

Extract from: Stormbreaker

“I’m afraid we haven’t had a great deal of time, Mrs J,” Smithers replied. “The challenge was to think what a fourteen-year-old might carry with him - and adapt it.” He picked the first object off the tray. A yo-yo. It was slightly larger than normal, made of black plastic. “Let’s start with this,” Smithers said.

Alex shook his head. He couldn’t believe any of this. “Don’t tell me!” he exclaimed. “It’s some sort of secret weapon...”

“Not exactly. I was told you weren’t to have weapons. You’re too young.”

“So it’s not really a hand grenade? Pull the string and run like hell?”

“Certainly not. It’s a yo-yo.” Smithers pulled out the string, holding it between a podgy finger and thumb. “However, the string *is* a special sort of nylon. Very advanced. There are thirty metres of it and it can lift weights of up to one hundred kilograms. The actual yo-yo is motorized and clips on to your belt. Very useful for climbing.”

“Amazing.” Alex was unimpressed.

“And then there’s this.” Smithers produced a small tube. Alex read the side: ZIT-CLEAN, FOR HEALTHIER SKIN. “Nothing personal,” Smithers went on apologetically, “but we thought it was something a boy of your age might use. And it is rather remarkable.” He opened the tube and squeezed some of the cream on to his finger. “Completely harmless when you touch it. But bring it into contact with metal and it’s quite another story.” He wiped his finger, smearing the cream on to the surface of the table. For a moment nothing happened. Then a wisp of acrid smoke twisted upwards in the air, the metal sizzled and a jagged hole

appeared. “It’ll do that to just about any metal,” Smithers explained. “Very useful if you need to break through a lock.” He took out a handkerchief and wiped his finger clean.

“Anything else?” Mrs Jones asked.

“Oh yes, Mrs J. You could say this is our piece de resistance.” He picked up a brightly coloured box that Alex recognized at once as a Nintendo Game Boy Color. “What teenager would be complete without one of these?” he asked. “This one comes with four games. And the beauty of it is, each game turns the computer into something quite different.”

He showed Alex the first game. “If you insert Nemesis, the computer becomes a fax/photocopier which gives you direct contact with us and vice versa.” A second game. “Exocet turns the computer into an X-ray device. It has an audio function too. The headphones are useful for eavesdropping. It’s not as powerful as I’d like, but we’re working on it. Speed Wars is a bug finder. I suggest you use it at the moment you’re shown to your room. And finally...Bomber Boy.”

“Do I get to play that one?” Alex asked.

“You can play all four of them. But as the name might suggest, this is actually a smoke bomb. You leave the game cartridge somewhere in a room and press START three times on the console and it will go off. Useful camouflage if you need to escape in a hurry.”



Harry Potter extracts:

"Don't you understand how Cho's feeling at the moment?" she asked.

"No", said Harry and Ron together.

Hermione sighed and laid down her quill.

"Well, obviously, she's feeling very sad, because of Cedric dying. Then I expect she's feeling confused because she liked Cedric and now she likes Harry, and she can't work out who she likes best. Then she'll be feeling guilty, thinking it's an insult to Cedric's memory to be kissing Harry at all, and she'll be worrying about what everyone else might say about her if she starts going out with Harry. And she probably can't work out what her feelings towards Harry are, anyway, because he was the one who was with Cedric when Cedric died, so that's all very mixed up and painful. Oh, and she's afraid she's going to be thrown off the Ravenclaw Quidditch team because she's been flying so badly."

A slightly stunned silence greeted the end of this speech, then Ron said, "One person can't feel all that at once, they'd explode."

"Just because you've got the emotional range of a teaspoon doesn't mean we all have, " said Hermione nastily, picking up her quill again.



Chapter Eight

The Deathday Party

October arrived, spreading a damp chill over the grounds and into the castle. Madam Pomfrey, the nurse, was kept busy by a sudden spate of colds among the staff and students. Her Pepperup potion worked instantly, though it left the drinker smoking at the ears for several hours afterward. Ginny Weasley, who had been looking pale, was bullied into taking some by Percy. The steam pouring from under her vivid hair gave the impression that her whole head was on fire.

Raindrops the size of bullets thundered on the castle windows for days on end; the lake rose, the flower beds turned into muddy streams, and Hagrid's pumpkins swelled to the size of garden sheds. Oliver Wood's enthusiasm for regular training sessions, however, was not dampened, which was why Harry was to be found, late one stormy Saturday afternoon a few days before Halloween, returning to Gryffindor Tower, drenched to the skin and splattered with mud.

Even aside from the rain and wind it hadn't been a happy practice session. Fred and George, who had been spying on the Slytherin team, had seen for themselves the speed of those new Nimbus Two Thousand and Ones. They reported that the Slytherin team was no more than seven greenish blurs, shooting through the air like missiles.

As Harry squelched along the deserted corridor he came across somebody who looked just as preoccupied as he was. Nearly Headless Nick, the ghost of Gryffindor Tower, was staring morosely out of a window, muttering under his breath, ". . . don't fulfill their requirements . . . half an inch, if that . . ."

"Hello, Nick," said Harry.

