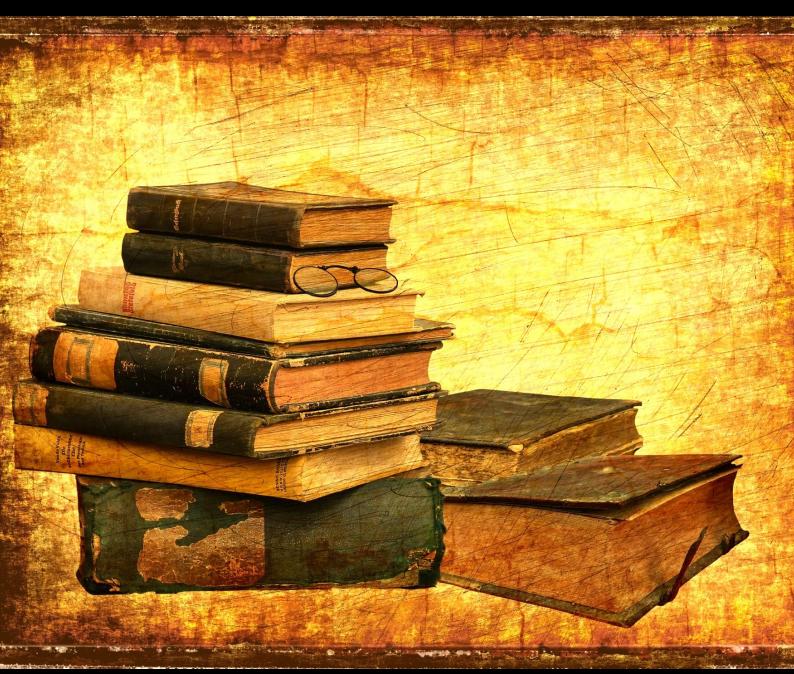
# Clarendon House Short Story Magazine

Satisfying Fiction from Clarendon House Publications Free to download wherever you are





Three gems from some of the best storytellers on the planet: Carmen Baca, R. A. Goli and Alexander Marshall

# Tlarendon House Short Story Magazine

#### Satisfying Fiction from Clarendon House Publications

Welcome to your free copy of this bi-monthly e-magazine from Clarendon House Publications.

Downloadable for free from the Clarendon House website here, each magazine contains a selection of stories from the collections which Clarendon House has already published but because the magazine is a directly downloadable pdf, each story is fully illustrated. As you will know if you're reading this, you have been able to obtain the pdf easily, without having to input even an email address. We encourage you to forward this pdf far and wide for the enjoyment of readers everywhere. It contains links to the Clarendon House collections from which each story is drawn, so it helps every author involved to reach more and more readers. Feedback is welcome! Drop us a line at grant@clarendonhousebooks.com

In this issue:

Rey Salvador by Carmen Baca

'The Journal knew everything: his owner's likes and dislikes, his opinions of family and

friends, his habits and his hobbies, his virtues and his vices. It held his owner's thoughts and secrets within its many pages. It also served as a record of his jobs, customers, and earnings as he worked as a handy man while he travelled across the country...' Let the Journal relate this tragic tale of the lost town of Rey Salvador.

#### Clash of Goddesses by R. A. Goli

Gna' knows that her mission into Hela's realm of Death will not be easy - but little does she suspect the bargain she will have to make to rescue her beloved Baldur...

Raven Stark and the Mollusc Man by Alexander Marshall

From the Seven Worlds Ordnance Response Directorate, agent Raven Stark is launched to save the one last chance for peace in this action-packed sci-fi adventure.

We hope you enjoy the magazine!

All rights reserved. This publication is licensed to the individual reader only. Duplication or distribution by e-mail, floppy disc, network, printout or by other means to a person other than the original recipient is a violation of international copyright law. © 2023 All stories, articles and other items are copyright of the authors as shown herein, and are reproduced here with permission. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without either the prior written permission of the publisher or a license permitting restricted copying in the United Kingdom issued by the Copyright Licensing Agency Ltd, 90 Tottenham Court Road, London W1P 9HE. © 2023 Clarendon House Publications, 76 Coal Pit Lane, Sheffield, England. Published in Sheffield 2023.





























































RECOGNISED
INTERNATIONALLY AS
THE WORLD'S MOST
EXCITING WRITERS'
MAGAZINEI





#### **CLARENDON HOUSE AUTHOR**

## CHARLOTTE LANGTREE



# Fractured: Gales of Flame and Fury



## A Fantasy Collection by Charlotte Langtree

Darkness shadows all worlds. Gods war, queens fall, and trust is broken. A frightened mother beseeches an uncaring god. Rebel Sisters dance on the wind, and doors open to long-forgotten realms. In the depths of the ocean, an ancient dragon stirs. When all hope is lost, who will rise? Who will resist? And who will rain ruin on a fractured land?

Lose yourself in eight tales of courage and chaos, powerful magic, and the women who hold their worlds together.

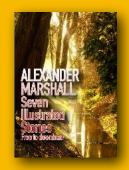
www.clarendonhousebooks.com/charlotte-langtree

## INCREDIBLE FREE DOWNLOADS FROM

#### CLARENDON HOUSE PUBLICATIONS

#### Alexander Marshall: Seven Illustrated Stories

Victorian time travel, gothic fantasy, superheroes, science fiction, magical realism and literary drama - this minicollection has it all! And it's free!





