

PICOCON 40

# TWISTED

FANZINE



# FROM THE EDITORS

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Hello there! welcome to our humble little fanzine!

Contained within these 30 hallowed pages are a collection of twisted and fantastical stories and art sent to us by current students, committee, and anyone else who felt compelled to make something for us to display.

We're pleased to finally have another fanzine, after last year where got only 1 submission, and so sadly had to forgo running this fanzine. So relax, and enjoy some twisted stories.  
**ΨΦ**

**— Luke Conmy - Treasurer The  
one responsible for the Homes-  
tuck bullshit Unofficial Editor**

March 2023

Thank you, Luke (also hi new editor here), and we return all the love to those who sent us their wonderfully twisty work to this fanzine. For those of you who've been handed this humble collection, be sure to check out the Picocon *Wyrmtongue* to find out what's happening, and most of all, enjoy the convention! **ΨΦ**

**— Clifford Chan - The other (very  
experienced) Editor**

March 2023

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# Rumpelstiltskin

by Rebecca Allday

*A twisted version of the Grimm fairytale Rumpelstiltskin, set in a steampunk city above the mysterious fey-inhabited wilds.*

The fey's presence was cloying, and Princess Arachne of the Iron Towers was certain her throat was not the only dry one as it swept through the grand doors, bringing with it the creeping scents of wet moss and fungal decay. The most noticeable feature of the humanoid creature was the huge antlers that stretched from its head as if trying to scrape the ceiling above the silent subjects. The polished bone gleamed in the light of the chandeliers, projecting shadows of ghostly branches into the throne room.

To her left, Arachne's father, Magnate of the Iron Towers, shifted uncomfortably in his seat. She knew why; his was a world of metal and smoke, and whilst he may have held all the power in their city haven, the fey creature who hailed from the Wilds was in no way beholden to him.

Arachne found herself unable to focus on its face. Her gaze slid away from the pale oval, into the mane of ivy vines that seemed to serve as hair, but she was left with a fleeting impression of deadly beauty. When she eventually managed to meet its eyes, she encountered twin pools of ink ringing pupils of green flame. Its feet were invisible beneath a swirling cloak of ruby leaves and brittle ashen branches, but they clicked hoof-like on the tiles as it prowled closer to the three thrones.

To her right, Arachne's mother, the 'Keeper of the Fruits', fruits that powered their world, was puffing her chest out. Arachne had noticed she often did this when nervous. It had amused the princess to learn that her mother's fight or flight response was so similar to a feline puffing of fur. She would have found her parent's attempts at bravado, faced with a magic they could never understand or aspire to control, entertaining. Instead, a heavy hopelessness weighed at her.

A deal had been made, 20 years ago, when their meagre city was beginning to flourish with the magic of her parent's inventions. The Wilds were dangerous, but as they fought to establish technology for the Towers, the city had faced loss after loss. The crux of the matter was that their power ran on the gases released from faerie fruits, harvested at great peril from the Wilds. The ancient fey who dwelled there hadn't much liked that, but they had eventually agreed to leave the humans alone, in exchange for the firstborn child of the new town magnate and his wife, upon the eve of her 16th autumn solstice. It was an escape she had been longing for, and now it seemed it would never come to pass.

It wasn't that Arachne disliked the Iron Towers. The twisting city of clockwork ingenuity was beautiful in a strange way, perched on a dais built high above the chaos of the Wilds, and defended by an ever-increasing arsenal of weapons she was responsible for designing. It had turned out the daughter of her city's esteemed rulers had an inventive flair of her own. Arachne had discovered that the faerie fruit's vapours were not their only useful properties. In extracting and harnessing the magical energy stored within the seeds, she had produced a weapon that would rip through any monster that dared scale their walls, and she'd been confined to her workshop ever since. Some subjects accused her of warmongering, others claimed her designs would be insufficient to protect them, and

for her parents, she had become more of a resource than a daughter. The opportunity to leave, however unpredictable her destination, would have been a chance to prove their reliance on her, to finally earn the recognition she was owed for her work.

Her father rose first, though not in greeting.

“We have met your conditions, fey. We owe you nothing.”

“What conditions do you believe yourself to have met, mortal?” Arachne never saw its mouth move; in fact, she could not say for certain that the words ever graced the air with their presence. The creature’s voice seemed to scrape, rasping and yet harmonic, into the minds of those present.

“You gave us three sunsets by which to find your name.” Indeed, as he spoke, the last glimmers of colour trickled from the stained-glass windows.

“In order to prevent you from taking our daughter, we have done the impossible, creature. We have learnt your name.”

Arachne could feel the fey’s grin in its sing-song reply, “And what do you suppose my name to be, mortal ruler.”

The magnate rose from his chair, just as Arachne sunk further down into hers, and spoke aloud the name he believed would put an end to this entire affair, and to her chances of a free life.

“Rumpelstiltskin.”

The fey stilled. Then the throne room filled with shaking shadows as it leant forwards, a choking cackle erupting from its twisted form. Arachne realised in shock that it was laughing, doubled over in apparent hysteria. The glamour over its visage seemed to shift and weaken, allowing the court to see a mouth of sharpened teeth open wider than any human jaws could extend.

“I’m sorry. You think my name is.... Rumpelstiltskin?” The fey’s chuckling breaths smelt like autumn bonfires.

“Your name is Rumpelstiltskin. We have found your name. We no longer have to adhere to your sick demands!” The magnate was yelling now, and Arachne almost shook her head at how quickly, in the face of panic, her father had forgotten his own teachings on court policy.

The fey straightened slowly up, and all present were subject to the chilling creak of sinister branches, before it raised a slim eyebrow.

“Might I remind you that I am unable to lie, and so I mean this with the deepest sincerity: I am older than your most wizened elder and more powerful than your most dangerous, what were you calling them? ‘Faerie fruit’ weapons?”

Its vibrant green pupils seemed to flash as they turned towards Arachne. The princess forced a smirk to her face in place of fear, determined to focus on the acknowledgement of her creations, rather than how this creature could tear apart the throne room with a

thought.

“And you beheld, and thought, ‘this gentleman really looks like a Rumpelstiltskin’.”

The creature’s mimicry was no patronising replication, but her father’s voice, exactly, echoing instead from the monster in front of them. The subjects gaped. The fey’s mouth stretched wide in a gash of a grin.

“We were informed-” The magnate stammered.

“You were informed wrongly, it would seem.”

“But we were told-”

“-that I was seen dancing around a clearing singing my name for all the world to hear?”

A murmur spread around the subjects, as their leader stared, defeated, from a meaningless throne.

“Oh, don’t look so surprised,” it continued, “the mist can weave many mirages for the weary traveller, at my beck and call.”

“We won’t allow you to take our daughter!”

