them any glimmer of justice, although I will try to do so.

They were so beautifully a part of that web, those colours – with gold and silver and aquamarine and turquoise and the pinkish lustre of pearls and the glimmering of the farthest stars. It was like raindrops had reflected off a thousand rainbows, blending all their colours together to create a myriad of sweet, yet sharply sparkling tints, constantly shifting but always in harmony with each other. Oh, it was an enchanting mixture of delicate hues the like of which I'd never seen before. And will probably never see again.

The bottom of the web was strung out directly in front of the wizard-like being I had seen at first, but its upper reaches hung high above him, so that the high, delicate structure dwarfed him with ease, making his lavishly attired figure puny in comparison. Although I could not see what held the web up, it was obvious that it was stretched out and tethered to the space around it in some way.

The wizard, for I was sure now that that was what he must be, seemed to be picking things from the air all around him, and throwing them into the web where they stayed stuck and glittering. Perhaps they added to the colour and texture of the thing.

Yes, it was so large and intricate and beautiful that it took my breath away. And I – abruptly aware that I was no longer in a Welsh forest – gasped.

Considering the circumstances, perhaps it was not the best thing for me to have done, but I really could not help myself.

On hearing that gasp echo and echo around insubstantial walls, the voluminous hat and robes turned round swiftly. Two large brown eyes with grey twinkles in them surveyed me in silence. There was a nice olive tone to the wizard's skin. His hands appeared well shaped, and quite full of veins. I almost bowed then; he looked so very tall and imperious, this colourful wizard, for all that he was obviously very old. So old and so knobbly that he reminded me of my grandfather, with his bones jutting out at the joints, and his slender, beautiful fingers turning bony with age. He had a face so full of character too, so full of powerful memories, that I was reminded of just how young I still was.

I stared at him, wondering what he would say to me.

He rolled his eyes. "Dimensional shifts again, I see." Intelligent eyes narrowed suddenly. "Or, a spy."

A pregnant pause fell. I occupied it by gazing at the wizard in bewilderment.

"Well," he said suddenly. "Aren't you going to say anything?"

I could feel my face scrunch up in the effort to get my voice out. The air felt so thick here.

"Who...Who are you?" I managed at last.

He squinted in return. Perhaps he was trying to be polite. Or mocking. I was fairly certain his expression portrayed faint disgust along the way.

"I am the Story-Catcher," he said then. "If you truly do not know this, which I can see you don't, you cannot be a spy after all." He sighed. "I'll have to explain myself to you from scratch."

My face must have conveyed dazed confusion, for he continued smoothly, "I catch stories. And you," he picked up some glittering powder from a dusty container to his right, "should not be here. I'm afraid you'll have to get home now. The powder will make sure you don't remember any of this, my dear, so you needn't worry about nightmares or anything of that sort. Hmmm, how much is right...." A short puff of annoyed breath escaped. "My word, I haven't had to use this for so long that I've forgotten the dosages. Just shows what lack of practice does for one's skills." A gleam of excitement entered his eyes. "Oh, well, there's no harm in re-learning old tricks, is there?"

He rose up from what I could now see was a rather cute little wooden swivelling stool.

I backed away in alarm.

"Wait," I said. "What is that?"

"Oh, just a little bit of something to make you forget you were ever here. It won't hurt you at all. Humans aren't supposed to be here, you know. If you'd been an enemy, or a spy, or a friend, you'd have done just fine. But humans... pooh! You poor things have no stomach at all for this kind of thing, and when you do, you only try to get all the money you can out of it. So, we have a policy: 'Memory Dust and Throw 'Em Back Where They Came From!'"

It occurred to me that perhaps it would be a good idea to take the memory dust in good faith, but before he could throw the glittering stuff in my face – which I'm pretty sure is what he intended to do – a punishing finger of curiosity suddenly prodded me in the back.

"Wait, wait!" I let out desperately.

The old wizard brought his dust-filled fist down in some surprise; I hastily tried to think up a legitimate excuse for staying.

"I'm sure you have no one to talk to here," I volunteered finally. The place did look rather empty now that I noticed it. "Why not have a chat? Just the two of us. I could bring you up to speed on what mankind's been up to lately." I smiled nervously. "We've been up to quite a lot, you know."

"I'm sorry?"

The wizard's gnarled hand was lowered to the side. He squinted at me again. I decided to suggest spectacles at the earliest opportunity.

"Did you just ask me if I wanted to have a *chat*?"

"Yes." I have to say, I was quite pleased with my sudden courage; no clue where it came from, but it felt good. "I mean, *do* you have anyone to talk to? Seems pretty, er, boring over here."

"Hmmm..." The old fellow looked down for a moment – when he looked up again there was a touch of interest in his eyes. He shrugged. "Well, now you mention it, I suppose I haven't had a good conversation with anyone for a long time. Everyone here's a workaholic. And well, if you've known a set of people for thousands of years, as I have, you... you pretty much run out of things to say to each other."

A small smile crinkled into place.

"All right then, my girl." Both hands efficiently dusted off the memory powder back into its container. He sat down on his stool. "Come on. We'll have a chat, and then I'll throw some memory dust on you and you can get on your way."

"Oh, thank you!" I exclaimed. Yes, I might have sounded just a bit like a deranged fan of old wizards, but I think I might be forgiven my excess of enthusiasm. It is after all not an everyday thing to get sucked into a spatial whirlpool and end up in a place with a gigantic web, memory dust, and a Story-Catcher, all at once. I was determined to make the most of the experience.

I walked up to the wizard and stood next to him. He had continued to pick things out of the air and was flinging them into the huge web as I watched. Up close, I could see that they were like little gems, floating here and there, but always within the old man's reach somehow.

He glanced at me out of the corner of his eye.

"You believe me, don't you? That I am *the* Story-Catcher?"



It isn't an exaggeration to say that he actually smirked at me.

"Of course I believe you," I said equably. One does not argue with a strange wizard in a strange place. "Of course, I ...er ... well, I don't exactly *know* what a Story-Catcher is...."

"I told you already." The wizard sniffed in disdain – or could it have been allergies? "I catch stories."

"You don't mean... real *stories*?" I asked disbelievingly.

"Is there any other kind?" he enquired with asperity. "Yes, child, stories. Tales. Narratives. Sagas. Anecdotes – "

"Anecdotes," I finished for him. "I see. Hmmm, I've never met a Story-Catcher before."

"Of course you haven't," was the supercilious reply. He turned to me, eyes all afire with indignation. "I'm the only one. And as I never forget a face, and as I know I haven't met you before, I know for a fact that you haven't met me. Silly girl. Well, since you're here and I'm here and you wanted to have a chat, you said... Ask me anything."

He inclined his head in a gesture probably meant to convey magnanimity, but only succeeded in hitting me in the eye with the tip of his tall hat.

"I really don't mind telling you all my secrets, you know," continued the generous old wizard, while I rubbed at my now furiously watering eye. "You'll only forget them once the memory dust works its magic. By the way, do you have a name?"

"Elvira," I volunteered, blinking at him, and felt obliged to apologise for being named as such. "And you?"

"I never saw the sense in names," he said, and winked. "One's profession grows on one far more than any name does. More apt that you call me 'Story-Catcher' and be done with it."

"Uh-huh," I agreed, without really knowing why. "So, Mr... er, Story-Catcher, how exactly do you catch these stories you say you catch?"

"It's a simple enough process. My assistants herd them in here, and I pick out the ones I want. The good ones, of course. The popcorn-flavoured, finger-licking ones. You can guess that I have a very discriminating eye for good stories. There are not all that many actually, that come up to my standards."

"Your assistants 'herd' them in here?"

Abruptly I knew what he meant. My eyes widened - I surveyed the bright, glittering little spots on the Story-Catcher's other side with increasing excitement. "They're ... They're *stories*! Your assistants herd stories in here!"

"Yes, that's what I said. It's so hard to find good help these days, but I manage somehow." He squinted up at me again. "My assistants travel the world for me, and find me the best stories. Then they herd them in here, a 'story-coral' of sorts. I pick out the ones I think are good and collect them on my web for the Mistress of Stories to use as she's wont to."

