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Abstract

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Additional Keywords

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NOW I WILL BELIEVE THAT THERE ARE UNICORNS

by Amy Wolf



George R. Erickson hurled the twenty-five-percent cotton fiber paper across the room, visions of following it with his Selectric dancing through his head like sugar plums. He moaned softly, stirring the cat, trying to imbed his face into the surface of his writing desk.

Through the wood, he could see the icons of his celebrated past: swirling planets and swaying necromancers, there on the trophy shelf; stiff certificates and honorary degrees, glaring behind glareless glass; and his books, all twelve of them, kicking in a chorus line above his head.

Like fine wine, George's time had come, the second book of his epic trilogy, *A Company of Elves*, having just cracked the New York Times Bestseller List. Dust cover blurbs screamed him worthy of breaking bread with Bradbury, Moorcock, Ellison; royalty checks flowed like mead. But, as with most things, there was trouble in paradise:

George R. Ericksoll could no longer write.

George brushed a sandy blonde wisp off his forehead, staring at his reflection in the elevator's silver panel. A thin-lipped fellow in his mid-thirties stared back, blue eyes pale behind wire frame glasses. He could hardly believe that this waxy-faced, emaciated creature was him; there was a time, not so long ago, when women had actually found him attractive.

He shrugged, trying not to let the past clutch at him, but there it was, metallic fingers drawing ribbons of blood.

Six months ago. Returning home from a triumphant college tour, to find the pink pastel note framed neatly against the refrigerator: "George: please try to understand, but I've always wanted to act." This being how Carol, his wife of eleven years, had informed him that she had run off with a sleazeball Hollywood producer.

"Erickson -- recognized you from the back of the books -- I'm Pat O'Neil." The satyr-like, fiftyish man in the blue-and-red jogging suit caught George's hand in a killer grip.

George stole a glance across a crumbling office, where dirty shafts of sunlight illuminated tiny moth corpses on the window sill.

"So, this is what happens to editors when they die -- they get shipped off to L.A.--"

O'Neil threw back his shoulder-length gray hair, laughing uproariously. "Don't be silly, George; I've always been here, you just never knew it." He cleared his throat awkward-

ly, not a good sign. "Look, I'm not gonna pull any punches with you -- New York's nervous as hell about Midlothian's Heartsong, They want me to try to... speed things along..."

George closed his eyes in pain. If the hole near the bottom of his soul could ooze liquid, he'd be standing up to his neck right now.

It wasn't that he didn't want to write the book -- Christ, how he wanted to! It was just that lately, those hidden realms of fantasy which had once called to him had faded into silence, retreating behind a veil of impenetrability. And he knew, without being told, exactly why this was so.

Because he no longer Believed.

"--ight not be a bad idea to send a temp up to your place this afternoon--" O'Neil was saying. "Lot a' guys tell me the juices really start flowin' if there's somebody else around to bounce ideas off of--"

"Couldn't I just talk to my cat?" George asked, thinking that if he didn't get out of there, he was going to kill either himself or this well-meaning Santa Claus. Bowing his good-byes, he disappeared through the door.

O'Neil stared after him with sympathy. "Sad case," he mumbled, slipping out the back entrance and jogging the twenty miles home along the boulevard.

The innocuous "ding dong" of the bell found George slumped over his Selectric, watching the ribbon cartridge spin round and round. With muted enthusiasm, he dragged over to his front door, opening it to find:

The most beautiful woman in the world staring back at him.

It wasn't that she was dressed provocatively or trying to play up her looks in any way. It was just that beneath the veneer of her red cotton business suit, between the strands of her decorously tied-back black hair, there wafted a heady sensuality, a pure menthol kick that cleared the sinuses.

"Mr. Erickson," the woman said professionally, "my name is Allyson Miles. I'm to take dictation for you from the hours of two 'till four."

"Uh--" George fumbled awkwardly, "won't you please, um--"

She sat down.

He sighed. "I guess they want me to try hashing out ideas for the last book of my trilogy--"

"The one about the elves?" she chimed in brightly.

Heavy pause. "Yes."

He thought for awhile, his tennis shoes moving lightly over shag carpeting. Closing his eyes, he became a Moviola, his visions two-frame splices:

Fairy folk marched through a dense wood, accompanied by the throaty strains of a hammer dulcimer; the sorcerer Norinanthar leaned in to his black grimoire, whispering a Name that was better left unspoken; two armies advanced on an unending plain, one in gold, the other silver, led by a ruby-red amulet flaring brightly, just as--

--the Moviola spluttered to a halt, the film falling from its core.

Allyson's Bic hung birdlike over her ruled steno pad, preparing to add to the legend that was George R. Erickson.

"I... I can't." He sat down heavily, praying for pestilence, flood, the Big Earthquake -- death.

Pity shone from Allyson's gray-green eyes as she reached out to him, squeezing his fingers gently. He steeled himself for the inevitable cliché, but instead, she did something totally unexpected:

She began to take off her clothes.

George stared open-mouthed, thanking God he was sitting down. This woman had a body that could sink a thousand ships -- she was Aphrodite sculpted in alabaster skin. Long braided hair streamed over perfect breasts, gently rounded hips, thighs that cried out to be touched.

"Well?" she asked softly, gauging his every move with those enormous eyes.

"I, I--" George tried to keep his legs from shaking. "You sure you wouldn't feel more comfortable in the bedroom?"

This seemed to trigger something in her. "Turn around," she said.

"But -- what -- what did I--"

"TURN AROUND." This wasn't a request; it was an imperial edict, issued from the lips of a princess.

George swivelled in his desk chair, confusion flooding through him like a drug. He heard the distant rustle of silk, then cotton, and finally, the firm creak of wood as she slammed the door behind her.