“Oh really? Don’t threaten to break a bargain with a fey, fool. The consequences of such a betrayal are not something your pitiful kingdom can withstand.”

There was warning in its tone, but also excitement. It was daring them to go ahead and try it, Arachne thought. Her parent’s next argument came as a surprise, to her at least.

“We love her.”

The fey’s head tilted to a sickening angle, and the noise that echoed through the hall was at first the crackling of branches, then the crunching of bones. The magnate winced. Arachne watched in careful silence.

“Is. That. So?”

It drew each word out, and Arachne was distinctly reminded of a fly she had once seen trapped in the amber of the faerie fruits that had been delivered to her workshop. The golden treacle had dripped away from the preserved carcass with the same unnerving flow. Momentarily distracted by the fey’s tone, she did not immediately catch the implications of its question; it knew exactly how her parents measured her worth.

She finally spoke up, willing her voice into a cold cruelty, “I am necessary to this city.”

The fey turned, leering, towards her, and Arachne was certain only she heard its next words.

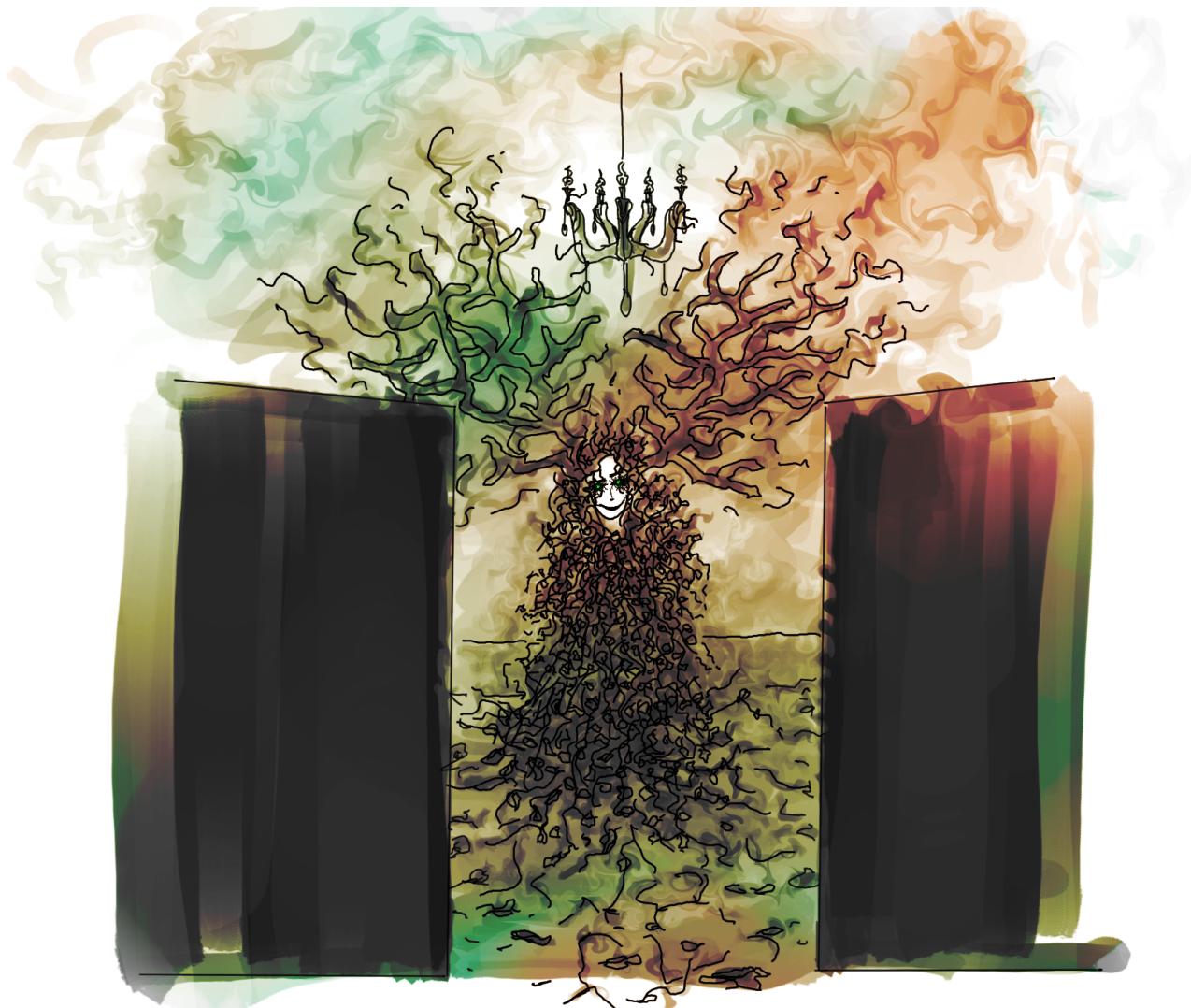
“Tell the truth, princess.”

Her hands clenched into white-knuckled fists, as she clarified, for all the court to hear, “My weapons are necessary to this city.” Releasing the ugly truth into the throne room

brought no relief. The words tasted bitter on her tongue.

“Well then, it will be curious to see how quickly it crumbles in the wake of your departure.”

Arachne was loathe to admit it, but she had been wondering the same. ΨΦ



*Illustration by Rebecca Allday*

# Seeing the Trees

by Luke Conmy

On the 19th of July, the sun baked the earth, and I was setting down a whetted bucket onto the cracked earth. Like any other day, I was checking the moisture traps, and refilling the last day's usage. In the valley where I lived, there was little water, and what water there stubbornly remained in the air, to live out there, water was everything. As I was checking the water levels on the main storage tanks, I asked the house's computer 'What's the plan for today?' The screen responded, telling me of the 2 wet traps left, and that dinner would be at 6:30, noodles and broccoli, with some chicken floss. I had not eaten broccoli in a few months, not since the last nutri-shipment, and I remembered the packaging, little green trees. Then I remembered.

The sun was setting and the ground was wet under my feet. The faintest breeze passed by, shuffling the trees and setting off the windchimes of the house. I sat down, and watched the clouds settle from orange to purple, breathing slowly, and gently. I heard someone moving behind me, and I saw her, my Stella, and I was happy.

As the memory pressed itself into my chest, I stood, sweating under the cruel sun, the sweat at my lips was salty, and ran to my chin dripping. By the end of the evening, my work was done, and I had packed my bags, setting them in my buggy. I could hardly sleep, but the buggy would not run until the sun rose; I took my medicine, and I sat down in bed, I knew I would dream of her again tonight, and I could not wait to fall asleep.