"Who's the Mistress of Stories? Is she the female version of you?" I asked.

"Don't be ridiculous," was his annoyed reply. "I told you there's only one of me. No, the Mistress of Stories is my sister. Very particular she is, more so than me, but quite brilliant. The stories I catch are sent to her, and she then assigns them to the right writers." A wrinkled nose scrunched up yet more. "It's not really

an easy task that," the Story-Catcher confided. "Much harder than mine actually. Choosing the right writer for the right story is shockingly tricky. Too many factors come into play. She's always complaining about it." He shrugged. "But someone has to do it."

"Oh?" I said. "Is it really difficult then? I would have thought it wouldn't be. There are so many writers nowadays."

"You'd think so, wouldn't you? But the plain fact is, that's not really true."

"It isn't?"

"Nope," he declared. "There are those who'd like to write, and there are those who'd want to write, and there are those who actually do write, but that doesn't mean that they *can* write. And stories are like people. They react differently to different people. If they aren't sent them to the right writers, you'll have a grand mess on your hands. The work will end up being a mess in itself. Or worse, the writing will be excellent, but quite contrary to the spirit of the original story."

"So, once you find the right writer," I said, "everything will work out. Right?"

The Story-Catcher's expression turned oddly pensive. "I wish it were so. You must understand," he said slowly, "that even when stories are sent to those who are meant to write them, many things can happen along the way. Misunderstood inspiration, distractions, complexes.... Sometimes, I think it is almost a gamble, this story business. Some true writers give up on their vision not halfway through, which makes those of us watching from up here so very sad. We put in so much effort in choosing the writer, you see. And then, there are those who just butcher the piece sent to them, for no particular reason that I can think of, really. Some writers are too impatient to wait until they are truly ready to write their stories. Others never start writing until it's too late, because their vision intimidates them from the very beginning. Still more devalue their art by altering their work to appease the vision of others. Yes, the Mistress of Stories has by far a harder job than me."

"This is fascinating," I observed, for I'd never really thought much about the intricacies attached to the written word. Writers write after all, while readers read. And I had always been a reader, not a writer. Hadn't I?

I'm struck suddenly by a vision of my younger self busily scribbling down some odd little tales, only to be laughed at when I read them out to my friends; I suppose I never did get over that initial humiliation ...

"But why do you say that the Mistress of Stories has the harder job?" I said to the Story-Catcher rather fiercely now. "Surely yours is just as hard, if not more so. You actually have to look through all these stories and catch the right ones. You're the filter. The one who spots which ones are worth writing. That can't be easy."

"Ah, but my job's fun. Very enjoyable." His face creased into a huge grin. "I get to visit so many worlds through these stories, for all that I sit here all day. I don't think anyone else but me has such a life."

"Have stories changed much?" I asked suddenly. "I mean... You said you've been doing this for years and years, right? So, have they changed much over the years?"

He was silent for a moment. “Well, now,” the Story-Catcher said at last, “that is a most interesting question. I believe the stories are changing, to be sure. They’re becoming – for lack of a better description – real.”

“Real?”

“Yes, real. Is it a normal part of everyday conversation now for one to echo the words of another?” he enquired politely. “If so, you’re certainly extremely good at it. Yes, indeed,” he continued, “there has lately been a trend for mass fiction – you know, stories accessible to all. Which has, of course, made the stories become more true-life, ‘else the masses wouldn’t be able to understand them.”

He paused once more, apparently deep in thought.

“Don’t tell anyone,” the old wizard whispered finally, “but I have some misgivings about this. Fiction is becoming real now, and vice versa. All is melding into reality. The two are becoming one. Frankly, my dear, I don’t know what will happen when they do become one. Imagine it – the real and the imagined, one and the same.” He blinked once, very slowly. “I suppose I’ll be out of a job then, hmmm?”

I stared at him, abruptly at a loss.

He laughed then, loud and hearty, into the silence surrounding us. “It would be about time I got out of the business,” he said through his chuckles. “I haven’t had a decent break since I started. It would be good to try my hand at something else sometime.”

His words surprised me. The old fellow seemed so very happy in his work. I’d temp-ed enough during summer breaks to know how hard it was to find a job you actually liked doing. Why would you want to give it up once you found it?

“You’d actually *want* to stop being a Story-Catcher?” I asked finally, and my doubt at this eventuality made it straight into my voice, for the old wizard glanced at me rather sardonically.

“What do you think?” the Story-Catcher retorted. “Doing the same thing day in, day out... Alright, I do enjoy it still, even after all these years. But sometimes, one needs some *variety* in life, you know. Some spark of new excitement.” He looked up at me quietly. “Do you understand?”

Maybe I did, because I found myself nodding at once.

“I almost quit actually, one day many years ago,” the Story-Catcher confessed then. “It was at about the height of worldwide censorship. The repression of imagination was so widespread that it was all I could do to find the motivation to go on. There were so many stories just stuck in the web and left there, forced to grow stagnant... living far beyond their time because the Mistress of Stories could not find anyone who was in the position to write them.” Thin lips pressed together in displeasure. “We were forced to retire them, of course. By the time they could be written, they were no longer applicable to the reality of their times.”

His hand rose to his face. I could swear I saw him wipe a stray tear from his right eye.

“But you stayed,” I prompted uneasily.

“Yes, I did.” His eyes darted to mine. His expression had cleared, turned brisk - almost business-like - as he turned to the web before him. “At the time

though, I truly thought it was the end. I even began to look seriously into the job market for suitable vacancies. After all, I'm a wizard of the highest level. There was sure to have been great competition for my experience and skills. But then –

” He looked directly at me, a proud gleam in his eye. “I thought: ‘This is what I was made for. The urge and love for story-catching runs through my veins. Even when I'm not looking out for the stories, they find their way into my sight. Even without my assistants herding them in, the stories find their way to me voluntarily, hoping that I would assign them to a writer’.” He shook his head wryly. “You see, with such thoughts running through my head, I could not give up so easily. I had to continue my work.”

“That was very brave of you,” I said, and meant it.

“It's all about faith, you know.” He sighed, the sound one of wistful, hard-earned relief. “Beautiful thing, faith. It oils the wheels so very well.”

“What – ” I began.

“Hold on! Don't speak! Don't even move!” he interrupted hastily. “Just a minute now....”

As I watched, the Story-Catcher put out his right hand. Smooth fingertips lightly grasped something that was hanging in the air about four feet from the wizard's face. Don't ask me how he reached the thing. I still do not know. Perhaps it was the skills of being a wizard of the highest level.

In any event, he brought whatever it was that he had captured to the level of his eyes, and beamed in delight.

“What is it?” I asked, for I could not make it out.

“Now this, child,” he said, and moved his hand to just under my eyes, “is a very special story indeed. Not many of these left now.” He opened his hand. “Look into it.”

Curious, I looked at the small thing sitting in his palm. It shone with stunning brilliance. So brilliant in fact that, as tiny as was, its bright sparkling outshone the purest diamond.

“Is it a jewel? How is the story kept in it?”

“Foolish child,” whispered the Story-Catcher. “Yes, it is a jewel, but not the kind you're thinking of. This is what a story looks like in its purest form, before it is sent to humankind in the form of inspiration. Now, my dear...” He brought it up yet closer to my eyes. “Look deep into it... Deep, deep into it. And perhaps you will see what I saw....”

At his urging, I attempted to see right into the tiny thing.

At first, nothing happened. It was like looking into the heart of a small, bright spark.

But then, as I continued to gaze into it, something strange began to happen: the light grew bigger and bigger in my mind's eye.

And then, without warning, it parted to frame a collection of the most beautiful scenes I had ever seen.

First, there crept into sight a small glade, with deep green trees and a small lake in the middle of it. Up rode beings with pointed ears and long arrows on their backs.

*Elves!* I exulted, and dare not look away.

The next brief scene appeared to be one of a celebration, where fairies and other strange beings sang and danced freely, their fey revelry making an odd quiver of wondering awe slide up my spine. This was followed by a glimpse of war, with huge ogre-like creatures leading the melee. Impressions of fear and horror, courage and hope, struck me with disorienting strength. And finally, the setting sun, framed in an atmosphere of tragedy and triumph; no elves or fairies were apparent here, but somehow I knew that this last scene was part of the same story.