#### Gary Bonn: Six Illustrated Stories

What if everything you've been told is wrong?
Outside what we're told is reality are paths no one takes ... because they're yours.

#### The Clarendon House Short Story Magazine

A bi-monthly e-magazine from Clarendon House Publications, downloadable for free from the Clarendon House website, containing a selection of stories from Clarendon House collections —each story is fully illustrated.





#### The Sword Sundergost: An Illustrated Companion

A free, lavishly illustrated e-book to give you a glimpse into the wide world of Gandria — from the mighty mountains of the Penning to the deserts of Turgal; from the heroic and tragic Valkurn to the twisted and burned Dare-kor; from ancient and powerful gemstones to the Sword Sundergost itself, herein are many windows into the imagination of Alexander Marshall.

#### The 'Laws' of Spamming

Are you putting out post after post on social media about your book, hoping that someone will buy it?

Have you realised yet that this approach doesn't work?

Don't do it!

Instead: • Find your ideal readers • Learn about the Two Kinds of People • Discover How Money Works • Build Up Affinity with Potential Readers





#### Your Biggest Challenge as a Writer — and What You Can Do About It

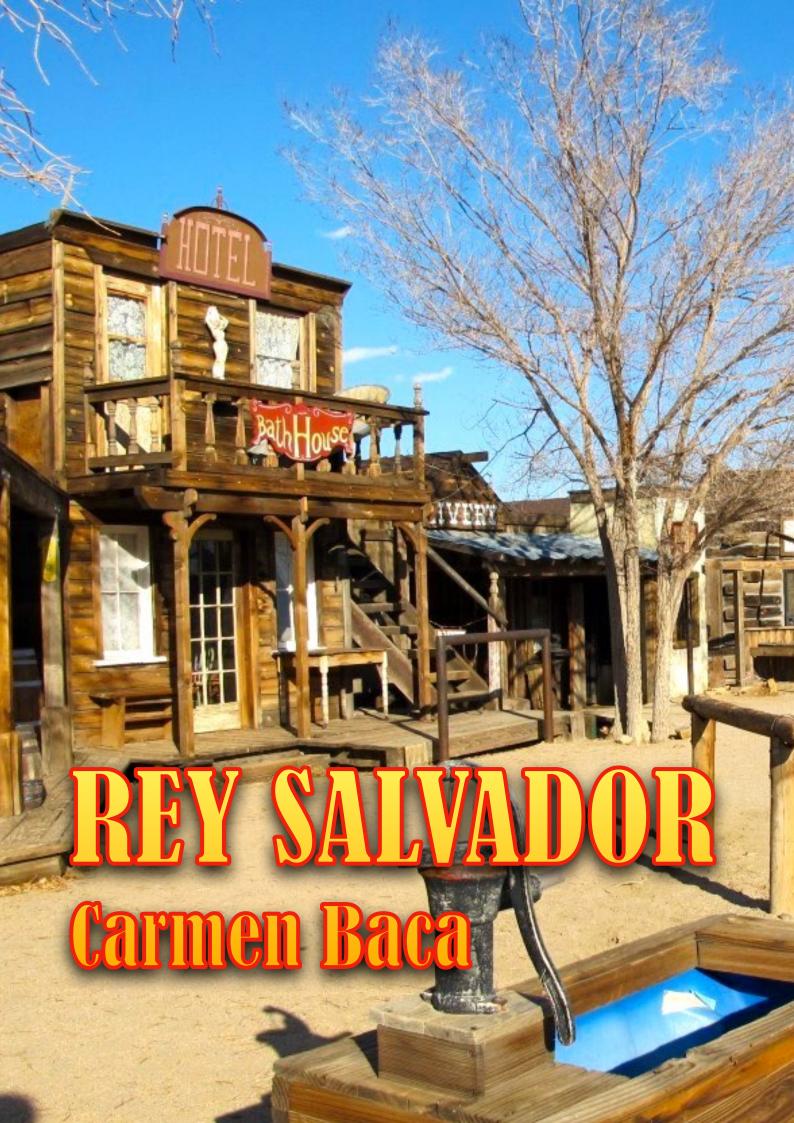
Haunted by your twin enemies, Lack of Time and Procrastination? This 25,000 word e-book shows you the pathway to freedom as a writer.

#### **How to Blog Every Day Possibly Forever**

So you'd like to be able to **generate volume blog content** so that you can create a new blog post **every day of the year** — including weekends and holidays? Creating a daily blog has **tremendous spin-off benefits** that you probably haven't thought of.



...and more! All totally free, no email address required: www.clarendonhousebooks.com/free-items





The Journal knew everything: his owner's likes and dislikes, his opinions of family and friends, his habits and his hobbies, his virtues and his vices. It held his owner's thoughts and secrets within its many pages. It also served as a record of his jobs, customers, and earnings as he worked as a handy man while he travelled across the country. Carpenter by trade, the Journal's owner, José María, also learned as an apprentice to be a farrier and saddler, among other skills he picked up along his way.