"Hello, hello," said Nearly Headless Nick, starting and looking round. He wore a dashing, plumed hat on his long curly hair, and a tunic with a ruff, which concealed the fact that his neck was almost completely severed. He was pale as smoke, and Harry could see right through him to the dark sky and torrential rain outside.



Extract from *The Penalty* Mal Peet


We were river people, fishermen. People of the River Spirit, Loma, who is slow and green and clever. We were not warriors, so when the fierce people from beyond the forest attacked our village we did not know what to do. They came out of the trees, howling, at the time of lightbut- no-sun-yet, when my mother and the other women were waking the first fires. I picked up my young sister who was playing at the front of our house and ran with the others towards our boats. Some of us fell with spears in our backs. I looked for my mother and saw her go down broken beneath the feet of the fierce people who swept over her like water. And when we reached the sands we saw two great war-canoes on the river, and in them there were terrible No-Skins who killed more of us with their fire-sticks. My father was one who died there. He went onto his knees with his hands on his chest full of blood and then he fell with his face in the water. The air was so full of screaming that I could hardly breathe it. We were trapped, and I thought we would all die, and I tried to make myself ready. But they did not kill us, not there, not then.

The war-canoes came onto the beach, breaking our boats. The fierce people and the No-Skins used their spears and their fire-sticks to beat the women and children back towards the houses. They tore my sister from me. She did not cry out even when they threw her down, but her eyes were huge and her mouth was open like a person found drowned.

I was kneeling beside my father, chanting for his spirit, when I looked up and saw a No-Skin looking down at me. His face was the colour of a peeled animal with the fat still on it, but there was yellow fur around his mouth.

That was how I thought, then: peeled animal, yellow fur, fire-sticks. Because I had never seen white men before, or their guns.

I was terribly afraid. I thought the one standing over me was Lord Death from our stories. He kept his raw-looking eyes on me and shouted in his language. Hands seized me and forced me to where our other men had been gathered. Our hands were tied together and our necks fastened to a long chain of iron.



Boy in the Striped Pyjamas

John Boyne

Chapter 1: Bruno Makes a Discovery

One afternoon, when Bruno came home from school, he was surprised to find Maria, the family's maid - who always kept her head bowed and never looked up from the carpet - standing in his bedroom, pulling all his belongings out of the wardrobe and packing them in four large wooden crates, even the things he'd hidden at the back that belonged to him and were nobody's else's business.

'What are you doing?' he asked in as polite a tone as he could muster, for although he wasn't happy to come home and find someone going through his possessions, his mother had always told him that he was to treat Maria respectfully and not just imitate the way Father spoke to her. 'You take your hands off my things.'

Maria shook her head and pointed towards the staircase behind him, where Bruno's mother had just appeared. She was tall woman with long red hair that she bundled into a sort of net behind her head, and she was twisting her hands together nervously as if there was something she didn't want to have to say or something she didn't want to have to believe.


'Mother,' said Bruno, marching towards her, 'what's going on? Why is Maria going through my things?'

'She's packing them,' explained Mother.

'Packing them?' he asked, running quickly through the events of the previous few days to consider whether he'd been particularly naughty or had used those words out loud that he wasn't allowed to use and was being sent away because of it.

He couldn't think of anything though. In fact over the last few days he had behaved in a perfectly decent manner to everyone and couldn't remember causing any chaos at all.

'Why?' he asked then. 'What have I done?'



Small-Minded Giants
by Oisin McGann

The city of Ash Harbour looked spectacular. Built inside a hollowed-out mountain five kilometres across, its top roofed with a massive dome to keep out the ferocious elements, this was their whole world. Beyond those walls, deadly storms and freezing temperatures had stripped the planet bare. Sol gazed out at the city, and realized for the first time just how small their world was. His window was facing towards the body of the crane, and his eyes followed it down to the bottom, a long, long way below. The crane's perspective heightened the feeling of being hung out in the sky and he experienced a moment of dizziness.

He caught sight of the carriage that Schaeffer had boarded. It was hanging from another arm of the crane. It was going to pass inside the path of the school's carriage, overtaking it as the students took the scenic route. It was moving jerkily, as if something was wrong.

Sol leaned harder against the glass. He could see two figures inside. One was on the nearside of the carriage, looking anxiously towards the ceiling. He was a young man, dressed in the suit of a businessman or industrialist. Sol couldn't see the other person very well, but knew it must be Schaeffer. Ms Kiroa saw what he was looking at, and leaned in closer beside him, her shoulder touching his.

'Why is it shaking like that?' she wondered aloud.

'Maybe just worn bearings,' he replied, wanting to sound knowledgeable. His gaze was locked on the scene before him.

'They should lower it down. It doesn't look safe.' The obvious alarm in her voice carried around the carriage. All of a sudden the entire class was pushing in around them, staring out at the shuddering crane car, which was coming ever closer.

'Maybe it's going to fall!' Faisal Twomey said, from behind Sol.

'Shut up, you grit!' Cleo snapped.



Extract from Evil Star

There was something wrong about the house in Eastfield Terrace. Something unpleasant.