The next moment, I was back with the Story-Catcher. He was grinning at me, his gaze sly, and speculative. "You saw?" he asked softly.

"Oh, yes!" I gasped. "It was wonderful! Almost like a movie, but so real! Was that the story?"

"Movies, pooh!" he grumbled, then nodded. "Yes, that was the story. What humans call a 'fairy tale' or 'legend', depending on their taste." He grunted disapprovingly – whether at the fickle nature of humans or the offensiveness of movies, I wasn't sure – but continued with some glee, "These are not easy to come by, my curious Elvira. Not many imaginations can do justice to this one. My sister will have some hard days ahead. So many fairytales are spoilt by the spirit of those who have no eye to their beauty, to their possibility, to their... reality. It takes a rare writer to bring a fairy tale to life so that it's not only children who would enjoy the truth it carries, so that those who believe they are not children are forced to remember that that is what they always were, and are, and shall be."

"Story-Catcher," I said then, for I had been wondering about something for some time now. "Where exactly do the stories come from?"

He looked at me sharply. "Ah, my young friend, I'm afraid I cannot tell you that. Some secrets are simply not mine to tell, even if you were to forget that I told them to you. But you are wise to ask. Sometimes, it is the answer that matters but – more often – it is the fact that you actually asked the question. It shows that you are alive to the possibilities. Yes, you are wise to ask."

That all sounded way too abstract - and vaguely like a cop-out - to me, but before I could insist on a proper answer, the Story-Catcher got up, rising to his feet quite gracefully for someone who appeared so ancient.

"And now, Elvira, I'm afraid our little tête-à-tête must come to an end," he announced while I stared at him in dismay. "I have enjoyed our conversation tremendously, but I must get back to work. If there is one fairy tale hanging around, there might very well be more nearby. Stories tend to follow each other, you see, much like a flock of geese, so that if one has been herded in, further gems are probably on their way. I dare not miss them."

Before I could prevaricate somehow, convince him to let me stay a little longer, there was a quick flick of memory dust in my face. The wily fellow must have passed some of it into his left hand while I had been watching the fairy tale play out its tale. The next thing I remember was a brisk shove; without warning, I was back in that confusing whirlpool.

A few seconds later brought a loud thump, followed by a far louder 'ow!' – I must have landed rather hard.

Cool darkness claimed my senses with ease.

When I woke up, Simon was sprinkling water on my face while our two friends squatted down next to me. Three identical expressions of concern met my blurred gaze. I said I was all right. Simon replied that I had fallen down on the other side of the riverbank. Had I hit my head?

I felt myself shaking my poor, mistreated head in answer.

Any bones broken?

I didn't think so, and said so.

I must have miscalculated when jumping the stones across the river, was Simon's next observation.

I was quick to nod in agreement, but I knew better.

You might think I kept silent because it's such an improbable story that nobody would have believed me anyway. But there was another reason why I didn't tell the others about the Story-Catcher. You see, I would also have had to explain why his memory dust hadn't worked on me. And I really couldn't do that.

Half-elves are never allowed to reveal their ancestry to non-elves – let alone our immunity to memory dust – unless it's an emergency.

It's a good thing the Story-Catcher didn't realise what I was though. He'd have thought twice about our little conversation if he'd known...

My thoughts pause abruptly in their whirl of confusion. A warm smile comes to my mouth. The sound of Simon berating my carelessness fades to the edge of my consciousness as I sit very still on the earthy riverbank.

Oh, the cunning old wizard! He *had* known what I was, hadn't he? Right from the beginning . . .

Who else, after all, but a very bored Story-Catcher would have hatched such an elaborate scheme for the telling of his own story?

[Back to Top](#)

## **Amnipur: A Science Fiction Short Story**

There is a certain pleasurable solitude in watching the sun rise every morning, a solitude that lightens the heart and draws the mind towards the future. Bietonepu sat on the side of his bed in his long, grey night-robe, and looked his fill at the sunrise streaking the sky with golds and pinks outside his window.

A satisfied expression entered his almond-shaped eyes.

Those expressive eyes, large and dark, hinted at a strange unearthliness, a sense of depth and infinity beyond their owner's years. It pleased Bietonepu – that he possessed at least one feature that made him look wise. The touch of youth that often stole into his pale face made it so difficult for people to take him seriously sometimes.

It didn't help that Bietonepu's perfectly symmetrical features portrayed an impression of cold marble turned alive and moving. No, even his wide, high forehead, which should have stressed intelligence and thought, seemed to escape his contemporaries' notice. It might have been because that high forehead was poorly contrasted against a very small nose, one tiny enough to resemble a neat little oval depression flung into the middle of Bietonepu's long face, interrupting the clean lines between forehead and mobile, clever mouth sitting atop Bietonepu's firm chin.

But Bietonepu didn't think that was it.

After all, all Amnipur had similar features; *everyone else* didn't have to deal with being thought a child by those who should know better.

He could never understand it. He worked so hard at cultivating the air of a mature intellectual. His clothing was sparse and neat. And, like all Amnipur, no hair clothed the elegant, sloped dome of Bietonepu's head. A covering of hair would have lent imbalance to the graceful elegance of his reed-thin frame, and Amnipur abhorred imbalance. Well-kept, smoothed heads were usually much admired by contemporaries. On Bietonepu however, a sloped head only elicited badly hidden smiles of admiration – at his apparent cuteness. Cuteness!

"Ah, well," Bietonepu murmured through gritted teeth. He stretched silently. His already tall 7-foot figure cast an alarmingly taller shadow on the clean, white wall by his bed. Slender, pale hands linked together on his lap. "Another day in our wonderful ci-vi-li-sa-tion."

There was great care in Bietonepu's precise pronunciation of the word. It rolled out with the exact, inherent perfection of new knowledge. The last assimilation had been unexpectedly useful. Much had been gained.

Bietonepu wondered if today would bring even more to their ci-vi-li-sa-tion.

He flashed a quick glance towards the quiet streets below, seeking familiar faces. He was easily disappointed. Not a soul idled along the plentiful stone garden-paths.

With a small sigh, Bietonepu rose to his feet. It was time to set things in motion once more.

The first thing to do was check on the rest of the Council. They were probably still abed. Bietonepu was always the first to awake after an assimilation, and he normally afforded his colleagues the courtesy of a longer rest than he required.

*But it would not do to stay asleep for so long today*, he thought. *Not today. The stars look impatient in their bright sky, as though they are waiting for something unexpected to happen. What a fanciful thought*, Bietonepu reflected, and looked guiltily to his left and right.

He had been chided for expressing too many of such abstract, odd thoughts lately. But he couldn't help it. A chance glance at a mundane, ordinary object tended to stimulate utterly irrational thoughts that promptly fell out of his eloquent mouth before he'd fully considered the wisdom of speaking them aloud.

Perhaps, one day, a new assimilation would bring him the answer – maybe even a name – for his mind's tendency to wander so.

Chiskina always reminded him of this possibility.

Bietonepu's countenance brightened considerably at the thought of his fellow Council member, and he started off in search of her.

The Council House was all in cool, stark white, as was fitting. The building itself was as tall and slender as its occupants. Curling, spiralling staircases added an idealistic touch that had frequently been the subject of debate among Bietonepu's people; they served no useful purpose, after all. But the Council House was one of many buildings that had been inherited by the Amnipur in some time long past, and it seemed pointless to theorise on its odd architecture.

Bietonepu reminded himself of this as he walked down the curling staircase. His feet were bare and long, as were his fingers and neck. All in all, a perfect body for a stroll, something he and his people indulged in very frequently.

But Bietonepu had a sad tendency to take good things too far – a stroll was simply too slow for one whose mind sped at a different rate altogether from his body. On many occasions now, as his mind raced to reach its conclusions, Bietonepu had found his body keeping pace in a lurching gait that passed for a sort of half-stroll-half-run; an oddly misshapen little stride that invited much whispered conversation from onlookers and had – after Bietonepu'd been elected to join the revered High Council – resulted in senior Amnipur expressing their dismay in soft, firm lectures more than thrice now.