*In the morning, she rose, ate, gave thanks and left. I did not know where to, only that I would not see her again. The moisture traps were full, but that was not her job now. I waited until the sun went down, and then stopped waiting.*

On the 20th, I had made it out of the mouth of the valley, and set up camp under the stars, I took my food with my medicine, and I lay down, staring up at the million worlds my Dad used to tell me of. He had dreamed all of his life of taking me there with Mum, up to where the stars shone, and he had tried in love for so long. I was sure he was there now, with Mum, shining as he sleeps. Again I remembered Stella, the first time I had met her, and the stars in her eyes looking at me, so close. For those eyes, I gave her a name, and I am sure she liked it, resting under the soft pale yellow of the moon. When I awoke, the sun rose lazily, and the buggy sputtered with its first life, and I began to pack.

On the 22nd, I could barely find the energy to make my tent, every second away from home felt like another thousand years packed onto my back. Aching, I lay down, poking my head out to look at the stars twinkling. Yesterday I had been chased yellow grinning teeth, across the empty plains, and when my buggy went out, I stayed up through the dark, waiting for them to catch up. Once, with Stella, I had seen those teeth, as they threatened her and I. Not thinking, driven by fear, and anger I put an end to it with a knife tied to a stick. As the spotted thing panted roughly, life spilling through its neck, it stared at me, and through ragged gasps breathed hate, its eyes vicious, and unforgiving. I don't think Stella ever saw me the same after that. When exhaustion took me, my eyes were dark, and I slept a dreamless night. I awoke under the sun's zenith, and got into my buggy, another day gone.

*The metal thing drove by, it smelt of sweat. I chased it, hidden, not wanting to be seen. Clearly it had seen me though, those of two legs were clever. I bode my time, but I could not catch up, and it passed out of my territory, onwards. I looked back to my business.*

On the 25th, I took the last of my medicine, and awoke the next day, knowing I could not return home. As I moved onwards though, the land beneath started to give, and the cracks receded. Not yet did I see trees, but I knew more than hoped, that soon I would see them, piercing the dull sky. On the 27th, I began to struggle, and the horizon blurred into the sky, all things turning blue. My joints crackled as I lay down to rest. Part of me cursed, I knew what would happen, that beyond the valley, age and death ruled, in truth, I knew I would be killing myself just to leave. But how bad could death be, life had never been that special, not without Stella.

I stopped recording the days, and kept driving, the cracks once in the ground crept upwards, and down my arms. I thought back to Stella, who wore such wrinkles so naturally, that it hardly seemed to me like she was some wrinkly monster, I just wish I could have worn it as well as she. By the time I saw the tree, the buggy had dug itself deep into the mud below it, and I had to carry my things onwards, but what did that matter. Shaking in love and anticipation, I breathed deep and walked to the tree, my legs not yet giving out on me, and I sat against it, breathing in the air, and smelling the deep earth below me. I felt my cheeks drip with my love, and for a day I dared not move.

In truth, I never did move the buggy from that tree at all, I set up my camp, and explored around the oasis I had found on foot, reeds and berries, and trees, and damp earth. I waited there, eating and drinking what I had, content just to drink water from the ground, and to rest in grass. As the sun set on what I thought was the third day I had spent by the trees and the water, I thought again of Stella, and wept. Not in heartbreak that I would never see her, but in joy that I had known her, and that even out here, I felt warmed by the love she had given me. I slept easy, and the tears felt good, and I knew I would spend what time I had left here.

*Some days after, I looked to a grey mass approaching, lumbering to and fro as the dust kicked up around her. By that time I stood only waveringly, unable to stop shaking. When she reached me, she stopped, wary of me, shaking her great white tusks, but weeping, I walked arms outstretched towards her. Then the moment came, I looked straight into the stars in her eyes, and recognition sparked, 50 years passed between us, and we were again under the stars, soaking in the waters next to the trees, even as the sun bore us down. I came up to her, and rubbed the dirt from her skin, hugging her tight, in those moments, there was no separation between us, I sang as she trumpeted, and we soaked in the water. Staring up at the dark sky, waiting for the stars to arrive, floating in the water, all those years washing away, I wondered why I hadn't done this sooner, why I had waited till my body broke, and I could hardly walk without medicine. All I knew, was that I was here now, seeing her one last time. I slept before the stars came. ΨΦ*

# The View from the Light-spire

by Sophie Reck Pointon

There was once a hermit who lived on the light-spire. The name “light-spire” came from a local legend of long-ago lightning striking the earth of a high moor and turning instantly into a twisted, jutting finger of rock. It was on the very tip of the lightning-spire’s nail that the hermit’s hut perched, the place he had his home for most of his life, precariously balanced above a blanket of heather and bracken.

The hermit purported that his reason for coming to this obscure moor was to become closer to God. But the true reason, the real reason, was that the hermit despised all human contact; totally and completely. His chosen existence was a hard, bleak one, measured in storms, psalms and sheep, but he adapted with the calm self-belief that comes with conviction. Any doubts or pangs of loneliness were silenced ruthlessly and thoroughly by the hermit, as though they were a similar problem to finding clean water or a lost ewe: there was no room for such weaknesses, the hermit believed, not in the vast quietness of the moor and its light-spire.

From where kith and kin could have surrounded him, the yellow slotted eyes of the sheep regarded him mutely. In the place of warm laughter at the end of an evening, an ever-biting wind moaned as it sharpened its teeth on the edges of the light-spire.

There was a free-standing world at the tip of the light-spire, defined by many things: the touch of Holy Book’s soft, velvet cover. The smell of fresh cloudberry. The crackling of a winter fire. The curlew’s call. The scratch of a quill. This was the hermit’s life, for decades upon decades.

Until that night...

The hermit woke that night with the knowledge something was different. Pulling a sheepskin around his shoulders, he opened the door of the hut, hands stiff with cold. He shook off the mantle of sleep and looked towards the moor. And his breath caught in his throat in a way it hadn’t done for a long, long time: because a sight like no other awaited him.

Mist. A sea of it, blanketing the moor into invisibility. His hut, a lonely island, stood just shy of the gently roiling surface.

But the most astounding thing, the thing that had conjured amazement in a soul saturated in solitude, were the angels in the mist. Angels. They had to be; the hermit had no other word for them. Pale purples, greens, blues were diffusing their way through the mist, just like wings slowly beating. It was undoubtably the most beautiful, the most perfect thing the hermit had ever seen. For the time that he spent watching the languid, peaceful motions of the frost-smoke, the hermit forgot why he had decided to come to the moor. Enraptured beyond what he thought could be possible, the hermit watched until the opalescence gracefully faded away into nothingness.

Overwhelmed, grateful, reverent, the hermit looked up towards heaven to pray. He prayed with his eyes open, looking into the cold glare of the stars, giving thanks with tears in his eyes. But the night had not yet ended.