All the houses in the street were more or less identical: redbrick, Victorian, with two bedrooms on the first floor and a bay window on either the left or the right of the front door. Some had satellite dishes. Some had window boxes filled with brightly coloured flowers. But looking down from the top of the hill at the terrace curving round St Patrick's church on its way to the Esso garage and All-Nite store, one house stood out immediately. Number twenty-seven no longer belonged there. It was as if it had caught some sort of disease and needed to be taken away.

The front garden was full of junk, and as usual the wheelie bin beside the gate was overflowing, surrounded by black garbage bags that the owners had been unable to stuff inside. This wasn't uncommon in Eastfield Terrace. Nor was it particularly strange that the curtains were permanently drawn across the front windows and, as far as anyone could tell, the lights were never turned on. But the house smelled. For weeks now there had been a rotten, sewagey smell that had seemed at first to be coming from a blocked pipe but that had rapidly got worse until people had begun to cross the street to avoid it. And whatever was causing it seemed to be affecting the entire place. The grass on the front lawn was beginning to die. The flowers had wilted and then been choked up by weeds. The colour seemed to be draining out of the very bricks.

The neighbours had tried to complain. They had knocked on the front door, but nobody had come. They had telephoned, but nobody had answered. Finally, they had called the borough council at the Ipswich Civic Centre but of course it would be weeks before any action was taken. The house wasn't empty. That much they knew. They had occasionally seen the owner, Gwenda Davis, pacing back and forth behind the net curtains. Once – more than a week ago – she had been seen scurrying home from the shops. And there was one other piece of evidence that there was still life at number twentyseven: every evening the television was turned on. Gwenda Davis was well known in the street.

A Hat Full of Sky – Terry Pratchett

Chapter 1

LEAVING

It came crackling over the hills, like an invisible fog. Movement without a body tired it, and it drifted very slowly. It wasn't thinking now. It had been months since it had last thought, because the brain that was doing the thinking for it had died. They always died. So now it was naked again, and frightened.

It could hide in one of the blobby white creatures that baa'd nervously as it crawled over the turf. But they had useless brains, capable of thinking only about grass and making other things that went baa. No. They would not do. It needed, needed something better, a strong mind, a mind with power, a mind that could keep it safe.

It searched

The new boots were all wrong. They were stiff and shiny. Shiny boots! That was disgraceful. Clean boots, that was different. There was nothing wrong with putting a bit of a polish on boots to keep the wet out. But boots had to work for a living. They shouldn't *shine*.

Tiffany Aching, standing on the rug in her bedroom, shook her head. She'd have to scuff the things as soon as possible.

Then there was the new straw hat, with a ribbon on it. She had some doubts about that, too.

She tried to look at herself in the mirror, which wasn't easy because the mirror was not much bigger than her hand, and cracked and blotchy. She had to move it around to try and see as much of herself as possible and remember how the bits fitted together. But today . . . well, she didn't usually do this sort of thing in the house, but it was important to look smart today, and since no one was around . . .

She put the mirror down on the rickety table by the bed, stood in the middle of the threadbare rug, shut her eyes and said:

'See me.'

And away on the hills something, a thing with no body and no mind but a terrible hunger and a bottomless fear, felt the power.

It would have sniffed the air, if it had a nose.

It searched.

It found.

Such a strange mind, like a lot of minds inside one another, getting smaller and smaller! So strong! So close!

It changed direction slightly, and went a little faster. As it moved, it made a noise like a swarm of flies.

The sheep, nervous for a moment about something they couldn't see, hear or smell, baa'd . . .

. . . and went back to chewing grass.


Tiffany opened her eyes. There she was, a few feet away from herself. She could see the back of her own head.

Carefully, she moved around the room, not looking down at the 'her' that was moving, because she found that if she did that then the trick was over.

It was quite difficult, moving like that, but at last she was in front of herself and looking herself up and down.

Brown hair to match brown eyes . . . there was nothing she could do about that. At least her hair was clean and she'd washed her face.

She had a new dress on, which improved things a bit. It was so unusual to buy new clothes in the Aching family that, of course, it was bought big so that she'd 'grow into it'. But at least it was pale green, and it didn't actually touch the floor. With the shiny new boots and the straw hat she looked . . . like a farmer's daughter, quite respectable, going off to her first job. It'd have to do.



From here she could see the pointy hat on her head, but she had to look hard for it. It was like a glint in the air, gone as soon as you saw it. That's why she'd been worried about the new straw hat, but it had simply gone through it as if the new hat wasn't there.

This was because, in a way, it wasn't. It was invisible, except in the rain. Sun and wind went straight through, but rain and snow somehow saw it, and treated it as if it were real. She'd been given it by the greatest witch in the world, a real witch with a black dress and a black hat and eyes that could go through you like turpentine goes through a sick sheep. It had been a kind of reward. Tiffany had done magic, serious magic. Before she had done it she hadn't known that she could; when she had been doing it she hadn't known that she was; and after she had done it she hadn't known how she had. Now she had to learn how.

'See me not,' she said. The vision of her . . . or whatever it was, because she was not exactly sure about this trick . . . vanished.

It had been a shock, the first time she'd done this. But she'd always found it easy to see herself, at least in her head. All her memories were like little pictures of herself doing things or watching things, rather than the view from the two holes in the front of her head. There was a part of her that was always watching her.