It was the thought of facing those stern, sour old bats on this bright morning that ironically reined in Bietonepu's enthusiasm. He simply couldn't stand the thought of keeping still for hours while his elders castigated him.

And they usually did take hours. Plural. Sadly, frustratingly plural.

His spirit dampened at the thought. Bietonepu's slim fingers reluctantly drew away from the warm, smooth stone of the curving balustrade. He drew his hands down to his sides, adopting a dignified mien. Gradually, his stride turned relaxed, calm – almost relentless – in its pace.

As he entered the stretch of circular chambers in the main section of the Council House, Bietonepu's posture turned yet more rigid. His long and heavy robe swirled around him with minimum flourish. He was satisfied that his respect for his hallowed surroundings was appropriately displayed; he hoped he could reach Chiskina's rooms before he lost control of his posture completely.



Chiskina was – surprisingly – wide awake when Bietonepu entered her quarters.

Her lean body sat unmoving in its cross-legged position on a curved, wooden window seat. She was staring at the view outside her bow window, her eyes flat.

Bietonepu grimaced at the unnerving lack of expression on Chiskina's face. It was definitely time for new knowledge. Chiskina was usually the least bored member of the Council; if she had nothing better to do than look out her window, as gracefully shaped as it was, the people would reach a state of boredom in no time at all. And no surprises what would follow: all Council members would instantly be replaced for lack of efficiency!

Bietonepu shuddered at the thought. Out of all the positions he'd held in government, this was without a doubt the best of the lot. There would be no going back to administrative drudgery if he could help it.

"Sister," was Bietonepu's first, polite greeting. And then, with badly hidden disappointment, "The last assimilation has run its course?"

"No." Chiskina sighed, her wide-set eyes still set blankly on the city spread out so silently before them. "But it is well on the way there."

"That is unfortunate," Bietonepu said quietly. "I am sorry to hear this, Chiskina."

Chiskina turned away from the window, her large eyes blinking slowly. "I had thought that last set would last longer," she remarked at last, "but I suppose it is all for the best. Just think," she said suddenly, and a flicker of horror seemed to flash through her eyes, "what if we ever lost our desire to learn, Bietonepu? That would be far worse than the boredom I feel now."

Bietonepu wasn't quite sure he agreed with her, but he nodded gravely anyway. For most Amnipur, learning was *the* reason for their existence. All they'd ever done was collect knowledge. They thrived on the stuff. Their very nature was made for this purpose. It was their destiny as Amnipur to increase their store of knowledge whenever possible.

Besides, they had no clue what else they could do with their time.

Bietonepu wondered what would happen if the slave races ever sought to better their lot in life. *The rest of us would definitely have more to do with our time then.*

He frowned abruptly. Why ever would the slaves think of such a thing? Why had *he* thought of such a thing? It was well established that birth into specific class ranges was the most efficient means of ordering Amnipurian society, a matter not to be trifled with or pushed aside for personal gain. Or knowledge. Or lack of boredom...

"Are the rest awake yet?" Chiskina asked. Bietonepu was staring intensely at her empty bed, a frown in his eyes. *He must be doing that mind-wandering thing again*, Chiskina thought, and blinked slowly in her usual way. Her long curling lashes trembled delicately on pale lids. "Bietonepu," Chiskina called, loudly this time.

She should have known that wouldn't get his attention.

Gracefully, Chiskina uncurled herself from the window seat before sashaying over to her nearby recliner. As she'd suspected, her movements

brought Bietonepu's attention back to her far more effectively than shouting had. She sat down in a sinuous little slide and gestured for Bietonepu to join her. "I'm too tired to do a search for the others. Will you do one for me?"

"I thought I would not intrude this morning," Bietonepu remarked absently. "I thought perhaps it would be better if I searched everyone out manually."

"I see," Chiskina said slowly, though really she did not. Manual conduct seemed a foolish option when one possessed minds as powerful as the Amnipur did. But Chiskina was used to humoring her odd little Council member. Bietonepu might be older than Chiskina herself, but given his naïve, eccentric ways, she couldn't help thinking of him as she would an Amnipur child.

Indeed, on other mornings, Chiskina would have generously allowed Bietonepu his space for strange behavior. Today though, the 'child' seemed more distracted than usual, humming and hawing, actually muttering something beneath his breath while staring into space – no doubt mulling over the shape and texture of the bed hangings, Chiskina guessed. A cool smile rose to her thin lips. Bietonepu really was the strangest Councillor she'd ever met.

"A meeting in a few hours perhaps?" Chiskina suggested loudly, a questioning tilt to her head.

Bietonepu started. "I will inform everyone of it," he replied at once, missing her gentle sarcasm, and missed also the deepening of Chiskina's small smile as he turned away from her. "A few more of our sisters and brothers are waking," he threw over his shoulder as he started towards the doorway, only to pause. Turning back, Bietonepu added comfortingly, "Something more challenging will be found, Chiskina. In the meantime, don't forget, we are a *civilization*."

He chuckled softly and exited the room.

Through the door closed quietly behind him, he heard Chiskina burst into laughter. Bietonepu smiled, congratulating himself on a job well done. According to previous information, comforting someone was not a technique that always had the desired results. He must have mastered the concept completely to have succeeded at his first try with such ease.

A short while later, Bietonepu found himself half-strolling half-running through the Council House, making haste to wake the others up.

Soon, drowsy minds were filled with the anticipation of a Council meeting, and the tall chambers of the Council House echoed with the sounds of soft, measured footsteps.

The creatures would pass into the Council portal at any moment, Bietonepu knew. Bemeen was wonderfully efficient at posting the portals whenever and wherever they were needed. There wouldn't be long to wait now.

As the seconds ticked by, Bietonepu wondered if these specimens would be the right ones to provide him with the answer to his recalcitrant mind. He was beginning to worry over ever diagnosing its nature with any accuracy.

Still, even if they didn't provide him with the information he needed, they would surely provide the Council with more than enough knowledge to keep everyone occupied for some days. From Bemeen's thorough and methodical

studies, there was much that this race possessed that the Council had no concept of, not least their extremely strange methods to reach what could only be termed a kind of haphazard civilisation. But after their encounter with the extremely cultured Pashtans, the Council had decided that any type of 'civilisation' was obviously worthy of study, even haphazard ones. And so, the Council members waited eagerly for the subjects to walk into the room.

Two minutes later, the three creatures strolled in.

Bietonepu was not sure that it spoke well for their race that one of the male specimens screamed high and sharp at the sight of their Amnipur hosts. And, of course, they all fainted in a matter of seconds.

Bietonepu frowned. The Council really had to do something about the ventilation system in the deodorised meeting room.

"I wonder if they are ever going to wake up." Chiskina glanced at Bietonepu. "They went down so solidly."

"Oh, they'll wake up soon enough," Bemeen remarked. Sitting before an interesting counter of coloured buttons, the short Councillor checked the dial on his side of the transparent wall before scratching his pale, slightly fat head. He raised apologetic brown eyes to his compatriots. "Humans faint very easily, I'm afraid. My research indicates that it is something quite beyond their control. We'll have to be careful not to assimilate that particular characteristic; quite unpleasant."

"It is not the fainting that is the problem," Bietonepu pointed out. "It is the fact that they are taking a long time to wake up. Is there any way we can wake them? Without damaging them, of course," he added hastily. Bemeen could be rather ruthless sometimes.

Before Bemeen could reply, Chiskina exclaimed suddenly, "Oh, look! I think one of them is waking up."

"It's the female." Bemeen adjusted another dial, and surveyed the readings on the small console before him. He looked pleased. "Yes, she appears to have suffered no ill-effects from her fainting spell."

"The other one is waking up as well." Chiskina pointed him out with interest. Her eyes widened. "Oh, and even the third one is coming awake. How interesting. They faint and wake up together. Perhaps they are more like us than we thought."

Bietonepu nodded enthusiastically. He'd noticed that even the humans' limbs and physical structure was similar to the Amnipur, albeit sturdier, and even unwieldy in comparison.