Without any warning whatsoever, the *aurora borealis* burst forth once again.

The angels were no pale reflections in the mist this time. Bright and emerald and violet they shone; a dance of forces marvellous. The hermit felt, right then and there, the truth of his mortality crash down on him, powerful and terrible. He had to clutch his shepherd's crook tightly to keep from falling over as a heady mix of terror and wonder swirled around inside of him.

If he had been asked why he suddenly felt that way, the hermit would have replied: "This does not belong to any mortal." But there was no one to ask him. No one at all, not for leagues and leagues....

There was no question of the hermit going back to sleep. He stood and waited, washed in the dreadful power of the Northern Lights, awestruck to the very depths of his soul.

Daybreak, seemingly months later. The clear glow of dawn found the hut on the tip of the light-spire empty and the sheep wandering masterless. Under the gaze of the *aurora*, the hermit had decided to leave behind his life of exile and isolation and start over again in the land of the living.

For they had found that they did not belong in this place: the light-spire belonged to the angels alone. **ΨΦ**

# Slaughterhouse

by Clifford Chan

26<sup>th</sup> January, 20XX

*In the past three months, six children from the local county have disappeared under suspicious circumstances. After banging my head against the wall for the better part of a week, I have finally managed to identify a common thread – a middle school Biology teacher who goes by the name of Mr Edgars. I have his address at hand (it's in the middle of nowhere), and I approach his place of residence with nothing but a sense of grim determination.*

It snowed in January, back when I first met him. The inspector snapped his diary shut as his partner climbed onto the passenger seat beside him, chilled air seeping inside before the man closed the door.

“You got a lead. Where to?”

“Somewhere southwest, far out of town. Middle of nowhere.”

“Easy for scum to hide, I suppose. Hit it.”

“Seatbelt.”

“Right, right.”

The inspector drove out of the parking lot, wheels crunching on salt and snow. His partner handed him a cig, which he accepted. Wind howled and battered against the side of their vehicle.

His partner tapped on his phone. “Have you ever heard of the Trolley Problem? It’s pretty popular on the internet these days.”

“Sounds like something the kids would love.”

“It’s a thought experiment, actually.”

“Oh?”

“It goes like this. There’s a trolley barrelling down some railway tracks, and five innocents are tied to the rails. You’re standing next to a lever and if you pull it, you change the trolley’s path, but there’s a single innocent on that other path. Do you pull the lever?”

“Hm. I think I do. Absolutely.”

“That’d make you a murderer.”

“Our whole job is to make sure as many people as possible stay safe. That’s why we lock the dregs behind bars, and if worse comes to worst, you’ve got to get your hands dirty. That’s all I’m saying.”

“Well, let’s hope the worst never happens, eh?”

“Amen, brother. Amen.”

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They arrived in the afternoon. The inspector locked the car behind him, and took a last, long pull from his cigarette before crushing it under his heel. Half-molten snow crunched beneath leather boots as the two approached the house, where droplets dripped from icicles on the eaves, and rolled down chilled stone bricks before freezing again on the window frames. Blank, dull windows watched the inspector climb up granite stairs to the porch then knock on the wooden doors, once, twice, three times. His partner looked up at the windows.

“Looks like no one’s home.”

“You think so? Mr Edgars! We’ve come to ask some questions!”

No reply came except for the rasping of wind on stone, and even snow stayed on their crooked branches, for there were no squirrels nor birds to disturb the silence.

Glancing at his partner, the inspector tried the door, and was surprised to find it unlocked. He hesitated for a moment before deciding that he cared little for the privacy of a likely criminal, and stepped foot into the bowels of the house. His partner followed without complaint.

Soft carpet embraced the grooves on his boots, wetting itself from the moisture, as the inspector stood in the middle of a corridor, empty barring a few drawers and one of those vintage grandfather clocks that sat on four legs. It squatted against a wall, a little off to the side, and its pendulum swung in a broken pattern, faster to one side than the other, like the rhythm of a heartbeat.

Two sets of stairs stretched on to his right. One rose to the floor above, while the other led to the cellar. As it was unlikely that anything incriminating would be hidden in the open, the inspector signalled for his partner to check the cellar as he climbed to the floor above.

Although the curtains were drawn, and windows shut, the air seemed to breathe and stick to his cheeks when the inspector climbed the creaking stairs. He reached the landing with a half-held breath and looked for the man’s study, which he discovered to be the room to the left, its door ajar. He pushed it all the way open, and stepped through.

A bookshelf waited in the corner, with a modest collection of textbooks and fiction placed meticulously on its shelves, and one had a chameleon on its cover, skin blending to its surroundings as it waited for its prey. The ordered shelves stood in stark contrast to the stacks of paper and folders leaning against one another on the desk, like a tower of pebbles threatening to collapse. He skimmed through the documents lying on the desk without touching them, but the drawn curtains blocked out most of the light, so he tapped on his phone and turned its screen on, then cursed.

When he scanned the content on the desk, he had dismissed what he thought were ordinary paperweights holding the sheets down for some semblance of order, as if there could be some method to the madness, but under the dull glow of his phone, the paperweights revealed themselves as six white rings surrounding a bit of solid brown, each unique in size and thickness.

Like parts of a tibia, cut from a child.

Before he could do anything else, a tremor reverberated through the house. Someone screamed. It came from the cellar. Then a door creaked open from the floor below, followed by a rapid patterning of footsteps. The inspector dared not breathe as he held onto the side of the desk. His partner was in trouble. He had to get to the cellar. He took off his wristwatch and wrapped it over his knuckles then crept down the stairs, one hand on the wall. The wall rose and fell under his fingers and felt strangely warm, like the breathing of a beast, as his heartbeat echoed in his skull, the planks groaning from under his feet until he reached the foot of the stairs. Chill air crawled into the house through open doors, revealing a black convertible parked next to theirs, and his eyes flickered towards the entrance to the cellar, left unclosed like the maw of a carnivore. Edgars was in the house, and his partner was in danger. He had to go into the cellar.

The beating of blood thundered within his brain, so he clenched his fingers, breathing shallow breaths, and made his descent. He turned on his torch, and the shadows from below retreated to the edges of the light as he pressed on, one foot before the other, each step resisting the primal instinct to run, and leave this place behind.

Then no more steps remained, just a corridor to the end. The inspector kept his pace, and the walls seemed to press closer, like the constrictions of an oesophagus. A muffled sound emanated from beneath the stones, mixed with a hint of liquid sloshing in a bowl, and then silence returned. When he reached the end, he found the cellar door open, obstructed by a wall of darkness, which the light of his torch chased back. He took a deep breath, then pushed through.