Striding over to where she'd left her panty hose, he picked them up, crumpling them into a ball.

Tomorrow, he'd have to tell O'Neil to find a new temp agency.

Allyson stopped running when she arrived in a seedier part of Van Nuys, pausing before a door displaying the coat of arms of a lion, a unicorn, and a knight crushing a scorpion beneath his sabaton. Below it were etched the words, in fine gold leaf: "SECRET SOCIETY, KEEP OUT."

She pushed her way inside, greeting a man seated before a personal computer.

"Well, how'd it go, Arieta?"

"Lousy. He couldn't see me at all -- just sat there with his mouth hanging open, like a stuffed blowfish."

The man shook his head. "Too bad... too bad." He lumbered over to a rusty file cabinet, pulling out an enormous green ledger. Paging rapidly to the E's, he let his pen hover over a scrawled notation reading: "ERICKSON, GEORGE, R. STATUS: 'MAYBE.'"

With a sigh, he crossed out the entry in a flood of ink, substituting: "HOPELESS."

George ducked into a narrow alcove as he spotted Allyson striding out of O'Neil's office, arms overflowing with mailing envelopes. He sighed with relief as she pressed the "down" button, sweeping into the elevator.

"Well?" O'Neil asked metaphorically, his girth expanding behind his desk.

"There's something very strange about that temp, O'Neil. Yesterday, she--"

"Never mind that. Anything happening with the book?"

George knew before saying a word that the editor already had the answer.

O'Neil passed a large hand over his eyes. "I'm afraid there's nothing more I can do for you, Erickson. You're on your own now..."

George nodded heavily, slouching his way back down the hall. Now, more than ever, he wished that Carol were here with him, to stroke his hair softly, tell him that everything would be alright. But she was on location in Oslo, making him happy by finally leaving him alone with his work. Or so she thought.

"That's right, sweetheart -- nice n' easy."

George's foot never made it to the next step leading to the underground garage.

"Take it all off, puta--" Another menacing growl, there, below him, on the stairwell. He crouched down low, taking in the whole scenario: three young punks, very greasy, were slitting off their victim's clothes at knife-point. In one sickening rush of recognition, he caught the glimmer of gray-green eyes that could only belong to one woman.

Steel zigzagged across her thigh as the last of her underclothes hit the filthy floor.

George staggered to his feet, psyching himself up to rush down upon them, to prevent another atrocity in this city where blood flowed more freely than suntan oil. He was no Rambo, but what the hell, his life wasn't worth that much anyway--

He never had a chance to move.

One of the punks closed in on Allyson, then went down with a scream, clutching his bitten hand; the next rolled beside him, the wind knocked out of him by an Amazonian blow from her leg.



The last man up looked scared, but had in his favor a nasty six-inch blade limned with Notches running smoothly down the handle.

"F_____ bitch!" he spat, moving in for her, swinging the steel in a jagged arc for her throat, but finding something else: something unseen. From George's perspective, whatever it was must have protruded from her face, because she shook her head, once, and the punk crashed to the floor, laid out upon impact with -- What?

George stood transfixed as the greasy threesome slunk off, cutting a wide swath around the naked woman who seemed oblivious to their departure. Extending her alabaster neck, she thrust back her head, and from her throat issued the sound of:

Dragons wings whistling overhead; the flourish of a wizard's cap; an aphrodisiac uncapped. With that single piercing note, George heard the sound of imagination, of fantasy, of enchanted worlds whose veils had been ripped off, standing once more resplendent in his sight.

Shaking, he lifted his head from his knees, fighting the urge to run toward Allyson, to take her in his arms. But what he saw was a beautiful woman no longer -- in her place there stood a unicorn, eighteen hands high, with glistening white hide, flowing black mane and tail, an alicorn of twisted white light, and those eyes, unmistakable, gray-green and enormous.

Without a word, he leapt onto the animal's back, grabbing for handfuls of mane. He clung on for dear life as she galloped toward the "Exit" sign, then unfolded diaphanous wings, soaring upward into the night.

His lungs filled with icy air as the two of them burst above the cloud cover, sailing beneath a moon where every crater stood out in bas relief. George saw the stars tonight as they were meant to be seen -- unobscured by smog and neon -- crying out at familiar constellations with the delight of a child.

And he felt free, freer than he ever had in his life; it was the rediscovery of a basic joy he had known when his father

had brought home that beat-up old Remington; when Carol had whispered in his ear that yes, she would marry him; when he saw his name -- his -- staring back at him from a bookstore window.

He felt his stomach drop as the unicorn wheeled sharply, dropping from the Heavens like Icarus plunging into the sea, depositing him (as he knew she would) squarely in the middle of his front porch.

The two of them stood and stared at each other for a long time then, illuminated only by the alicorn of pure white light. George reached out to stroke the animal's drooping beard, as finely spun as the clouds.

"Wha -- what are you doing here?" he finally managed to gasp.

"We never left," she answered calmly, in her clear, human-form voice.

And George knew then, all at once. Knew that she would ascend back into the night, leaving him in the now utter darkness.

But somehow, it didn't matter. He ran into the house, rolling a crisp new sheet into his Selectric, thinking excitedly about the unicorn's Great Cry -- how to get it down just right?

The door to the Secret Society was slightly ajar as Allyson entered. She threw a glance at the man at the P/C, who dispensed his host of unicorns across the planet.

Reading the message in Allyson's eyes, he removed his faithful green ledger. By the name of George R. Erickson, he crossed out "HOPELESS," scrawling, "NOT SO BAD."

With a shared nod, the two of them -- Allyson and O'Neil -- slipped out the window, making their way to wherever hope was needed.