Chiskina was already leaning forward over Bemeen's shoulder, her eyes sharp and focused on the three figures stirring within the chamber before her. "Shall we greet them, Bietonepu?" she threw over her shoulder.

"Yes, let us go in," Bietonepu decided. "Bemeen, inform the rest of the Council to link with us, please. We need not waste any time with formalities. This first encounter should acclimatize the humans to their surroundings – and what is expected of them."

The two Council members glided into the Visitors' Quarters with efficient grace.

The humans turned a little pale at the sight of them.

"Please," Bietonepu said hastily. "Do not faint again. That would be most inconvenient. We have been waiting for you to wake up for a very long time."

If possible, the humans became even paler at his words.

Bietonepu sighed in defeat, prepared for another fainting spell to befall them. Surprisingly, however, the humans decided to stay awake. They proceeded to stare at him silently. At last, one of the males spoke up.

"Who are you?" was his first question. It was more like a demand really, and though his voice sounded strangled and hoarse, Bietonepu had to applaud him for managing to bring it out under the circumstances. Many other specimens had taken a far longer time to decide to communicate.

He glanced at Chiskina. She was obviously also pleased with their progress, her wide, dark eyes shining with enthusiasm.

"My name is Bietonepu," announced Bietonepu finally. "This is my fellow Council member, Chiskina. We are Amnipur. Welcome to our home." He made a broad, sweeping gesture with his right arm.

There was a brief silence, during which the humans stared at him stonily.

"Is this some kind of joke?" the female asked after a moment.

"No, no, I'm afraid this is all quite true," Chiskina stated firmly, in the tone of a patient parent. The humans' reaction was nothing extraordinary, and the Council had strict rules in place to deal with such reactions, favouring a firm approach during first encounters.

"Yeah, well, I'm the King of Spain," the third human volunteered in a mutter. "And this is Bonnie Prince Charlie, sitting on my right!"

"I see." Bietonepu inclined his head. "I am pleased to meet you, Thekingofspen and Boniprinscharli. I am sure you will enjoy your stay here. And what might your name be?" he smiled at the female.

"Jenna," she replied shakily.

"We are pleased to meet you, Jenna." Chiskina smiled at her as well, before encompassing them all in one glance, "I'm sure the three of you are feeling very confused, but we shall explain everything in due time. For now, it is enough that you know how honoured and privileged you are to have been chosen for assimilation. Very few races are – " She paused, searching for the right word, then beamed brightly enough that the humans actually drew back slightly. "Civilized enough to be chosen," Chiskina ended.

The three humans only gazed at her in bemusement. Bietonepu cleared his throat, stating kindly, "We will now leave you for a time. We will return when we feel you have recovered enough strength to better communicate with us."

With that, both he and Chiskina quietly departed.

Bemeen was waiting for them back in the control room, together with two other Council members. All eyes were on the three humans on the other side of the transparent wall. Bietonepu could hear the humans speaking as he joined the others.

"It appears they communicate well enough when left alone," Bietonepu observed, "I suspected as much." He looked at the other Amnipur. "I believe we

underestimated the nervous tendencies of this race. It might take far longer than we thought for them to become comfortable with us.”

“Do you think we should assimilate other new knowledge while we wait?” Councillor Ribkiss – a short, scrawny little excuse for an Amnipur – asked hopefully.

The Council members considered the point, before abandoning it almost immediately. It was never wise to focus on two new subjects at the same time. Besides, studying the humans’ behaviour might prove almost as interesting as assimilating new knowledge.

“I suppose it would take a few more hours before they would be in the right state to accept what we have to say,” Chiskina noted. “Will they be requiring any sustenance, Bemeen? Would we have to get anything special for them?”

“No, no,” the Amnipur replied. “They will do quite well with what we have. Although,” and his voice fell to a hush, “they do eat meat. *Regularly.*”

There was a shocked silence, broken soon enough by Bietonepu. He was by far the most talkative of all the Council Members, and probably the most curious member of the group, as well. And he was nothing if not a lover of furry creatures, scaly creatures and – in short – all creatures big and small.

“Well!” he exclaimed. “This is an unpleasant surprise. None of the other assimilations were flesh-eaters. Are you sure they are ci-vei-lised?”

In his haste to ask the question, Bietonepu actually forgot his perfected pronunciation. Under the circumstances, however, Bemeen could forgive the lapse. “Yes, I think they are civilised,” volunteered the stoic controller. “And, of course, they don’t actually eat meat in its natural form. They burn it first.”

Bietonepu couldn’t suppress his shudder of revulsion, but he and the other Councillors nodded their heads rapidly. Ah, the meat was obviously cooked before consumption. Although the use of fire was felt to lack the Amnipur’s own finesse in culinary matters, even burned meat made the whole thing slightly better.

Although, an uneasy Bietonepu reflected, in the experience of the Amnipur, only the more barbaric races ate flesh. And flesh-eaters rarely created civilizations. These humans certainly seemed rather... unusual.

“Well, then, my brothers,” Chiskina remarked into the sudden quiet, “shall we meet here, say, three hours from now?”

On receiving the expected assents, the Amnipur retired to their respective quarters to pass the remainder of the afternoon in pleasant perusal of the results of their last assimilation, and pleasant speculation on the future event.

Precisely three hours from their last meeting, the humans were again visited by Bietonepu and Chiskina. This time, however, two more Amnipur had joined them: Councillors by the names of Rempitan and Murista, respectively. All four looked very businesslike as they crowded into the Visitors’ Quarters.

“You have slept well, I trust,” Murista commented. He was one of the more gentle Councillors, and was always fretting about the standard of care given to, and enjoyed by, new specimens.

The humans exchanged glances. The loud-mouthed male, Thekingofspen, predictably spoke up first. "Who are you, exactly? And where are we? *And why have we been brought here?*"

It was obvious that he had not intended to ask all the questions at once, but his momentum appeared to be beyond his control, and after the last rather shrill question, the human abruptly shut his mouth.

"We are Amnipur," Bietonepu began.

"Yes, yes, you've said that before," the female human called Jenna interrupted. "But we have no idea what that means?"

"In your terminology, I suppose it would mean that we are – a different species," Chiskina hazarded.

"What do you mean?" Jenna wondered.

A brief pause struck. And then, "Aliens?" Thekingofspen asked incredulously.

The Councillors paused to confer, before answering simultaneously, "Yes."

The humans looked taken aback – and just a bit afraid – at the synchronized voices echoing in the room. Bietonepu decided they might feel better if he explained the ways of the Amnipur a bit more clearly to them; it would also help to avoid some nasty surprises later, he thought.

"Do not be afraid," Bietonepu said. "We communicate using our minds. That is why you do not hear us speak much to each other. It is easier to speak with our minds, that is all."

"And that is also," Murista interjected, "why we can speak in your human language."

"Because you can read our minds?" said Boniprinscharli, finally choosing to involve himself in the discussion.

"Yes," Murista said, "although it is not all a case of reading your minds. We consider it rude to read another's mind without their permission unless it becomes absolutely necessary to do so, such as happens in matters concerning the health and welfare of the Amnipur in general. Barring this exception, we would not dream of violating the sanctity of your mind. Indeed, Bemeen, whom you have not met, has spent a lot of time in researching your race to ensure that we would need to read your minds only a little to understand you. We are now reasonably familiar with your various languages and cultures, as well as most of your other characteristics. *Dest-ruc-tive*," he whispered in a kind of sing-song warning to the others, blithely unaware of the humans flushing a bright red as the whisper echoed all over the small room. Murista continued smoothly, "And of course, this knowledge makes it easier for us to follow your thought processes when we do choose to read your minds."

"This is unbelievable," Thekingofspen bit out through clenched teeth. "This is unbelievable."

"Not really," Rempitan objected. He was a very fastidious Amnipur, one who prided himself on the accuracy of his deductive abilities. This human was being both illogical and ignorant in dismissing the believability of the Amnipur. "Do you honestly not think it unbelievable that yours is the only intelligent species to live in this world, with all its millions of planets? Surely, your knowledge of mathematics should obviate such a conclusion."