Warm air caressed his skin. Cabinets of wine and various spirits lined the walls, hidden behind a pane of dust-rimmed glass. Shadows prowled at the edge of the light, lying in wait for a moment of weakness. A pack of cigarettes lay abandoned on the floor. His partner's favourite. The inspector turned on the spot, wristwatch clutched in one hand until he noticed a single wine bottle missing from its row, and the reflected silhouette of a man raising it above his head.

The bottle smashed against the glass as the inspector ducked and spun, slamming his wristwatch across the bridge of a nose, and he felt a satisfying crunch. His light flew from his hand and skidded to a corner as the two men wrestled at the boundary, the shadows on the wall turning into beasts to rip their fellows apart. Blood chimed in his skull. Edgars was stronger, and bigger, but the man was not trained, and after a moment of struggle, let the inspector slip under his swing to use the momentum to throw him into the glass. As broken shards showered onto the larger man's frame, the inspector locked the man's wrists behind his back and clicked a pair of handcuffs in place. Jagged edges cut into flesh, and blood dripped onto the floorboards.

"Mr Edgars, you are under arrest for the senseless murder of six innocent children. You have the right to remain silent. Do not resist."

The man sputtered behind bleeding lips. "Senseless? I am a hero. I'm the one who's keeping it here."

"Tell that to the bars of your prison cell. What did you do to my partner?"

“He was an idiot, and so are you. You should have stayed far away. What if you scared it off? Imagine if it had gone to more populated areas, like towns and cities. It’d be like a buffet before anyone figured out why, if they even do.”

“What are you talking about?”

“It’s the house, inspector. It’s like a chameleon, but far superior, far more resilient and far, far more intelligent, adapted to completely conceal itself from human senses. And it loves our flesh. It’s addicted to it. I tried to gather evidence but no one ever listens. This was the only way. You have to believe me. I didn’t want them to die, but the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few. Sometimes you have to get your hands dirty.”

“What—”

A tremor shuddered through the earth, and flung the inspector backwards as he was adjusting the cuffs. Wine cabinets swayed, bottles clinking in their display.

“It’s the house, inspector. The house is alive.”

The ground cracked open beneath the bloodstained glass next to Edgar’s feet, revealing too many rows of serrated teeth. The inspector watched as the man hung in the air for a heartbeat, shock flashing across the teacher’s face, before it plunged into the acidic fumes below. The crack sealed shut before the first screams reached his ears, then he was alone.

Blood hammered against the confines of his skull, yet the house did not devour him. He struggled to understand when he ascended the stairs, until he stepped out the front door and took one step onto frozen earth, bloody shards falling from his shirt like rose petals on snow, bringing crystal clarity. No one would believe him. No one can help him. The needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few. The beating of his heart aligned with the rhythm of the broken grandfather clock. There was only one thing to be done.

He became my favourite servant. ΨΦ



**Twisted Paths** — by Irene Soto

*Inspired by Dimension 20 – Neverafter campaign ΨΦ*

## **My Immortal (Dalek style)**

by Sophie Appleyard

Hi my name is Miranda Dar'lek Exterminator Metallic Grey and I have metallic grey metal (that's how I got my name) with blue bumps and a cozy hat with orange streaks and red tips that reaches my whisk arm and an eye in a single eye stalk like limpid tears and a lot of people tell me I look like Blue Strategist Dalek (AN: if u don't know who they are get da hell out of here!). I'm not related to Davros but I wish I was because he's a major f\*cking hottie. I'm a Dalek but my plunger arm is straight and long. I have pale grey panels. I'm also a menace, and I inhabit a library called ICSF in London, England where I'm in the middle shelf (I'm big). I'm a goth (in case you couldn't tell) and I wear only my hat. I love the engineering department and I steal all my parts from there. For example, today I was equipped with pale blue Dalek bumps with an un-matching red ribbon around it and a black plunger. I was equipped with alternating grey and black grating, a short whisk arm and a wide base. I was sitting inside ICSF library. It was inside in the basement so there was no sun, which I was very happy about. A lot of nerds stared at me. I exterminated them. ΨΦ

# Surreal

by Anand Doshi

I woke up in a daze. I recognized that I was in my own bed, in my own bedroom, but there was something in the air that felt wrong. Firstly, I noticed it was still dark out. I had been awoken unexpectedly. Secondly, I realized the reason for my rude awakening. There were hushed whispers and strange noises coming from the other side of my bedroom door. And thirdly, perhaps the most troublingly, the other side of the bed was empty, with no sign of Elizabeth in the room.

I slowly sat up, looking around for my girlfriend, while trying not to panic. There was probably a perfectly reasonable explanation for what was going on. But my heart paid no heed and continued to beat faster. I distinctly remembered El sleeping next to me the previous night, but her side of the bed was made, as if she hadn't been there at all.

Wide awake, I quickly got to my feet and rushed to the door. Pressing my ear up against it, I strained to pick up any sort of voice or word that I could recognize.

"Clear," someone said, in a high pitched voice. The voice was foreign and the tone sent chills down my spine. She - I assumed from the voice that the speaker was a she - continued talking, but I could only make out a few words.

"- not here. ... have escaped....alert them. "

To say that I was incredibly confused would be an understatement. I could not wrap my head around the events going around me. It could have been that the cobwebs of sleep still fogged my mind. Before I could think of doing anything else, I felt a forceful push on my cheek as someone kicked open the door I had my face pressed up against.

I fell backwards, landing painfully on my head. I saw a man dressed in a black suit enter my room, and the last thing I thought before my vision went dark was that I was probably dreaming.

When I came to, I realized that I was not dreaming. And the thing that gave it away was the massive, white walled room that I found myself in. I was sitting upright, clamped to a chair as if in an interrogation.

My eyes were still a bleary mess as they adjusted to the bright light in the room, but I could hear the sounds of boots on linoleum and the smell of disinfectant wafted up my nostrils prominently. My eyes resumed normal functioning in a few seconds and I took in my surroundings, noticing the size of the room and the bare walls that made it up.

I also noticed that I was alone. There wasn't anyone else in the room apart from me. There probably wasn't a speck of dust in the room either. Understandably confused and terrified, my heart beat skyrocketed as I tried to reason through the situation. But it didn't make any sense. What would anyone want with a 22 year old college student? Why would anyone go to so much trouble to kidnap and detain me? I wasn't rich or famous, and neither was anyone close to me. My mind spun from all the unanswered questions swirling inside. My heart was threatening to burst at how quickly it was beating.

But suddenly I heard a voice speak up, seemingly emanating from the walls of the room.

“Calm down, Kath,” it said, and I recognized it almost instantly. It was El. “Just take a few deep breaths.”

I acted on the advice and tried to calm myself down. She did always have a calming effect on me. Ever since I’d met her two years ago. I felt my heart slow down as some much needed air entered my lungs.