Miss Tick – another witch, but one who was easier to talk to than the witch who'd given Tiffany the hat – had said that a witch had to know how to 'stand apart', and that she'd find out more when her talent grew, so Tiffany supposed the 'see me' was part of this. Sometimes Tiffany thought she ought to talk to Miss Tick about 'see me'. It felt as if she was stepping out of her body, but still had a sort of ghost body that could walk around. It all worked as long as her ghost eyes didn't look down and see that she was just a ghost body. If that happened, some part of her panicked and she found herself back in her solid body immediately. Tiffany had, in the end, decided to keep this to herself. You didn't have to tell a teacher *everything*. Anyway, it was a good trick for when you didn't have a mirror.

Miss Tick was a sort of witch-finder. That seemed to be how witchcraft worked. Some witches kept a magical lookout for girls who showed promise, and found them an older witch to help them along. They didn't teach you how to do it. They taught you how to know what you were doing.

Witches were a bit like cats. They didn't much like one another's company, but they *did* like to know where all the other witches *were*, just in case they needed them. And what you might need them for was to tell you, as a friend, that you were beginning to cackle.

Witches didn't fear much, Miss Tick had said, but what the powerful ones were afraid of, even if they didn't talk about it, was what they called '*going to the bad*'. It was too easy to slip into careless little cruelties because you had power and other people hadn't, too easy to think other people didn't matter much, too easy to think that ideas like right and wrong didn't apply to *you*. At the end of *that* road was you dribbling and cackling to yourself all alone in a gingerbread house, growing warts on your nose.

Witches needed to know other witches were watching them.

Astrosuars: Day of the Dino-Droids

By Steve Cole

Chapter One

THE TUNNEL IN SPACE

Captain Teggs was a very worried dinosaur.

Most days, he felt on top of the world - on top of *any* world. After all, he was in charge of the DSS *Sauropod*, the best ship in the whole Dinosaur Space Service. He had the finest, bravest crew any captain could hope for. And he even had a private larder crammed with three hundred types of delicious ferns. His life was one long exciting adventure in space - with just a spot of tummy-ache now and then.

But today, sat in the *Sauropod's* control pit, he was worried. And with good reason. Admiral Rosso - the crusty old barosaurus in charge of the DSS - had disappeared.

"I've double-checked the admiral's movements," said Arx, Teggs's second-in-command, looking up from his controls. "He left in his private starship for a holiday on the planet Trimuda. But no one has seen or heard from him since."

Teggs nodded glumly. "And he was due back at DSS HQ yesterday!" He turned to his communications officer, a stripy hadrosaur named Gipsy. "Anything to report?"

"I've listened in to every message sent and every signal received in Trimuda's part of space over the last week." Gipsy put down her headphones with a sigh. "Nothing from Admiral Rosso."

Teggs chewed on some bracken. "I just hope we find him safe and well - and *fast*. The Pick-a-Planet meeting is due to be held in just three days, and if we're not back at DSS HQ with Admiral Rosso by then . . ."

"It could mean trouble," said Gipsy.

"Trouble with a capital T!" Teggs agreed.

New planets were discovered at the outer edges of the Jurassic Quadrant all the time. If they were found in the Vegetarian Sector, they were claimed by the plant-eaters. If they were found in the Carnivore Sector, they were taken by the meat-eaters. But any worlds discovered close to the Vegmeat Zone - the no-man's land between the two dinosaur empires - were up for grabs. And each side wanted these worlds for themselves.

In olden times, there would be a big battle for each of the planets. But now, thanks to Admiral Rosso, things were different. Meat-eaters and plant-eaters alike gathered each year at DSS HQ for the Pick-a-Planet meeting. Here, the battles were fought with words, not weapons, and the planets were divided up evenly.

But Rosso was the only dinosaur trusted by both sides to play fair. Without him, the meeting could go dangerously wrong . . .

A loud bleep made the astrosuars jump. The dimorphodon - the ship's fearless, fifty-strong flight crew - flapped over to perch at their positions, ready for anything.

Gipsy frowned at her controls. "It's Iggy," she said. "He's sent a code-two warning signal."


"*What?*" Teggs reared up in his control pit. Iggy was the *Sauropod's* chief engineer. He was brilliant with all things mechanical. But a code-two warning signal meant he'd found a serious problem with the ship. "Put him on screen!"

Iggy's scowling, scaly face appeared on the scanner. "Captain, the engines seem to be playing up. I can't stop the ship slipping sideways through space!"

"*Sideways?*" Teggs frowned. "What do your controls say, Arx?"

Puzzled, Arx tried to scratch his head - but he couldn't reach, so a dimorphodon did it for him. "Iggy's right. We are drifting off-course."

"But why?" Gipsy wondered.



Extract from *Beauty* by Robin Mckinley
Chapter One

I was the youngest of three daughters. Our literal-minded mother named us Grace, Hope, and Honour, but few people except perhaps the abbot who had baptized all three of us remembered my given name. My father still likes to tell the story of how I acquired my odd nickname: I had come to him for further information when I first discovered that our names meant something besides you-come-here. He succeeded in explaining grace and hope, but he had some difficulty trying to make the concept of honour understandable to a five-year-old. I heard him out, but with an expression of deepening disgust; and when he was finished I said: 'Huh! I'd rather be Beauty.' He laughed; and over the next few weeks told everyone he met this story of his youngest child's precocity. I found that my ill-considered opinion became a reality; the name at least was attached to me securely.