“It is not the math on your *existence* that is the issue. I find it unbelievable that out of the millions of humans walking the Earth, you abducted *us*,” hissed Thekingofspen.

Murista’s mouth opened, then closed abruptly. He kept silent. Bietonepu found himself grinning suddenly. Any species that could render the rather militant Councilor mute was surely worthy of further study.

“My math was never very good,” Boniprinscharli remarked unhappily in the meanwhile.

“Don’t worry,” Chiskina said, trying her hand at the art of ‘comforting’. “I doubt you will need it anymore.”

For some reason, Chiskina thought as an ominous silence greeted her words, her attempt had gone sadly awry. She cleared her throat. “You asked us why we had brought you here, Thekingofspen.” She nodded at Thekingofspen. “I believe it is time we answered your quest – is something wrong?” Chiskina asked suddenly. Thekingofspen was looking slightly uncomfortable.

“Uh,” the human dissembled, then muttered beneath his breath, “that’s not really my name.”

“Oh?” Chiskina stared at him, perplexed. “Not really your name?”

“My name’s really Matthew. Um, Matt.”

The Amnipur fell silent. Lies were not something they approved of. Their predisposition to read minds made untruths both unnecessary and redundant, and lies had gradually been ground out of their communication norms. Remarkably, though they had studied many worlds where lies were commonplace, they continued to regard the capability to lie with strong suspicion.

“What about you both?” Bietonepu wondered suddenly, looking at the other two humans. “Did you lie as well?”

The Amnipur turned as one to face Jenna and Boniprinscharli, both of whom winced inwardly under the glare of all those focused stares.

“My name’s Jenna,” Jenna confirmed hastily.

“Ashton,” Boniprinscharli volunteered. He smiled nervously. “Sorry for the, er, confusion,” he added in a whisper.

“Astron.” The Amnipur were silent again. “Why did you give us the wrong names, Matthew and Ashton?”

“I dunno, we thought you were playing a joke on us,” Matt said uneasily. “I mean... *Are* you playing a joke? Is this – is all this real?”

The Amnipur exchanged glances. The human’s answer did not excuse his lie – especially in light of his previous easy acceptance of their existence – but hopefully this was not a warning that humans were a species of low quality.

“This is all real, yes,” Chiskina said smoothly, “And I am sure you are interested in why we brought you here?”

“Yes, of course.” Jenna bit her lip. “How did you bring us here anyway? I didn’t see any spaceships or anything like that.”

The Amnipur looked quite amused at that.

“My dear human, the whole spaceship theory has been highly exaggerated. There is more than one way to travel through the universe.” Rempitan actually indulged in a chuckle, a rare event for the dignified Councilor; the idea of

spaceships had simply been too much for him to take. “We have at our disposal what you would refer to as ‘portals’.”

“Portals? You mean like time-traveling?” Jenna said, staring up at them in some awe.

“No, it is not time-traveling, I’m afraid.” Bietonepu sounded quite regretful about that fact, but hurriedly shifted his thoughts to less depressing scientific failings. “Although we are hoping to one day assimilate the right species. No, our portals are, you could say, built for ‘distance-traveling’ only. Purely distance. Not time.”

“How can that be?” Ashton objected. “The only possible way to ‘distance-travel’, as you put it, would be through worm-holes, and they affect time.”

Bietonepu shrugged. Obviously the human was an amateur physicist. They were always the most stubborn and irritating kind to come across – in any species. “The question is quite immaterial,” Bietonepu remarked. “Suffice to say, we had the requisite means to obtain your presence in Amnipur. And here you are. Just like *that*.” It was tempting to snap his slender fingers in what he understood was the human fashion, but it seemed inappropriate for an Amnipur to do so, so Bietonepu settled for clasping his hands tightly behind his back.

“What did you mean just now?” Matt asked suddenly. “About assimilating the right species?”

“Ah, finally, we get down to the basics,” Bietonepu exclaimed with pleasure. “We, the Amnipur, are an extremely privileged and honoured race.”

“This doesn’t sound good,” Ashton noted.

“We have been blessed,” Bietonepu continued, “in many ways. However, we find that we cannot – what would you call it? – *create*. I see that you do not understand what we mean,” he remarked, noting the looks of incomprehension on the humans’ faces. “We–cannot–create,” he repeated distinctly. “We cannot come up with new things, new inventions, new *knowledge*. However,” he stated with some pride, “we are able to assimilate the knowledge held by other species, so that we can progress as a race of Amnipur.” He paused, glancing at the others. “As for myself and the other Councillors – some of whom are presently waiting in the Council Room to meet you – we are privileged Amnipur, picked by the rest of our species to search out, and select, the species that are most, er, suitable to fill in the gaps in our knowledge. Once the required knowledge is in the possession of the Council, we convey it to the rest of our people.”

Alarm spread across the humans’ faces.

“The process is not at all painful,” Bietonepu said quickly. “You might experience some loss of memory, and you would probably not remember this whole incident at all, but you will be otherwise healthy.”

“Why do you say that you will be assimilating *us*, then?” Matt asked. There was a rather wild look in his eyes. “If you’re just getting information, why do you say you’re assimilating *us*?”

The Amnipur were collectively surprised at the question. “In human terms,” Chiskina rationalized, “I presume you would understand our terminology if you think of it this way: each creature is a sum of his or her knowledge – therefore, to us, saying that we are assimilating your knowledge is equivalent to saying that we are assimilating *you*. Of course, ‘knowledge’ is a very loose term.



More appropriately, we are assimilating your – experience. Yes.” She tilted her head in consideration, and added a pleased, “Yes, and your cognition.”

“You mean,” Jenna said slowly, “that you are stealing the evolution experienced by other species.”

“Steal?” This time it was the Amnipur who looked at her blankly. “What do you mean, ‘steal’?”

“You take something that does not belong to you and make it your own,” Matt explained dryly. “In other words, you’re thieves.”

The Amnipur’s expressions conveyed their confusion.

“Why should knowledge belong to anyone? It is for everyone. Surely humans understand that,” Chiskina asserted.

“It may be for everyone,” Ashton replied, “but it’s definitely wrong to *force* someone to give you the knowledge that they possess.”

“Wrong?”

The Amnipur looked at each other questioningly, then turned back to survey their human prisoners.

“Not right,” Jenna supplied. “I mean, it’s wrong,” she continued, and paused. “What I mean is it’s not ethical. For one thing, you’d be taking away our freedom to choose.”

“Ethical? Freedom to choose?”

Jenna shifted uneasily under the intent stares now trained on her. “Yes, we have rights, you know,” she said somewhat lamely. “I mean, you can’t just *make* us tell you stuff. It’s just – It’s not the right thing to do, you see.”

“No, I do not see,” Chiskina said. A sudden, rather predatory, smile flitted across her face. “I do not see at all. Oh, this is excellent. We were beginning to think that humans had nothing worth assimilating. Obviously, we were wrong.”

Matt, Ashton and Jenna exchanged alarmed glances. Jenna’s words had completely missed their mark. Even worse, they had evidently backfired.

“You don’t understand,” Ashton put in somewhat desperately.

“But that is the whole point,” Bietonepu observed with remarkably terrifying logic. “We *don’t* understand. None of the species we have encountered before have had a concept of this ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ you speak of. It is quite remarkable.”

The Amnipur had touched lightly on the human’s minds as they explained the thing; all found the idea unusual, unique among their many discoveries thus far.

“This would surely add many new layers to our previous knowledge,” Bietonepu remarked to himself. He was immensely relieved at this unexpected development. The humans had come across as headstrong, illogical, and stupid, but it now appeared that they might have something worth assimilating after all. What a wonderful surprise.

“We shall prepare you for assimilation immediately,” the Amnipur stated as one, and quickly exited the room. They left behind a set of extremely dismayed – and frightened – specimens.

The following week, Bietonepu awoke with a pleasant feeling in his heart. The day was very bright, as usual; and it promised a more glorious future than ever before.

The assimilation of the human specimens had gone like clockwork. They had already been returned to their human homes some days before, leaving the High Council to rest through the nights, absorbing all the knowledge extracted during the assimilation process and dispersing the same to the rest of Amnipur each successive day.