In preparation for a journey he decided to undertake, he rode into town to purchase supplies. Carrying his latest buy in the saddlebags he'd made, he was about to cross the street when he glanced into a nearby shop and saw it: a small leather-bound book with the most intricately patterned scrollwork on the front cover. He had to have it and left the shop with it safely tucked in the front pocket of his shirt. And there the Journal stayed for most of its life: observing and listening, smelling, tasting, and feeling all that the man experienced. During the nights it welcomed its owner's opening of its fresh, crisp pages, the scratching of the fountain pen on the material, and the understanding it gained from the man's words as he wrote them. Happiness and humor, satisfaction and discord, pain and frustration - everything José María went through on a daily basis, the Journal not only recorded but understood. It came to be such an integral part of José María's life it was almost an extension of the man.

Early in its role as keeper of records, the Journal discovered its owner was born in a stable where his parents had sought shelter because they had no money for a room in the town through which they traveled. He came into the world early on Christmas morning. As if he knew that he would be a quiet, agreeable individual, he didn't cry out like most infants. When his father pulled him out of the warm body of his mother, he opened his eyes, blinked once, and smiled serenely as if to say, 'I'm home.' He promptly fell asleep as though tired of the long and laborious journey he'd endured to emerge in his new environment.

The man recorded how the little family was discovered only a few hours later when the ranch foreman entered the barn to feed the livestock. The property owner arrived shortly after and was enraged at first by the trespassers. Propelled forward as though by something unseen, he peered through the folds of the blanket swaddling the baby. The twinkling brown orbs looked directly at Mr. Barron and the same peaceful smile appeared on the infant's face. Mr. Barron told his owner much later he felt his heart so filled with love he thought he would have a physical attack of some sort had he not looked away. Something about the baby struck him so emotionally that he offered the father and mother employment on his ranch immediately. Christened José María Cristo, the baby had found his parents a home with only a bright-eyed smile on the first day of his life.

José María wrote about how his father worked for the wealthy horse breeder and his mother was employed as the family's maid. He grew up in a loving environment and Mr. Barron made sure he received both regular and religious education. He performed well academically, but he much preferred his religious studies and outdoor activities. He spent much of his time with Mr. Barron's jardinero, Esteban, who taught him everything about gardening vegetables and caring for the fruit trees. From him, José María learned about which plants were used for curanderismo, the healing arts, and which were poisonous and how they should be removed before taking over the good ones. Additionally, the old man taught him the art of dowsing - searching for water beneath the ground. José María also enjoyed working with the man's wife, Mr. Barron's cook. Named Juanita, she was devoutly Catholic and filled the boy's mind with her own religious experiences as a girl in Mexico. From her, he learned to love Psalms and Proverbs and often recited from one or the other in certain circumstances. After a few years, the ranch hands gave him their own moniker of *el padrecito*, the little priest, for indeed it seemed he might be headed toward the monastery and eventual priesthood the way he embraced the Bible and Christ's teachings.





José María wrote of a specific episode from when he was but ten and the people of the ranch all thought he had disappeared. The Journal gleaned the desperation everyone experienced as they searched for him for hours: the nearby river and ponds, the more distant corn fields and every shed, abandoned shack, and even a mine several miles away - not an area on the property or off was left to look when he emerged from a copse of trees in the distance. Mr. Barron's dog spotted him first and ran to greet him as though warning he was in deep trouble.

'Where were you?'

'What were you thinking?'

'You worried your mother almost to death.'

'¡Muchacho descuidado!' 'Careless boy!' came so fast, one atop the other that José María answered all questions with one quiet statement, the first of many times when he would rely on the Bible to explain his actions.

'Estaba caminando con Dios en mi lado.' He assured them he was walking with God at his side, and recited from Psalms, 'The Lord is my strength and my shield; my heart trusts in him, and He helps me.'

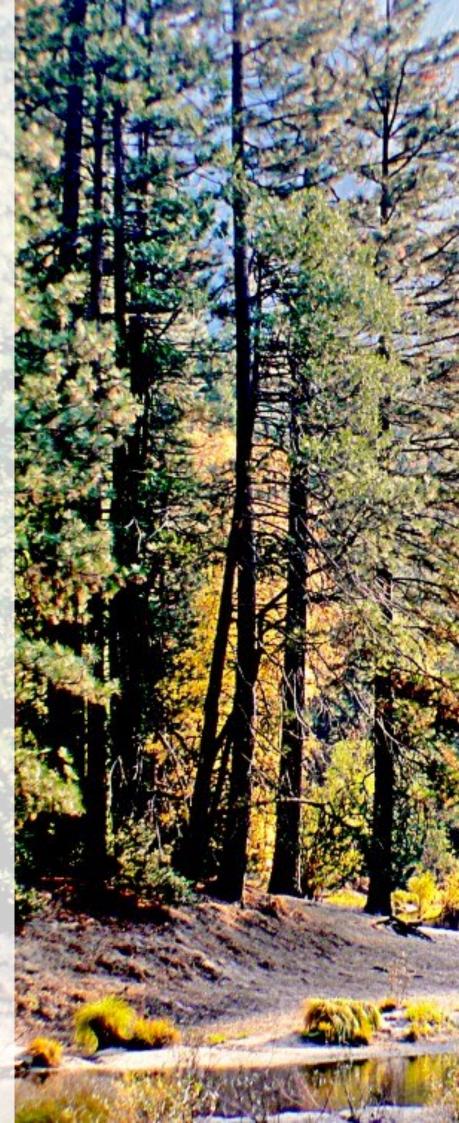
The Journal discovered that was José María's way, quoting scripture on occasions where he deemed a moral needed to be voiced. It never failed to calm those around him down either. Instead of giving him a sound thrashing or other form of punishment, the adults became mesmerized by his words and accepted his quiet resolution - every time. The Journal discovered for itself that something always came over José María when he quoted scripture. As though his eyes saw something not of this world, they shone with an inner understanding and his calm demeanor radiated peace. Everyone within close proximity to him felt a calmness come over them and the worries and fears of only moments before sloughed from their bodies. Had those with whom he grew up not known him his entire life, they might have thought him a child of the devil or a witch who'd cast some sort of spell on them. They loved the boy though, and they felt instead that he was blessed, perhaps even chosen.