The fog of panic lifted from my brain, and I tried immediately to figure out how El was talking to me. Maybe they had captured her too?! My heart rate spiked again.

“I’m fine, Kath. I haven’t been kidnapped. I’m safe,” I heard her say, seemingly from nowhere and everywhere. It was an incredibly strange sensation, hearing her voice in such a bodiless manner. Almost as if she was talking to me in my mind.

“You always were smart,” came the reply. My eyes widened.

Somehow, even though I had never experienced telepathic communication before, I felt an odd sense of safety and tranquility. Despite all the burning questions that popped into the forefront of my mind, despite the excitement I felt at witnessing a metaphysical phenomenon, despite everything going on around me, I felt incredibly calm.

“Okay, Kath. We need to get you out of there,” said Ghost-El.

Get out of where? Where was I?

“I’ll explain everything. Just do as I say. And trust me,” she said firmly. But I was able to catch that same feeling of care and love that I had come to associate with her. I trusted her completely.

“Close your eyes and focus on my voice. It will all be over soon.”

I did just that. Her voice had an angelic quality to it, and I couldn’t help but be entranced.

“Great, just continue staying calm. You’re doing great. Just one more minute, and -”

I suddenly felt a strong breeze around my body. A whooshing sound accompanied it, and I found myself clutching the handles of my chair instinctively.

Suddenly there was silence as the breeze ceased. I did not dare open my eyes. Was it over? Where was El?

Before I could go into another panic attack, I heard her speak.

“It’s over, Katherine. You can open your eyes now.”

The visceral quality of her voice that I had been experiencing up until now was suddenly and strikingly absent. It seemed to be coming from in front of me. Almost as if she was standing right -

I immediately opened my eyes. And there she was, looking at me with a smile on her face. I realized with a start that I was in a completely different place. My poor brain was

struggling to make head or tail out of the situation and the recent change in location did not help one bit. I looked at El's face a bit more closely. She looked tired. Bringing me to her must have drained her somehow.

There was a silence between us for a moment, but I broke it.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

El only smiled and came closer to hug me.

I was relieved to hear that she was fine. But I was still incredibly confused.

"You're probably wondering what just happened," she said.

I nodded my head. My brain was hurting from trying to wrap my head around the night I had just lived through.

"Well, the short of it is that I'm a telepath. And I can teleport things," she said casually, as if it wasn't something that violated the laws of the universe.

Naturally, I was at a loss for words. But she continued.

"And the people that took you, momentarily," she smiled at that word, "are a secret branch of MI5, tasked with dealing with and handling supernatural phenomena."

She paused as a grim look crossed her face.

"And they have been after me ever since I was a baby."

I couldn't believe my ears. My mouth was still unresponsive as my brain failed to produce any impulse to say something. It just felt like too much.

But the weird thing was, I believed what she was telling me. The whole situation was absurd, and I was desperate for any sort of explanation. And I trusted her completely.

There was a small moment of silence as I processed El's words. This was easily the craziest thing that had ever happened to me. And it took a moment for my brain to catch up.

"So, you're on the run from them?" I asked.

A dark look crossed her face as she nodded. "And now you are too."

My eyes widened as it finally hit me. That the supernatural and extraordinary events - like telepathy, telekinesis, and teleportation, apparently - were all real. Everything that had happened to me in the past God-knew-how-many hours was all real. It was surreal.

In a single night, my perception of reality had changed in more ways than one. My girlfriend was a telekinetic, a secret government agency was after the both of us and I had just been rescued from said government agency via teleportation.

To say it was surreal was an understatement. My whole world had turned upside down. But if there was anyone that I would want by my side as I left my normal, lacking-

supernatural-events, boring life behind, it was El.

And that made me accept the fact that I was leaving my normal, lacking-supernatural-events, boring life behind for good. **ΨΦ**

# Fairy-Phone

by Juairiyah Raqib

Esmerelda groaned and rubbed her temples as the fairy-phone rang for the seventh time that afternoon.

“What now?” she growled, yanking it off the hook.

The caller was unaffected by her tone. “You won’t believe it. It’s happened to Caelia and Grimhilde too!”

“Well, it would have to be all of us,” Esmerelda replied drily, looking longingly at her empty bottle of pixie-liquor. “Everyone at that damned dinner.”

“Carabosse’s going too far,” complained the speaker. “All this because her invitation was lost in the mail.”

“You mean you forgot to send it to her,” Esmerelda corrected. “But I’ll allow bygones to be bygones.”

There was a pause, before a weak excuse was attempted. “Well, I had to help Arugula wash her hair...”

“Enough! I don’t know why you never let that foolish girl ever get a haircut. Even I let that ash-covered thing visit the village barber once a month.”

“Only because you hope he’ll marry her so you don’t have to provide-“ but the argument was cut off by her slamming down the fairy-phone.

*Damn Gothel!* She cursed, staring out of the window at the lush fields outside. Beyond them ran a sparkling stream where she knew that half-fish creature was frolicking. She’d appeared this morning, looking like a normal teenage girl from the waist-up and had made her own two daughters dreadfully insecure, but after that she was all fish. Not at all capable of completing any of the chores the other girl had done. Completely useless! All because Carabosse had thought she was being excluded from a dinner. Gothel should have known better after what had happened the last time this situation had taken place – wasn’t there still a princess in a nearby kingdom sleeping her life away?

The fairy-phone trilled once again, and she snatched it up.

“If you don’t stop bothering me, you elderberry-reeking old hag-”

But instead it was Caelia’s drawling voice. “Well, I am relieved to not be the only one out of sorts.”

“Caelia.” Esmerelda narrowed her eyes, putting two and two together. “So the fish-girl is yours.”

“You have the mer-princess?” Caelia’s relaxed drawl sharpened, and Esmerelda chuckled.

“You still haven’t scammed her out of her voice? You’re getting rusty, my aquatic friend.”

"And you still haven't sold off your step-daughter's hand in marriage, you twice-widowed old bat," Caelia replied bluntly. "What do you want?"

"My step-daughter, of course." Esmerelda leaned back and swiped a finger along the surface of the desk, wrinkling her nose at the fine layer of dust on her fingertip. "Your little princess just can't get any chores done and of course my precious girls can't be expected to live in filth."

"I'm afraid I can't help you there. I'm looking at a girl and a tiger on the shore beside me, and I'm sure if I get too close I'll become calamari. I'm guessing she's with that diplomat you invited."

Esmerelda dimly remembered a red cloak and staff, and nodded. "That royal vizier. I remember he was giving Grimhilde advice. All that sorcery nonsense when they already have power."

"And you have no magic or power," Caelia replied blandly. "Do you know how to contact him?"

Ignoring the slight, Esmerelda sniffed. "I'll have to ask Grimhilde. But she's having her own problems. Gothel too."