Yes, it had been a job well done.

Bietonepu walked over to his curved window. He eyed the stars shining in the bright blue sky with wiser eyes. Already, he could feel the new knowledge coursing through the rest of Amnipur. The material was challenging enough to last them all for quite some time.

In fact, it was more than challenging; it was ... pleasurable. Not least because he had at last found a name for his strange thoughts.

"Imagination," Bietonepu said aloud. "Imagination."

He felt the word roll off his tongue, tested it out once more, and then again. His face shone with joy. Finally, he knew what to call his mind-wandering. It had a name. A valid, real and apparently valuable name: in the human world, this thing called 'imagination' was often credited for sparking off invention, creativity – the very things, in short, that all Amnipur had desired since they could remember.

Oh yes, the assimilation of this new concept had indeed been a welcome addition to the main reason for assimilating the humans in the first place.

Bietonepu smiled up at the stars. It seemed that they were smiling back at him. For once, the idea didn't cause him to feel guilt or doubt or worry. He could think such odd thoughts and not risk his position on the High Council; the others would understand him and his mind-wandering now, fully approve of it. Even be in awe of it.

Further contemplation of the city below, however, dispelled some of the morning's enthusiasm. A crease crept onto Bietonepu's smooth forehead. It seemed that all was not, after all, well in Amnipur.

Bietonepu leaned forward, his torso hanging half out of his window, and closed his eyes; he was disturbed to find a strange wave of new thoughts sweeping through the Amnipur. Further consideration revealed that these thoughts were alarmingly disrupting the natural cohesion of Amnipur everywhere, was causing in fact an unexpected tidal wave of dissension in the ranks of the slave races in particular.

*This has never happened before,* Bietonepu thought uneasily. *We have always been one.*

Apparently, the rest of the Council had also caught on to the situation. Bietonepu stilled when he sensed the extremely urgent summons to be present at the Council Meeting Room as soon as possible. That Rempitan had not bothered to be discreet in his mental communication only served to make Bietonepu even more worried. He found it harder than ever to keep his stride to its usual sedate limits today.

On reaching the Council Room, Bietonepu found the other Councillors already present. All looked rather harried, but none were speaking, either manually or – as Bietonepu discovered with a quick mind search – otherwise. He cleared his throat loudly. “Good morning, brothers and sisters. Is something amiss?”

“Ah, Bietonepu.” Rempitan sat up abruptly, “Now that you’re here, we shall begin immediately.”

“Indeed, we shall.” Murista sat down briskly in his high-backed seat.

Bietonepu wondered at the uncharacteristically firm tenor to the Councillor’s voice today.

“My fellow Councillors,” Rempitan began, glancing uneasily at Murista, “we have been struck by an unexpected disaster.”

“Blessing,” Murista corrected calmly.

“I’m sure you are all aware of the results of our last assimilation?”

Rempitan continued, in blatant disregard of this interruption.

“Uhh-hmmmm, yes, brothers and sisters. The results!” Councillor Nekumis glowered in his seat after this sudden exclamation. “It seems to have brought about some,” he paused for effect, “*disagreements* among our people.”

“Disagreements?” Bietonepu said warily. He could swear there was a feverish glint of excitement in Nekumis’s eyes. Or was that the light of martial fanaticism? Hmmm, yes, his face did seem to be glowing a bright red from excitement. “What does that mean exactly, ‘disagreements’?”

“What does it *not* mean?” Nekumis began, with the air of someone who was about to launch into a diatribe of alarmingly long and unintelligible proportions. He lifted a slender white hand in the air, fingers spread out expressively. “What can it *not* result in? What will it *not* bring about but– ”

“The slave races are rebelling!” Rempitan burst out impatiently. “They are demanding housing closer to the centre of the city, and some of the higher ranking Amnipur are agreeing with such a preposterous demand!”

“This has never happened before,” Chiskina said blankly.

“What does it matter if it has not happened before?” Nekumis replied. He bent forward, urgency writ all over his face. “What does it matter if – ”

“There are reports,” Rempitan cut in with haste, “that they are forming organised groups – groups, I must add, that are growing in number and threatening to storm our sacred halls if we do not grant them their demands.”

A tense hush fell on the small room.

“This will disturb all balance,” Chiskina murmured, echoing Bietonepu’s exact sentiments. “What is happening to us?”

“It’s the humans’ assimilation, isn’t it?” Bietonepu said suddenly. “It is the whole ‘right-wrong’ concept. The concept is bringing disruption to our way of thinking. *Everything* is being questioned.” He sat down abruptly. Rempitan was right. This was a disaster.

“My fellow Councillors,” Murista remarked with surprising coolness.

“Surely this is a good thing. For millennia upon millennia, we have walked our land with no real idea of our purpose.”

“Our purpose,” Rempitan pointed out, “was–is– to collect information.”

“Is it?” Murista replied. “But for what reason do we collect information?”

“To progress as Amnipur, of course.”

“Aha!” Murista exclaimed triumphantly, “That, my dear Rempitan, is precisely the point. The whole justification for our *forceful* sublimation of the works of hundreds of other different species is for our own gratification. For the pursuit of our own pleasure. This, I say, is a corruption of our true capacity as a noble race of Amnipur.”

The rest of the Councillors shifted uneasily. A part of them couldn't help but agree with Murista. But it was a very small part. After all, this was all they had ever done. And none of the assimilated races were ever truly hurt. Yes, some of them did lose all their memories during the assimilation process – such as that human male Matthew, for example – but the humans had the rest of their lives to form new ones, so this was surely not an incident worthy of mention.

But abruptly, Bietonepu discovered that he felt a newfound sympathy for Murista's point of view. It did not seem *right* to take control of the lives of others just for the sake of knowledge. Surely, it was not right.

And the slave races... How could they be condemned to a paltry, defeated share of the Amnipur world simply because of past traditions which were buried so deeply in the past that they could no longer boast a solid, memorable foundation?

But was it right to disrupt the existing power structure simply because one couldn't pinpoint the original wisdom behind its creation? Surely the chaos such disruption could create was not worth the potential freedom it could secure for the slave races. And if the Amnipur did not assimilate the evolution of other races, just how were they going to gain valuable knowledge to pass the centuries with?

Bietonepu was aghast. So many questions - and he could think of no satisfactory answer to any of them. Lightly, Bietonepu touched on the minds of the other Councillors. He found them in a similar state of flux. Indeed, only Rempitan and Murista seemed to have come to a state of decision that was clear in any way. Unfortunately, in perfect cohesion with the more dominant sides to their respective natures, each had decided to support the opposite extremes of the pendulum. If Bietonepu had been human, he was sure he would have been suffering from that thing they called 'a headache' at that moment.

“I say to you, Councillors,” Rempitan asserted. “The acquisition of knowledge is, *in itself*, a noble pursuit.” He glared at Murista.

Bietonepu realised that this was the first time that any of the Amnipur had well and truly disagreed with each other about anything at all. He began to feel faintly sick inside. “Our dear Brother has obviously not taken well to the last assimilation,” Bietonepu suggested. “Perhaps further study is needed of the humans and their knowledge to fully understand this idea of 'right and wrong'.”

The Councillors glanced at each other, before nodding vigorously. “Yes, we must bring in more humans for study.”

“How can you say that?” Murista's tone conveyed his burgeoning outrage. “Surely you see that this is wrong! We cannot just bring in more *experiments* because of our own ignorance!”

“But that's the very reason we are ignorant,” Chiskina said in distress. “If it had not been for the last assimilation, we would not even be having this

argument. Surely, we should bring the humans back in order to find the flaw that has caused their assimilation to go wrong.”

“No,” Murista stated with a sudden and cold finality. “Our ancestors created this process of assimilation to begin with. They must have had this thing the humans called ‘imagination’ then. We have just forgotten it, forgotten its uses and grown complacent as a result, stealing the inventions of others instead of bothering to imagine our own. And do not even attempt to tell me that no Amnipur has an imagination,” he shot at Rempitan before that fiery Councillor could get a word in, “because Bietonepu has it. I’ve heard him speak of it. It is only a matter of time before we each become aware of our own imagination. When this happens, we shall once again learn how to create new things and find new knowledge within ourselves or by observation, *not* by assimilation.” Murista paused for a breath before saying with shocking finality, “I, for one, will not agree to any further assimilations. The entire process is flawed. It is *wrong*. I refuse to be part of this travesty any further.”