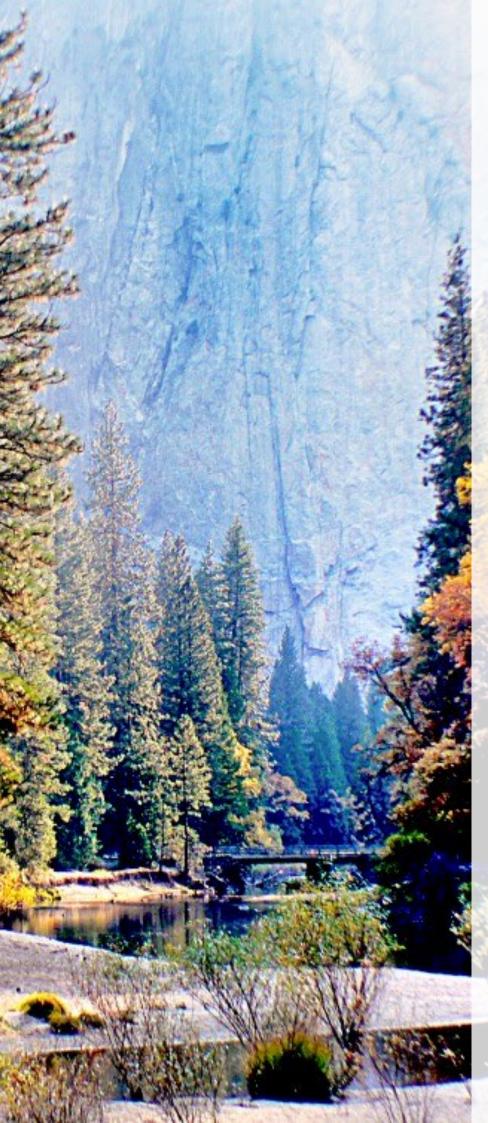
The Journal learned that when José María turned fifteen, Mr. Barron offered him a job, doing whatever he wanted to be trained in through apprenticeship with any of the local town's shop owners. In truth, the boy was sincerely considering entering the priesthood; however, he decided it would be in his best interests to learn other skills which would help him be self-sufficient. After all, if he were ever assigned to villages in the still-to-be-discovered western part of the country, he'd most likely have to build his own capillas, chapels. So he chose carpentry and after learning all he could, he moved on to horse-shoeing. Much in demand in all three areas, he soon earned enough money to strike out on his own.

The Journal recorded the tearful goodbye with José María's parents and even Mr. Barron which preceded his departure from the horse farm in Kansas as a young man. The daybook accompanied his owner as he followed the previously-travelled road of many a settler before him. In the company of fellow travelers, because there was, after all, safety in numbers,

José María was a welcome helpmate to the wagon train master and his crew. When they reached a little valley within the Territory of New Mexico, he bade his compañeros farewell and rode off by himself to explore the lush, green area with purple mountains in the distance.

Something about the territory spoke to him. The Journal felt the pull of the land in the words his owner used to describe it. 'This land is blessed,' José María wrote. 'The freshness of the wafting breeze blowing through the landscape only adds to the eyecatching vista around me. I feel a natural affinity for this place, almost as if it waited for me and I had a void in my heart which was filled upon my arrival here. The green of the meadows varies in tint and color like a patchwork until it meets the tree line of the forest. There the green deepens in the shadow and the shades where the trees are so dense nothing can be seen between them. Rising behind the pine-covered hills, the purple sierras meet the blue of the clear skies as far as the eye can see.





'In the foreground the wildflowers and grasses of the southwest wave their blossoms in the light breeze: the orange Sierra woolly paintbrush blending with the yellow of the desert marigold, the purple of the Musk thistle, and the white of the common yarrow make spectacles of themselves as though competing for my attention. It is as though God painted the lovely landscape for my eyes only. And I find myself blessed to be here.'

Throughout the next week, José María with his journal peering over the top of his vest pocket, traveled around on his faithful steed and his pack mule at his side until he came to know the area fairly well and arrived at a small settlement he later found was called Rey Salvador, meaning King Savior. Looking at the lushness of the valley with a creek flowing at its southern boundary and the towering mountains to the north, he breathed, quoting from Proverbs, 'The name of the righteous is used in blessings.' Discovering its name only an hour later, he knew he was indeed home and wrote in his diary, 'This is God's country.'