"Gothel deserves it!" Caelia snapped in disgust. "Complaining to me about some young thing with sunlight deficiency making her insecure. What do I care?"

Esmerelda snorted, and hung up.

Grimhilde was frazzled when she answered the fairy-phone. Esmerelda would have felt pity for her if she'd been capable of it.

"We have to undo this," she whispered as soon as she answered. "I went to visit that brat and sell her a poisoned comb and she wasn't there! There was some girl asking if I sell books! As if intelligence is more important than beauty!"

"There there," Esmerelda responded soothingly. "I'm sure she didn't mean it. Of course everyone is just as obsessed with appearances as you are."

There was a sniffle, and Grimhilde replied in a teary voice, "Thank you, I'm just still really shaken up about it."

Rolling her eyes, Esmerelda leaned back in her chair, admiring the collection of medals her daughters had won throughout the years. "And you know of course whose work this is?"

Grimhilde hesitated. "You?"

"Fool! Maybe if you actually had a brain under that pretty face of yours, you'd have been able to kill your step-daughter the first time!"

"Well, maybe if you had a pretty face, you wouldn't have had two men leave you," Grimhilde countered sulkily.

“They died, you skin-bleaching bimbo.” Esmerelda pinched the bridge of her nose and tried again. “You realise this is the work of Carabosse?”

“I did wonder why she wasn’t attending the last group dinner,” Grimhilde remarked. “So Gothel didn’t invite her?”

“And now we’re all suffering for it,” Esmerelda agreed grimly.

“Why do bad things always happen to good people?” Grimhilde began to wail, but Esmerelda cut her off.

“Of course, her spells all have a limit. We know everyone from the dinner so we can easily set things back on course. What remains is our response.”

“Carabosse’s going to learn that we’re not to be taken lightly,” Grimhilde agreed, finally on the same page. “But how?”

Esmerelda smiled deviously, looking down at the Royal Ball invitation on her desk. “Isn’t there a teenager in a death-like sleep out there? And don’t we all know a prince or other?”

“You mean—“

“Yes. Carabosse will never see it coming.” **ΨΦ**

# The Room-Where-the-Aurora-Looks-In

by Sophie Reck Pointon

Long ago, when magic reigned and giants walked, a Sorcerer fell in love with a Princess.

It happened suddenly and irrevocably, one frostbitten winter's night. The Sorcerer had been travelling for months when he had come across an ancient and terrible castle far to the north, nestled among the mountains where the snow gathered and the forest drew closely in. While the castle had towers like black daggers and guards like wolves, the Sorcerer had powers beyond those of ordinary humans, and saw past the stony walls and thornwood gates to set eyes upon the Princess who lived inside. She was not especially beautiful nor especially wise, but Sorcerers do not feel as ordinary humans do, and he fell in love with her on the spot.

The Princess had no idea she was being spied upon, and wouldn't have cared too much even if she had known, because she was sitting by the bedside of her father the king, who was gravely ill. He was old and weary, and she no longer needed his guidance (being a strong and capable ruler herself) but she loved him and hated to see him suffer like this. In the light of the candles, her eyes (which were, peculiarly, an orange-gold colour) shone with suppressed tears.

Very soon, it seemed, there would be a Queen in the castle.

Night was falling thick and fast, just like the snow, so the Sorcerer approached the guards and asked if they would let a lonely traveller stay the night out of the cold. The guards, with their heavy swords and wolf-fur cloaks, looked him up and down and they didn't like what they saw.

"Do you have any skills or coin to repay the master of the castle for giving you shelter?" they asked him.

"Yes, I do," replied the Sorcerer immediately, who would have said anything for a chance to meet the Princess face-to-face. "I can heal your king as payment. In fact," he added, seized by inspiration, "that's the reason I'm here, actually: I heard he was ill and was so moved by his plight that I decided to come and see what I could do."

The guards were suspicious but, after a brief discussion with each other, decided to give him the benefit of the doubt. After all, the Princess would skin them alive and hang them up for wall decor if she found out they had turned away a healer when her father lay dying.

He was shown to the king's chambers (when the Sorcerer saw the Princess, his heart jumped), where many of the king's family and important nobles were gathered, and was given leave to heal him. It only took a few minutes of the Sorcerer murmuring complicated spells and making impressive hand-waving gestures before colour was restored to the king's skin, his breathing eased and his eyes regained their former lustre.

A cry of joy went up in the room: it was obvious to everyone that the king was healed, and that the Sorcerer's magic had worked.

The king clasped the Sorcerer's hand in his. "I cannot thank you enough for this," he said, "I was sure this night would be my last. You must be rewarded: my daughter the Princess will see to it."

The Sorcerer looked at the Princess, as an excuse to trace his eyes over her feather-soft hair and orange-gold eyes. She smiled at him, and the Sorcerer almost fainted.

Everyone left the elderly king to his rest and came into the Hall of the castle. The Princess took her place on the throne and asked the Sorcerer, "What is it you would like as a reward for your great service to my father?"

The Sorcerer stepped forward boldly and said, "My lady, I would beg of you the chance to be your suitor."

There was a gasp like snow falling abruptly off a tree brough. Everyone else was staring at the Sorcerer with mixtures of offended shock and reluctant respect for his daring.

"It would be unfair of me to grant you this, given that I cannot marry you," said the Princess.

The Sorcerer's face fell. "Is there another man who has already won your heart? A noble lord, a prince, perhaps?" he asked.

"There is no man alive who loves me for who I am," the Princess said with a strange smile (the strange smile is important for later, take note), "They only love my wealth and lands."

The Sorcerer threw himself onto his knees in front of her and clasped his hands to his heart.

"But I love you," he cried, "I have loved you at first sight, and I couldn't imagine loving anyone else for the rest of my life. There is no one else in the world who loves you as much as I do!"

The Princess was a tadge embarrassed by this passionate show and tried to let him down gently without hurting his feelings.

"That's very kind of you, really it is. I'm honestly flattered," she said, "But I think I'm going to have to say no."

(Which was fair enough, in all honesty, given that she had only met the Sorcerer an hour ago.)

"What do you mean, 'no'?"

"I mean what I say," replied the Princess, "I mean 'no'."

The Sorcerer, who had been expecting the Princess to be delighted at her good fortune to have an exceedingly handsome and talented Sorcerer begging for her hand in marriage, felt suddenly furious. He sprang to his feet. How dare this Princess turn her nose up at him like he was beneath her? Right then and there, he decided to curse her with all of his power.

He shouted out:— “For this slight, I curse you, cruel Princess! May you walk with a bumbling, clumsy gait; may your eyes freeze in their sockets; may you be covered in black spots, your memory fade, and your voice wither into shrieks! Indeed, may all your least important virtues be the only ones you have left!”