All three of us were pretty children, with curly blond hair and blue-grey eyes; and if Grace's hair was the brightest, and Hope's eyes the biggest, well, for the first ten years the difference wasn't too noticeable. Grace, who was seven years older than I, grew into a beautiful, and profoundly graceful, young girl. Her hair was wavy and fine and luxuriant, and as butter-yellow as it had been when she was a baby (said doting friends of the family), and her eyes were long-lashed and as blue as a clear May morning after rain (said her doting swains). Hope's hair darkened to a rich chestnut-brown, and her big eyes turned a smoky green. Grace was an inch or two the taller, and her skin was rosy where Hope's was ivory-pale; but except for their dramatic colouring my sisters looked very much alike. Both were tall and slim, with tiny waists, short straight noses, dimples when they smiled, and small delicate hands and feet.

I was five years younger than Hope, and I don't know what happened to me. As I grew older, my hair turned mousy, neither blond nor brown, and the baby curl fell out until all that was left was a stubborn refusal to cooperate with the curling iron; my eyes turned a muddy hazel. Worse, I didn't grow; I was thin, awkward, and undersized, with big long-fingered hands and huge feet. Worst of all, when I turned thirteen, my skin broke out in spots. There hadn't been a spot in our mother's family for centuries, I was sure. And Grace and Hope went on being innocently and ravishingly lovely, with every eligible young man - and many more that were neither - dying of love for them.

Since I was the baby of the family I was a little spoilt. Our mother died less than two years after I was born, and our little sister Mercy died two weeks after her. Although we had a series of highly competent and often affectionate nursemaids and governesses, my sisters felt that they had raised me. By the time it was evident that I was going to let the family down by being plain, I'd been called Beauty for over six years; and while I came to hate the name, I was too proud to ask that it be discarded. I wasn't really very fond of my given name, Honour, either, if it came to that: It sounded sallow and angular to me, as if 'honourable' were the best that could be said of me. My sisters were too kind to refer to the increasing inappropriateness of my nickname. It was all the worse that they were as good-hearted as they were beautiful, and their kindness was sincerely meant.

Our father, bless him, didn't seem to notice that there was an egregious, and deplorable, difference between his first two daughters and his youngest. On the contrary, he used to smile at us over the dinner table and say how pleased he was that we were growing into three such dissimilar individuals; that he always felt sorry for families who looked like petals from the same flower. For a while his lack of perception hurt me, and I suspected him of hypocrisy; but in time I came to be grateful for his generous blindness. I could talk to him openly, about my dreams for the future, without fear of his pitying me or doubting my motives.

The only comfort I had in being my sisters' sister was that I was 'the clever one.' To a certain extent this was damning me with faint praise, in the same category as accepting my given name as an epithet accurately reflecting my limited worth - it was the best that could be said of me. Our governesses had always remarked on my cleverness in a pitying tone of voice. But at least it was true. My intellectual abilities gave me a release, and an excuse. I shunned company because I preferred books; and the dreams I confided to my father were of becoming a scholar in good earnest, and going to University. It was unheard-of that a woman should do anything of the sort - as several shocked governesses were only too quick to tell me, when I spoke a little too boldly - but my father nodded and smiled and said, 'We'll see.' Since I believed my father could do anything - except of course make me pretty - I worked and studied with passionate dedication, lived in hope, and avoided society and mirrors.

Our father was a merchant, one of the wealthiest in the city. He was the son of a shipwright, and had gone to sea as a cabin boy when he was not yet ten years old; but by the time he was forty, he and his ships were known in most of the major ports of the world. When he was forty too, he married our mother, the Lady Marguerite, who was just seventeen. She came of a fine old family that had nothing but its bloodlines left to live on, and her parents were more than happy to accept my father's suit, with its generous bridal settlements. But it had been a happy marriage, old friends told us girls. Our father had doted on his lovely young wife - my two sisters took after her, of course, except that her hair had been red-gold and her eyes amber - and she had worshipped him.

When I was twelve, and Grace was nineteen, she became engaged to our father's most promising young captain, Robert Tucker, a blue-eyed, black-haired giant of twenty-eight. He set sail almost immediately after their betrothal was announced, on a voyage that was to take three long years but bode fair to make his fortune. There had been a Masque of Courtesy acted out among the three of them - Robbie, Grace and Father - when the plans for the voyage and the wedding had first been discussed. Father suggested that they should be married right away, that

they might have a few weeks together (and perhaps start a baby, to give Grace something to do while she waited the long months for his return) before he set sail. The journey could be delayed a little.

Nay, said Robbie, he wished to prove himself first; it was no man's trick to leave his wife in her father's house; if he could not care for her himself as she deserved, then he was no fit husband for her. But he could not yet afford a house of his own, and three years was a long time; perhaps she should be freed of the constraints of their betrothal. It was not fair to one so fair as she to be asked to wait so long. And then of course Grace in her turn stood up and said that she would wait twenty years if necessary, and it would be the greatest honour of her life to have the banns published immediately. And so they were; and Robbie departed a month later.