The Journal appreciated his owner's desire to write down every detail of his days.

Although the book saw what the man did, heard his musings when he talked to himself or to others, and experienced the smells, sounds, and nuances of the man's activities, it didn't completely comprehend any of it until the man wrote it on its pages. The Journal admired the story-telling style of the man's writing and felt as though it were valued for its role as record-keeper of the man's life story. The Journal knew that one day his owner desired to turn his recordings into a book delineating his travels for others to follow.

After meeting the four families which comprised the settlement and receiving approval to join them, José María assisted the men with preparing lumber for the structures they wanted to build around the plaza area. The men informed the new-comer they'd settled there only a few months previously and still had much to do to prepare for the winter. They worked all day in communal cooperation, stopping for a quick lunch in and around the partiallyconstructed gazebo. The food prepared by the women hit the spot, so the men rested for a half an hour before returning to work. After the evening meal, Don Pablo Lucero offered José María a place to stay until he could build himself a house. The small storage shed had enough room in one corner for him to lay his bedroll and to store his belongings in the meantime. Since there was still sufficient daylight and the evening was warm, he decided to write down a bit of the history of the new settlement he'd gleaned from speaking to Señor Luis Padilla, the eldest, before he could forget any details. Reclining against a tall pine and sitting on the grass by the creek, José María wrote:

'April 1 - The families were grateful for the fast-moving creek that wove through the land near the southern boundary of the acreage they occupied. The settlers began to create *la Acequia Madre*, the mother ditch, to feed their plants, to sustain their animals and to meet their own needs. They worked diligently digging the ditch until they completed it and began routing the water to nurture their sprouting plants. They decided then that they needed to dig wells closer to their homes for easier access in the coming winter. The only problem with the settlers' plan was none knew where to dig. So they continued to take river water bucket by bucket to their homes day in and day out since they could think of no easier way.'

As it was getting dark, José María rose and returned to the shed to sleep. The Journal could sense he was exhausted by his early travels and by the work with the lumber. His owner wrapped it in a clean kerchief and placed it gently in his saddlebags before kneeling to pray and retiring for the night. He slept soundly and rose early the next day. The leather-bound book felt the crisp coolness of the spring morning as Don Luis invited José María to breakfast and they went to work immediately after. The group broke for lunch at the gazebo like the previous day and as they ate the comida the women had prepared, one of the older men asked, 'Do you know anything about well digging?'





'Yes,' José María replied with a nod. The Journal noticed how the men reacted to his admission. It seemed a miracle when he admitted he was also a dowser, otherwise known as a water witch. He told them he'd had previous success finding water beneath the surface of the earth just by using his trusty divining rod. None were aware of the method, and he was a stranger still, so they decided to put him to the test.

While he was finishing his breakfast, Don Padilla and Don Lucero devised a plan to see whether José María could do what he claimed. Don Lucero had an old canteen which had developed a small drip. He filled the vessel with water and buried it in a hole four feet deep he and Don Padilla dug in back of his house. When José María finished his meal, they approached and led him to Don Lucero's property.

'We all want to dig wells for each of our houses,' Don Padilla explained when José María had retrieved his rod and followed the man to Don Lucero's house, 'or at least a couple set in places we can get to without having to carry it so far like we do now.'

'Being that your *casas* aren't that far apart,' José María said, 'perhaps we can begin here then.' He handed the rod, nothing more than a forked branch, to the older man and said, 'See, it's nothing more than a *jara*, a willow rod I picked up on a riverbank back home. I used it in my journey across the country to find water when there was none above ground.'

The elder gentleman turned the flexible stick every which way and handed it to Don Padilla, who examined it as well. The two men watched as José María went to the wall of the house and stood erect with his feet together. He closed his eyes, took a deep breath while rolling his shoulders a few times, and expelled the air from his mouth slowly. He opened his eyes, and holding the two ends of the Y in each hand, he positioned the stem of the fork straight before him before taking a step forward. He moved heel to toe for several feet as the men observed in silence and the Journal watched the men. José María had gone only about five feet when the divining rod twitched almost imperceptibly and began to dip downward. One more step made the rod point directly to the ground. José María stopped: 'Aquí hay agua; there is water here.'

Don Padilla and Don Lucero's heads turned toward each other. Eyes wide and mouths agape, they were astounded the rod pointed to where they'd buried the canteen.

'Impossible,' scoffed one man.

'No puede ser verdad,' another declared with a shake of his head. 'It can't be true.'

'But it is!' Don Lucero exclaimed as between the two, he and Don Padilla told the rest what they had done. 'We are sorry, José María,' he finished, looking directly at the water witch, 'we wanted to believe you, but we couldn't. So we came up with a test and buried a *cantina* full of water here.'

'No!' exclaimed several of the men. '¡Si!' exclaimed a few others, more easily convinced and excited that this water-witching phenomenon could be true. '¡Vamos a ver si trabaja de deveras!' another man proposed. 'Let's see if it works in truth.'