There was a collective gasp around the Council table at this new development. Never had an Amnipur behaved with such lack of logic and reason. Even Bietonepu, for all that he understood Murista’s point of view, could not help but feel it did not bode well for their civilization that Murista could dismiss with such an unreasonable, unilateral stubbornness the suggestions of his fellow Councillors.

“Wait a minute,” Bietonepu said suddenly. He was struck by a strange thought. “Wait a minute!”

The rest of the Council shifted their attention to him.

Very quietly, Bietonepu said, “Why don’t we erase the last assimilation?”

Silence hung heavy and startled in the room.

“What did you say?” Chiskina said at last. She stared at him in incomprehension. And some awe.

“Erase it,” Bietonepu declared. “Completely. Remove it from our minds. And put a warning in our records of the dangerous attributes of the human species, so that we do not make the mistake of assimilating them again.”

Even as he spoke, Bietonepu congratulated himself. This idea had great merit. It could perhaps even be modified later for use with other species.

Murista, however, did not look pleased. “But would that not mean that we would forget about the *wrong*-ness of assimilation? After we erased the information on ‘right and wrong’, would we not be back where we started?”

“Of course,” Chiskina said happily. She patted Bietonepu on his slim shoulder. “We would be back to the original status quo. There would be no more arguments! Bietonepu, you are surely a remarkable Amnipur.”

Bietonepu flushed with pride. He had not thought that such recognition would feel as good as it did, but it did in fact feel good. Very good. Even Rempitan, who ordinarily had no respect for Bietonepu’s flashes of illogical thought, was nodding hard at everyone around the table, urging them to accept his suggestion. Oh, it was very satisfying to be so appreciated for once.

Only Murista’s face still showed his dissatisfaction.

“Come now, Murista,” Bemeen remarked. “Surely you cannot fault Bietonepu’s plan. It is brilliant, and completely impartial. We would just be putting everything back to the way it was before this whole fiasco.”

“I’m not sure that’s a good idea,” Murista mumbled sullenly. Somehow, this new idea, shining brightly with its supposed neutrality, seemed more threatening than Rempitan’s straightforward objections. Murista couldn’t put his finger on why he felt this way. After all, what could be ethically *wrong* with restoring the Amnipur’s status quo? But he could not get rid of the feeling that he had just lost his hold on something very, very important.

“I suppose,” Murista said at last, and his gaze fell to his pale hands. “I suppose this is an acceptable solution.”

“We are agreed then.” Bemeen inclined his head formally. “By tomorrow morning, this will be but a slight blot in our civilisation’s history. Bietonepu, you will have to use your ‘imagination’ to guide us through the process. Such an idea has never before been contemplated in theory – much less attempted in practice – by any Amnipur still living. I will call on our best scientific minds to assist me in reconfiguring the assimilator. An anti-assimilation! How progressive we are becoming.”

The morning was very – dull, Bietonepu thought, and blinked. He came fully awake with a feeling of languor in his bones, and stretched lazily beneath his paper-thin blanket.

Ah, he remembered happily. *The Amnipur have created a new process!* ‘Anti-assimilation’. They had already tried it out yesterday. It seemed to have worked well enough. Amnipur of all strata were now living in their usual, synchronized harmony. Bietonepu remembered vaguely that they had been experiencing a disquieting chaos the day before.

Although, he realized with a touch of misgiving, he could not remember what it was about the last assimilation that had caused that chaos.

Bietonepu searched the minds of the other Council members, only to find them experiencing similar states of amnesia. There was also the faintest trace of a warning in all their memories, a warning that humans were not to be assimilated again, that they had something to do with what had gone wrong before – though exactly what that was, no one could remember. It appeared the anti-assimilation had worked far too well.

Bietonepu frowned. He wondered suddenly how it was that he had been able to create the new process. After all, the Amnipur could not create. And although the new process was merely a reversal of the old one, it was nevertheless a completely new invention.

It must have been all his mind-wandering, Bietonepu concluded. It had turned out to be useful, after all.

But an odd sense that something was wrong was sweeping through his senses.

Abruptly, Bietonepu knew what it was; what it was that was making him so restless; what it was that was making him feel like his mind was trying to grab at the shadows of something important without success: his mind-wandering still had no name.

Bietonepu's face fell. He had been so hopeful that the humans' assimilation would be the one to provide him with a name for his unusual, fanciful thoughts. Had it done so? For the life of him, he couldn't remember. But surely fate could not be so cruel as to snatch back such knowledge once it had been given.

*Ah, well,* Bietonepu thought. He looked up at the sleeping stars in their blue firmament. *The future is unwritten as yet. The next assimilation might just be the one to provide me with the answers I seek.*

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**Book Excerpt**

**Chapter 1**

Lea's lids fluttered open. Silence hung heavy about her. She was faintly aware of being afraid, but she couldn't remember why. It took her a minute to register that it was barely dawn, and that she was in a forest with tall trees of deep emerald and a cold, sharp wind. It had stopped raining, but not for too long. Her clothes were still damp on cool skin.

Light crept across the forest floor and shone through the treetops, glittering in between the overhead canopy of leaves like diamonds in a bed of emerald velvet. The thought felt fanciful, unlike her... Had she bled out? This sense of nothingness must be the touch of death...

It was the rough gleam of something rippling gently in the distance that distracted her. A little lake lay perhaps ten feet away, glancing up at her with a pretty, beckoning glitter. Like an old key fitted in a rusty lock, the world jolted into place. Bright brown eyes widened. The sharp winds faded into insignificance. She'd *escaped*.

Lea's lips curved into a shaky smile.

Something occurred to her then. *The wolves ... they didn't get me.*

Her breath caught. Memories rushed back with shocking suddenness. She remembered now why she was afraid and hastily attempted to rise, only to wince at the stab of pain that hit her stomach. She fell back down with a thud. Her back pressed hard against tree bark, and the dark stain colouring the side of her tunic turned ominously darker. Her heart pounded heavily in her chest. It was so cold. Soundlessly, Lea let the tears fall.

As though they had been a signal eagerly awaited by the forest, a great shivering breath of air raced through the woods. Winds cut cruelly at the small figure curled up at the base of her large, gnarled tree. The tree's dense, green



canopy provided scant cover from the harsh winds, caressing Lea's bruised skin with fingers as sharp as daggers, chilling her to a remarkable sensation beyond numbness. Her tears dried on her cheeks. She began to tremble.

A howl cut through the silence. The sound was high and lingering, ominously beautiful as it travelled straight through the air to Lea's position. Hastily, she grasped the crudely fashioned dagger that she'd let fall to the ground just by her, then stilled. Her eyes narrowed on the foliage before her. In her mind's eye, she could imagine the glint of intelligent, feral eyes gleaming under the gloom of the pale sunlight; shadowed soft grey fur and snapping jaws; a growling wolf pack nipping at her heels as her dagger swung desperately –

“Damn it,” Lea whispered, and tensed. Her eyes darted back and forth. How much time had passed since she'd fallen? The brightening sunlight took on the aspect of a sly trick played by the fates. Oh, to die where none would know –

*Snap.*

Every muscle in Lea's body locked in place. A moment passed, then two.

*Snap!*

Her world narrowed in on that small, crackling sound of a twig crunched underfoot. For a strange moment, it felt like the forest stilled with her. Lea dragged in a small, unsteady breath – no wolf was that careless.

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When she isn't writing high fantasy or YA romantic fantasy, Isabella Amaris is often found busily penning poetry and short stories with elements of fantasy, romance and mystery/suspense.

No matter how busy she is, this author will always love to hear from her readers. Do drop her a line at belleamaris at gmail dot com, or pop by her website at <http://isabellaamaris.com>. She blogs on fairy tales and fantasy at <http://isabellaamaris.blogspot.com>.

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