Grace told Hope and me at great length about this Masque, just after it happened. We sat over tea in Grace's rose-silk-hung sitting room. Her tea service was very fine, and she presided over the silver urn like a grand and gracious hostess, handing round her favourite cups to her beloved sisters as if we too were grand ladies. I put mine down hastily; after years of taking tea with my sisters, I still eyed the little porcelain cups askance, and preferred to wait until I could return to my study and ring for my maid to bring me a proper big mug of tea, and some biscuits.

Hope looked vague and dreamy; I was the only one who saw any humour in Grace's story - although I could appreciate that it had not been amusing for the principals - but then, I was the only one who read poetry for pleasure. Grace blushed when she mentioned the baby, and admitted that while Robbie was right, of course, she was a weak woman and wished - oh, just the littlest bit! - that they might have been married before he left. She was even more beautiful when she blushed. Her sitting room set her high colour off admirably.

Those first months after Robbie set sail must have been very long ones for her. She who had been the toast of the town now went to parties very seldom; when Hope and Father protested that there was no need of her living like a nun, she smiled seraphically and said she truly didn't wish to go out and mix with a great many people any more. She spent most of her time 'setting her linen in order' as she put it; she sewed very prettily - I don't believe she had set a crooked stitch since she hemmed her first sheet at the age of five - and she already had a trousseau that might have been the envy of any three girls.

So Hope went out alone, with our chaperone, the last of our outgrown governesses, or sponsored by one of the many elderly ladies who thought she was just delightful. But after two years or so, it was observed that the incomparable Hope also began to neglect many fashionable gatherings; an incomprehensible development, since no banns had been published and no mysterious wasting diseases were whispered about. It was made comprehensible to me one night when she crept into my bedroom, weeping.

I was up late, translating Sophocles. She explained to me that she had to tell someone, but she couldn't be so selfish as to bother Grace when she was preoccupied with Robbie's safety - 'Yes, I understand,' I said patiently, although privately thought Grace would be the better for the distraction of someone else's problems - but she, Hope, had fallen in love with Gervain Woodhouse, and was therefore miserable. I sorted out this curious statement eventually.

Gervain was an estimable young man in every way - but he was also an ironworker in Father's shipyard. His family were good and honest people, but not at all grand, and his prospects were no more than modest. He had some ideas about the ballasting of ships, which Father admired, and had been invited to the house several times to discuss them, and then stayed on to tea or supper. I supposed that this was how he and my sister had met. I didn't follow Hope's account of their subsequent romance very well, and didn't at all recognize her anguished lover as the reserved and polite young man that Father entertained. At any rate, Hope concluded, she knew Father expected her to make a great match, or at least a good one, but her heart was given.

'Don't be silly,' I told her. 'Father only wants you to be happy. He's delighted with the prospect of Robbie as a son-in-law, you know, and Grace might have had an earl.'

Hope's dimples showed. 'An elderly earl.'


'An earl is an earl,' I said severely. 'Better than your count, who turned out to have a wife in the attic. If you think you'll be happiest scrubbing tar out of burlap aprons, Father won't say nay. And,' I added thoughtfully, 'he will probably buy you several maids to do the scrubbing.'

Hope sighed. 'You are not the slightest bit romantic.'

'You knew that already,' I said. 'But I *do* remind you that Father is not an ogre, as you know very well if you'd only calm down and think about it. He himself started as a shipwright; and you know that still tells against us in some circles. Only Mother was real society. Father hasn't forgotten. And he likes Gervain.'

'Oh, Beauty,' Hope said; 'but that's not all. Ger only stays in the city for love of me; he doesn't really like it here, not ships and the sea. He was born and raised north of here, far inland. He misses the forests. He wants to go back, and be a blacksmith again.'

I thought about this. It seemed like the waste of a first-class ironworker. I was also, for all my scholarship, not



entirely free of the city-bred belief that the north was a land rather overpopulated by goblins and magicians, who went striding about the countryside muttering wild charms. In the city magic was more discreetly contained, in little old men and women with bright eyes, who made up love potions and cures for warts in return for modest sums. But if this didn't bother Hope, there was no reason it should bother me.


I said at last: 'Well, we'll miss you. I hope you won't settle too far away - but it's still not an insurmountable obstacle. Look here: Stop wringing your hands and listen to me. Would you like me to talk to Father about it first, since you're so timid?'

'Oh, that would be wonderful of you,' my bright-eyed sister said eagerly. 'I've made Gervain promise not to say anything yet, and he feels that our continued silence is not right.' It was a tradition in the family that I could 'get around' Father best: I was the baby, and so on. This was another of my sisters' tactful attempts at recompense for the way I looked, but there was some truth to it. Father would do anything for any of us, but my sisters were both a little in awe of him.

'Umm, yes,' I said, looking longingly at my books. 'I'll talk to Father - but give me a week or so, will you please, since you've waited this long. Father's got business troubles, as you may have noticed, and I'd like to pick my time.'