By the end of the month, José María chronicled the days which followed his initial performance with his rod. 'Day 1, April 11 - I marked five places where the rod of divination pointed to water. The men began to dig in each spot by the same afternoon. The following day, the men found water in three of the places by midmorning and in the last two by the late afternoon. Over the next several days, the men finished lining two of the wells with flat rocks the older children found and supplied. The holes began filling with water which the boys began removing by buckets until the water cleared. By the end of April, there were five

wells producing sufficient water for drinking and cooking. The community continues to use the river for all other tasks which need water.'

José María logged every little event in the community of Rey Salvador over the next few months: the men completed the gazebo and framed a few other structures, including a small cabin for José María set apart from the others and closest to the forest where he wanted it. The Journal kept his records diligently and saw how his master seemed content with his life here. Finding acceptance among the community members, from the men who learned more about wood working, to the women who accepted his help with the gardening and the making of herbal remedies, to the children who learned from him how to fish with only a string and a twig, José María was prepared to stay for a while. His Journal, possessor of its owner's secrets, knew that he had found not only refuge in Rey Salvador, but also a community of like-minded Christian souls whom he could perhaps serve as pastor in the years ahead. He ended his entry for the night with these words: 'I believe I have found my home where I can be of use and serve my fellow man, for here is a blessed community which bears the name of our Lord and as Matthew 18:20 states, "where two or three are gathered in [the Lord's] name, [He is there] among them." I truly believe that this is God's country.'





They say that periods of happiness don't last, that life is filled with such intervals between bad times. And sad to say, José María and his loyal Journal were in for such a spell.

It came during the month of June, the month Christians celebrate the feast day of John the Baptist. José María registered the events in his Journal for as long as he could.

'June 24 - the feast day of John the Baptist was upon us. We awoke to silence, a complete stillness that not even the noisy magpies or the passing crows and hawks disturbed. No frogs croaked in contentment, no crickets or cicadas chirped, not even a squirrel or a lizard were seen. We exited our homes in confusion, all of us meeting in the center of the plaza looking in all directions, listening for any noise that would give us a clue as to what had occurred during the night to bring such a quietude.'

The Journal recalled the beginning of the end as though it had grown a mind of its own. As best as it could register, this is a chronicle of the events as they occurred.

"The river,' one of the young boys shouted, running to the bank. '¡No hay agua!' he turned and screamed when he was close enough to see. The rest of the people broke into a run, reaching the riverbank where only a trickle remained of the fast-moving creek that had been there only the evening before. There was no water!

'¡Es un castigo de Dios!' one of the women cried and promptly fainted before anyone could even think to move and catch her. Many agreed that it was a punishment from God. For what though, they had no idea.

For many minutes the people of Rey Salvador sought answers from ignorance. They could think of no natural reason for the creek to have gone dry overnight - and on the day they expected to have celebrated the abundant waters in a mass they'd planned for the feast, no less. They were flabbergasted; some were in such shock their eyes took on the look of sleep walkers while others became angry and sought blame where there was none. It wasn't long before the people found the one whom they condemned for the demise of the river: the water witch.

'¡Brujo!' some yelled, and the accusations began - one after the other. !76

'He knows how to make potions from plants! That makes him a witch!' screamed one.

'It's true - I - I felt sick to my stomach when he gave me his cure for my sore throat!' roared one from the back of the crowd pressing forward toward José María.

'I hear him at night,' confessed a boy of about twelve. 'I passed by his cabin and heard him chanting, and when I went back another night, he was chanting again - in a language I couldn't understand!'

'I pray in Latin,' José María stated quietly.

Not knowing what Latin was, a woman
screeched, 'That proves it! He speaks in the devil's
language!'

The accusations flew, the stoning began, the condemnation was forthcoming. Despite his verbal protests because he didn't offer a physical one, José María was held by two men who threw him back in the storage shed where he'd first been offered shelter and the door locked behind him as the rest of Rey Salvador determined his punishment. Rationalizing incorrectly, they figured José María had used witchcraft to somehow divert the river water to their wells, leaving the creek to dry. They mistakenly decided that eventually their wells would also dry and they would have to abandon their community just as it had begun to flourish.

Alone in his enforced solitude, José María wrote his thoughts as his Journal recorded them. Feeling as though it offered its master solace at least, the Journal felt it was the one loyal friend José María could count on in his moment of need. While he consoled himself with reciting from the Bible and writing in his log, the people debated and then decided his fate. This was the West, after all, a rugged, undeveloped country with no established law at hand to deliver justice. Rey Salvador would hang its first villain - a man they determined was a witch would be hanged at dawn on the day after they were to have given thanks to God for their wealth of water.

José María's last thoughts were found in the words he wrote in his Journal when they pulled him down from the rope which cut off his last breath. John 15:13 proclaims there is no 'Greater love...than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.'





Epilogue

José María Cristo's Journal survived; one among the settlers took it with him when he fled Rey Salvador and left it behind at a settlement in the Rockies before he met his own demise. In a shaky hand as if written by an inexperienced writer, the last entry in the Journal read as follows:

'What none of my master's accusers knew was that a few miles upriver was a very large settlement. It was responsible for the river drying out. The day before, the settlers there had finished construction on a dam they'd made to divert the river to their community, little knowing they were affecting Rey Salvador's very existence. As for the people of Rey Salvador, when they found and read José María Cristo's Journal, the shared blame and guilt for how they had sacrificed an honest and faithful Christian ate at them. The monster which had been created by their own ignorance and communal condemnation chewed on their very hearts and swallowed their happiness. They were never the same and allowed themselves to be devoured by their culpability. Some left, only to find death awaiting in a variety of ways - famine, disease, attack by savages or by beasts. Others, too despondent to leave their beds, succumbed to the atrophy of their muscles and simply curled up and died. A few went mad and had to be put down like rabid animals, and yet several more leapt from cliffs or merely wandered off into the forest where only God knew what happened to them.