There was a shocked, horrified silence in the hall. The Sorcerer realised he may have gotten a bit carried away in the heat of the moment, and hastily tacked onto the end:— “That is, this curse will fall upon you if you do not spend midnight tonight with someone who loves you as much as I do.”

(You may have noticed that the Sorcerer is a rather unstable fellow, so imagine how things would have turned out if he had married the Princess and had the opportunity to rule an entire kingdom.)

The Princess drew herself up and glared at the Sorcerer with more ice in her eyes than there was outside on the mountains.

“Guards! Throw him out of the castle this instant!” she commanded, and there was the sound of twenty heavy swords being unsheathed as the guards advanced menacingly towards the Sorcerer.

“You’re making a terrible mistake!” the Sorcerer shouted, desperately.

The Princess looked down at him from the throne. “Oh, I don’t think so,” she said coolly.

The guards marched the Sorcerer to the gate and threw him out into the night and the snow. In the sudden cold, the Sorcerer’s temper began to cool, and he ran back to the gates to beg the guards to let him back in and make amends. But the guards weren’t taken in by his change of heart and refused him.

“Turn back, Sorcerer!” they shouted. “You have betrayed the trust of our lady and you are not welcome here!”

They brandished thornwood spears that were soaked with the blood of all the hundreds of enemies who had fallen at the castle. But the Sorcerer was undeterred because the image of the Princess’s face was still strong in his heart.

For the second time, he approached the thornwood gates.

“Turn back, Sorcerer!” shouted the guards. “You are not welcome here and will never be again – turn back!”

They fired volleys of iron-tipped arrows sharp enough to cut air that missed the Sorcerer by a snowflake’s breadth. Still he was undeterred.

For the third time, the Sorcerer approached the thornwood gates.

At that moment, to his profound shock, the guards all turned into ferocious wolves with white fangs and red tongues, and streamed towards him in an avalanche of claws and howls. The Sorcerer turned tail and ran for his life, all thoughts of casting a spell to save him flying out of his head in his all-consuming panic.

The Princess watched him flee, before turning back to the anxious faces of her family and servants.

"To bed, I think," she said, smiling at them reassuringly. "It's been a long day."

Several worried looks and panicked frowns were exchanged. Her younger brother spoke up, "But... but, sister – the curse—"

"Never you mind about the curse," said the Princess, and dismissed them all with a wave of her hand.

Once they had gone, the Princess left the hall by a concealed staircase and ran up a set of turnpike stairs to reach a room at the very top of one of the castle's towers, which was known as the "Room-Where-the-Aurora-Looks-In". It was called this because every night when the aurora borealis shone and danced in the sky, some of the aurora's light would get caught in that room, without fail, and set it aglow with purple or green or turquoise. That night, a sparkling emerald and a dazzling pink blush flowed over the walls of the Room-Where-the-Aurora-Looks-In. The Princess opened the window and dropped a silvercloth handkerchief out of it, the cold jaws of the night taking her breath away as she did so.

The silvercloth handkerchief spun in the icy wind, once, twice, three times, like a swallow in a summer breeze, and then the light of the aurora fell squarely on the silver threads and the handkerchief lit up like a firework, a flash of brilliant emerald and pink against the coal-black sky.

Then the wind snatched the handkerchief in its claws, and it vanished into the darkness of the night.

Far below, in the castle yard, a silhouette saw this burst of light and stopped their work in front of the blacksmith's forge.

The Princess had smiled a strange smile when she had been asked if any man in the kingdom loved her because her true love wasn't a man. The fact of the matter was, the Princess had fallen in love with the Blacksmith's Daughter and both of them were planning to get married and run away together the following spring.

That was why the Princess sent for the Blacksmith's Daughter that night, because that's how she would be able to avoid the Sorcerer's curse: all the conditions the Sorcerer had so rashly tagged on the end of his curse would be fulfilled if the Princess and the Blacksmith's Daughter spent midnight together... because they loved one another with the same fierce love the wind holds for the sky and the ice holds for the sea.

The Blacksmith's Daughter set down her tools, put the forge fire to sleep, and closed up the workshop as quietly and as quickly as frost forms on a windowpane. No one saw her approach the castle, nor the happiness in her eyes; no one heard the keys turned in the locks, nor the soft footfalls on the flagstones; no one noticed the doors silently swung to, nor the shadow rippling over the walls.

But *someone* was waiting for her in the Room-Where-the-Aurora-Looks-In, where jade and pink sapphire sparkled in the air. That was where the Princess and the Blacksmith's

Daughter met that night.

By this time, the Sorcerer (you hadn't forgotten about him, had you?) was stuck up a pine tree with the twenty wolf-guards growling chillingly up at him from the tree's foot. The Sorcerer looked up at the night sky, and because he knew things that ordinary humans didn't know, he noticed it was almost midnight. He looked back at the castle with its dagger-like towers and saw the Princess and her lover clearly silhouetted against the aurora. The Sorcerer realised that the Princess had outwitted him and this time he was so angry all of his reason abandoned him in one overpowering avalanche of rage. He broke off a splinter of pine-wood from the tree he was clinging to and threw it with all of his might at the Princess and the Blacksmith's Daughter.

Ordinarily, this wouldn't have achieved very much (given that the castle was half a mountain away), but remember: the Sorcerer had powers beyond those of ordinary humans, and the splinter of pine-wood flew through the wintry air with the speed and deadly precision of a crossbow bolt... and pierced deep into the heart of the Blacksmith's Daughter.

A cry of deepest pain was wrenched from the breast of the Princess when she realised what had happened, and all the windows of the castle shattered at the sound. She pressed her hands to the wound hopelessly, feeling the warmth of the Blacksmith's Daughter flowing out from under her fingers.

Midnight struck.

At that very moment, the Sorcerer's curse crept into the Room-Where-the-Aurora-Looks-In. It saw what had happened: it saw the fading light in the eyes of the Blacksmith's Daughter, the heartsick shock on the Princess's face, the vicious, cruel weapon that the Sorcerer had thrown. The curse hesitated, and was surprised to feel a deep pity for the Princess. That morning, she had been sitting vigil by her father's sick bed, and now, at night, she was at the side of another dying love.

But a curse is still a curse, and cannot shirk its purpose.

That's why, some time later, two white shapes flew from the window of the Room-Where-the-Aurora-Looks-In. They were creatures of a sort that had never been seen before, creatures that had peculiar orange-gold eyes and spoke in shrieks and gurgles. If they had been walking, they would have walked with a bumbling, clumsy gait, and if they had wanted to look around, they would have had to turn their whole head. They were spotted with flecks of inky black, but had feathers as soft and as white as moonlight...

The Princess and the Blacksmith's Daughter had become the very first Snowy Owls. ΨΦ