Hope nodded, cheerful again, called me a darling girl, kissed me, and slipped out of the room. I went back to Sophocles. But to my surprise, I couldn't concentrate; stories I'd heard of the northland crept in and disrupted the Greek choruses. And there was also the fact that Ger, safe and sensible Ger, found our local witches amusing; it was not that he laughed when they were mentioned, but that he became very still. In my role of tiresome little sister, I had harassed him about this, till he told me a little. 'Where I come from, any old wife can mix a poultice to take off warts; it's something she learns from her mother with how to hem a shirt and how to make gingerbread. Or if she can't, she certainly has a neighbour who can, just as her husband probably has a good useful spell or two to stuff into his scarecrow with the straw, to make it do its work a little better.' He saw that he had his audience's fixed attention, so he grinned at me, and added: 'There are even a few dragons left up north, you know. I saw one once, when I was a boy, but they don't come that far south very often.' Even I knew that dragons could do all sorts of marvellous things, although only a great magician could master one.

My opportunity to discuss Hope's future with Father never arrived



Extract from Eragon
TWIN DISASTER

The songs of the dead are the lamentations of the living.

So thought Eragon as he stepped over a twisted and hacked Urgal, listening to the keening of women who removed loved ones from the blood-muddied ground of Farthen Dûr. Behind him Saphira delicately skirted the corpse, her glittering blue scales the only color in the gloom that filled the hollow mountain.

It was three days since the Varden and dwarves had fought the Urgals for possession of Tronjheim, the mile-high, conical city nestled in the center of Farthen Dûr, but the battlefield was still strewn with carnage. The sheer number of bodies had stymied their attempts to bury the dead. In the distance, a mountainous fire glowed sullenly by Farthen Dûr's wall where the Urgals were being burned. No burial or honored resting place for them.

Since waking to find his wound healed by Angela, Eragon had tried three times to assist in the recovery effort. On each occasion he had been racked by terrible pains that seemed to explode from his spine. The healers gave him various potions to drink. Arya and Angela said that he was perfectly sound. Nevertheless, he hurt. Nor could Saphira help, only share his pain as it rebounded across their mental link.

Eragon ran a hand over his face and looked up at the stars showing through Farthen Dûr's distant top, which were smudged with sooty smoke from the pyre. *Three days.* Three days since he had killed Durza; three days since people began calling him Shadeslayer; three days since the remnants of the sorcerer's consciousness had ravaged his mind and he had been saved by the mysterious Togira Ikonoka, the Cripple Who Is Whole. He had told no one about that vision but Saphira. Fighting Durza and the dark spirits that controlled him had transformed Eragon; although for better or for worse he was still unsure. He felt fragile, as if a sudden shock would shatter his reconstructed body and consciousness.

And now he had come to the site of the combat, driven by a morbid desire to see its aftermath. Upon arriving, he found nothing but the uncomfortable presence of death and decay, not the glory that heroic songs had led him to expect.

Before his uncle, Garrow, was slain by the Ra'zac months earlier, the brutality that Eragon had witnessed between the humans, dwarves, and Urgals would have destroyed him. Now it numbed him. He had realized, with Saphira's help, that the only way to stay rational amid such pain was to *do* things. Beyond that, he no longer believed that life possessed inherent meaning-not after seeing men torn apart by the Kull, a race of giant Urgals, and the ground a bed of thrashing limbs and the dirt so wet with blood it soaked through the soles of his boots. If any honor existed in war, he concluded, it was in fighting to protect others from harm.


He bent and plucked a tooth, a molar, from the dirt. Bouncing it on his palm, he and Saphira slowly made a circuit through the trampled plain. They stopped at its edge when they noticed Jörmundur-Ajihad's second in command in the Varden-hurrying toward them from Tronjheim. When he came near, Jörmundur bowed, a gesture Eragon knew he would never have made just days before.

"I'm glad I found you in time, Eragon." He clutched a parchment note in one hand. "Ajihad is returning, and he wants you to be there when he arrives. The others are already waiting for him by Tronjheim's west gate. We'll have to hurry to get there in time."

Eragon nodded and headed toward the gate, keeping a hand on Saphira. Ajihad had been gone most of the three days, hunting down Urgals who had managed to escape into the dwarf tunnels that honeycombed the stone beneath the Beor Mountains. The one time Eragon had seen him between expeditions, Ajihad was in a rage over discovering that his daughter, Nasuada, had disobeyed his orders to leave with the other women and children before the battle. Instead, she had secretly fought among the Varden's archers.

Murtagh and the Twins had accompanied Ajihad: the Twins because it was dangerous work and the Varden's leader needed the protection of their magical skills, and Murtagh because he was eager to continue proving that he bore the Varden no ill will. It surprised Eragon how much people's attitudes toward Murtagh had changed, considering that Murtagh's father was the Dragon Rider Morzan, who had betrayed the Riders to Galbatorix. Even though Murtagh despised his father and was loyal to Eragon, the Varden had not trusted him. But now, no one was willing to waste energy on a petty hate when so much work remained. Eragon missed talking with Murtagh and looked forward to discussing all that had happened, once he returned.