'Rey Salvador is no more; not even a speck on any map exists to show where it was - once. Swallowed by the earth for what its inhabitants had done, the settlement is gone like the people who created it. Justice is swift at the hands of the Lord.'

## CLARENDON HOUSE AUTHOR



## CARMEN BACA

CUENTOS DEL CAÑÓN

Journey to a world that is both deeply human and strangely phantasmagorical.





## Viajes con Fantasmas

La Quinceañera

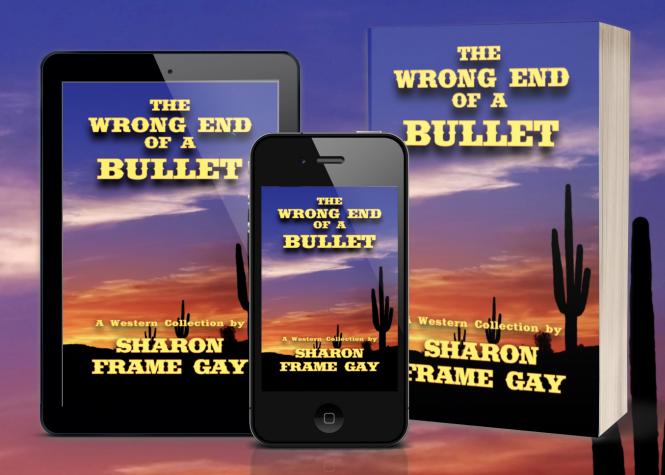


www.clarendonhousebooks.com/carmen-baca

## CLARENDON HOUSE AUTHOR

#### SHARON FRAME GAY





Award winning author Sharon Frame Gay grew up a child of the highway, playing by the side of the road.

Her westerns have been internationally published in anthologies and magazines, including Saddlebag Dispatches, The Writing District, Rope and Wire, Fiction On The Web, Five Star Publishing, Frontier Tales, Owl Hollow Press, Zimbell House, Clarendon House, New Reader Magazine, and others.

The short story "North Star" won a Will Rogers Medallion for Excellence in Western Writing in 2021. "The Actress" won Publication of the Year for Spillwords in 2022. Other westerns have been nominated for the Peacemaker Award and the Pushcart Prize.

www.clarendonhousebooks.com/sharonframegay





The sound of squelching each time her horse pulled a hoof free of the thick mud was starting to annoy Gna'.

Squelch, squelch, squelch.

That and the incredibly slow pace they traveled was enough to drive her to madness. Normally, they would take flight, Hofvarpnir's hooves galloping on unseen paths in the sky, but not this time. Not where they were going. She sighed and tried to focus her mind elsewhere. Trees loomed overhead like skeletal giants, their branches gnarled and twisted like arthritic hands. Whispers surged around her, but she paid them no mind; just a trick of the sorceress to scare away the living.

The mud became more sludgy as they neared the bridge. She could see it in the distance, a monolithic skeleton, stretching across the frozen river. No sign of Modgud, but she'd be close. Gna' could feel her presence looming, like the sickly-sweet stench of rotted meat

Squelch, squelch, squelch.

'Not long now, boy.' She patted the horse's neck and gently spurred him on. The stallion snorted in response and kept moving, no doubt frustrated with the mud as well, itching to soar through clouds alongside the birds.

When they reached the bridge, Hofvarpnir hesitated, but Gna' urged him onwards. The bridge was made completely of bones: humans, animals, even gods. The steed's hooves clip-clopped against the bridge's vertebrae. Gna' looked between the gaps at the frozen river beneath and shuddered. No creature was

immune to its poison; to fall into the water meant death. Scanning the river, she saw the petrified remains of birds, griffons, manticores, centaurs and men. All frozen in poses of pure terror, skin, fur and feathers calcified, their eyes shriveled grey orbs. The fossilized beasts looked like sentries guarding the frigid estuary.

A dark gray mist floated down the river towards them, enveloping the bridge as it came. Gna' pulled the horse up as the mist swirled in front of them, a rapidly rotating cumulonimbus cloud, like a small tornado. It spun faster and faster until a large, Amazonian-like woman stood before her. The witch's head was covered in a helm, her black shaggy hair sticking out from its rim to fall haphazardly around her shoulders. Her dress was made of plated armor and she held a sword and a staff.

'Turn back, Gna', you don't belong here.'

'I must get to the underworld and as you know, this is the only way.'

'Why must you? Are you dead?' Modgud laughed, then began chanting. A moment later the head of her staff glowed deep crimson and she thrust it towards Gna'.

The smaller woman was thrown from her horse. She landed on her back, the bridge's bone-shards piercing her flesh in several places where her own leather armor failed to cover her sufficiently. Fortunately, the bear fur that lined the collar of her cloak cushioned her head from similar injury. She shrugged it off as she stood and pulled the spear from the sheath at her back.