As Eragon and Saphira rounded Tronjheim, a small group became visible in the pool of lantern light before the timber gate. Among them were Orik-the dwarf shifting impatiently on his stout legs-and Arya. The white bandage around her upper arm gleamed in the darkness, reflecting a faint highlight onto the bottom of her hair. Eragon felt



a strange thrill, as he always did when he saw the elf. She looked at him and Saphira, green eyes flashing, then continued watching for Ajihad.

By breaking Isidar Mithrim—the great star sapphire that was sixty feet across and carved in the shape of a rose—Arya had allowed Eragon to kill Durza and so win the battle. Still, the dwarves were furious with her for destroying their most prized treasure. They refused to move the sapphire's remains, leaving them in a massive circle inside Tronjheim's central chamber. Eragon had walked through the splintered wreckage and shared the dwarves' sorrow for all the lost beauty.

He and Saphira stopped by Orik and looked out at the empty land that surrounded Tronjheim, extending to Farthen Dûr's base five miles away in each direction. "Where will Ajihad come from?" asked Eragon.

Orik pointed at a cluster of lanterns staked around a large tunnel opening a couple of miles away. "He should be here soon."

Eragon waited patiently with the others, answering comments directed at him but preferring to speak with Saphira in the peace of his mind. The quiet that filled Farthen Dûr suited him.

Half an hour passed before motion flickered in the distant tunnel. A group of ten men climbed out onto the ground, then turned and helped up as many dwarves. One of the men—Eragon assumed it was Ajihad—raised a hand, and the warriors assembled behind him in two straight lines. At a signal, the formation marched proudly toward Tronjheim.

Before they went more than five yards, the tunnel behind them swarmed with a flurry of activity as more figures jumped out. Eragon squinted, unable to see clearly from so far away.

Those are Urgals! exclaimed Saphira, her body tensing like a drawn bowstring.

Eragon did not question her. "Urgals!" he cried, and leaped onto Saphira, berating himself for leaving his sword, Zar'roc, in his room. No one had expected an attack now that the Urgal army had been driven away.

His wound twinged as Saphira lifted her azure wings, then drove them down and jumped forward, gaining speed and altitude each second. Below them, Arya ran toward the tunnel, nearly keeping apace with Saphira. Orik trailed her with several men, while Jörmundur sprinted back toward the barracks.

Eragon was forced to watch helplessly as the Urgals fell on the rear of Ajihad's warriors; he could not work magic over such a distance. The monsters had the advantage of surprise and quickly cut down four men, forcing the rest of the warriors, men and dwarves alike, to cluster around Ajihad in an attempt to protect him. Swords and axes clashed as the groups pressed together. Light flashed from one of the Twins, and an Urgal fell, clutching the stump of his severed arm.

Dustin Baby – Jacqueline Wilson
Let's begin with a happy ending.

I sit here in the warm, waiting. I can't eat anything. My mouth is too dry to swallow properly. I try sipping water. The glass clanks against my teeth. My hand is trembling. I put the glass down carefully and then clasp my hands tight. I squeeze until my nails dig in. I need to feel it. I need to know that this is real

I think people are staring at me, wondering why I'm all on my own. But not for much longer.

Please come now.

Please.

I look out the window, seeing my own pale reflection. And then there's a shadow. Someone stares back at me. And then smiles.

I smile too, though the tears are welling in my eyes. Why do I always have to cry? I mop at my face fiercely with a napkin. When I look back the window is empty.

'April?'

I jump. I look up.

'April, is it really you?'

I nod, still crying. I get clumsily to my feet. We look at each other and then our arms go out. We embrace, hugging each other close, even though we are strangers.

'Happy birthday!'

'This is the best birthday ever,' I whisper.

It's nearly over - and yet it's just beginning.

I always hate my birthdays. I don't tell anyone that. Cathy and Hannah would think me seriously weird. I try so hard to fit in with them so they'll stay friends with me. Sometimes I try too hard and I find myself copying them.

It's OK if I just yell 'Yay!' like Cathy or dance hunched-up Hannah-style. Ordinary friends catch habits from each other easily enough. But every now and then I overstep this mark in my eagerness. I started reading exactly the same books as Cathy until she spotted what I was doing.

'Can't you choose for yourself, April?' she said. 'Why do you always have to copy me?'

'I'm sorry, Cathy.'

Hannah got irritated too when I started styling my hair exactly like hers, even buying the same little slides and bands and beads.

'This is my hairstyle, April,' she said, giving one of my tiny beaded plaits a tug.

'I'm sorry, Hannah.'

They've both started sighing whenever I say sorry.

'It's kind of creepy,' said Cathy. 'You don't have to keep saying sorry to us.'

'We're your friends,' said Hannah.

They are my friends and I badly want them to stay my friends. They're the first nice normal friends I've ever had. They think I'm nice and normal too, give or take a few slightly strange ways. I'm going to do my best to keep it like that. I'm never going to tell them about me. I'd die if they found out.

I've got so good at pretending I hardly know I'm doing it. I'm like an actress. I've had to play lots and lots of parts. Sometimes I'm not sure if there's any real me left. No, the real me is this me, funny little April Showers, fourteen years old. Today.

I don't know how I'm going to handle it. It's the one day when it's hard to pretend.