'I have business with Hela.'

'Do you? Frigga has a message for the goddess of the underworld? I wonder what it could be?'

Modgud was mocking her. She knew what Gna' had been sent to the underworld for. Gna' knew it would be more dangerous than her usual missions; however, she had a vested interest in succeeding this time.

Hofvarpnir took a few steps back, sensing what was coming. The sorceress saw this and repeated her incantation. Her staff blazed and she aimed it at him. Gna' flicked her weapon in front of the steed, deflecting the blow, just as the horse took flight. Gna' was no stranger to battle and moved swiftly, with or without her horse companion. In an instant she was at the witch's side and knocked the stave from her hand. Modgud let out a banshee-like scream and thrashed her sword at Gna'. She parried, using her unbreakable spear to block the blade and alternatively, stab at the woman, searching for a gap in her armor that would expose a vital organ. Gna' moved so swiftly, Modgud was unable to land a successful blow and quickly grew tired. Without her staff, her incantations were useless. Gna' stabbed the woman's forearm, then her legs. Soon, crimson rivulets ran from the sorceress' appendages, splattering against the boney protuberances under their feet. Gna' saw Modgud's breath coming in ragged gasps and in a flash, she was at the witch's back, spearpoint digging into her neck. Before Gna' had a chance to drive the sharppointed steel through her throat, Modgud dropped her sword, transformed into a swirling grey fog and gusted down the bridge the way she had come.

With the fight over, Gna' realized she was panting and took a moment to catch her breath. The sound of hooves approached and stopped beside her. Her steed rubbed his side against hers. Gna' slid the spear back in its sheath, put her cloak over her shoulders and mounted up. It would take them another two hours to cross the bridge, but it was the only way in. She hoped Modgud wouldn't come back during that time, but she would be vigilant. If they made it across the bridge and river, then the witch couldn't touch them. If she did reappear, Gna' would kill her.



The muddied ground came to an end not long after Gna' cleared the bridge, replaced with a scarred land, arid and bleak. Hardened dirt cracked beneath the horse's hooves and Gna' wondered if she should let the beast take flight. She looked overhead at the canopy of trees, so thick she wondered how to breach them, and as an afterthought, wondered how they grew so tall with the land so dry. The branches were mostly bare, if you didn't count the murder of crows who watched her from their highest perch. She wondered if any were Odin's, sent to report on her progress. She dismissed them, as she dismissed the idea of flying, for the same reason she had declined to earlier. She didn't want to draw undue attention to herself. She had to reach Hela.

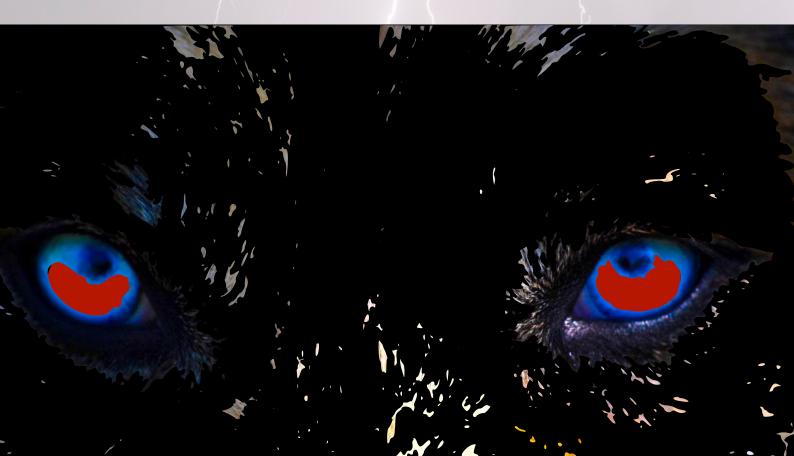
She pulled some oatcakes from Hofvarpnir's saddle, shoved one in her mouth, then leaned forward to push two into the horse's mouth. Usually they would stop to eat but she hadn't the time nor the patience. She was reaching for another oatcake when she heard the howl. A long eerie wail that sent her heart to her throat.

'What in the name of Asgard?!'

Hofvarpnir moved to a canter, but the forest became so dense he could only trot between thick grey trunks, as Gna' ducked to avoid losing her head from the low hanging branches. She heard the beast's cry again from behind her and chanced a look. A huge hellhound, larger than a wolf, its fur as black as a starless night sky, was gaining on them. Another howl, this one from the east.

'Up.' She tugged the reins and the horse leapt into the air, but his magical hooves couldn't find purchase on the air currents in the underworld, perhaps because there were none. Both horse and rider plummeted to the ground. Hofvarpnir stumbled, snapping his foreleg, his animalistic shriek of pain freezing Gna's heart as she was tossed to the hard ground. Bruised but otherwise uninjured she scrambled to her feet and pulled her spear from its sheath just as the first hound tore into the horse's flank. She sprinted to it and pushed her spear through its ribcage, twisting it to pierce the beast's heart. Its yelp bought a satisfied grunt from Gna' and she pulled her spear out and booted the dying beast aside.

She heard the pounding feet of the other hound and spun to face it. It stopped a few lengths before her, red eyes boring into hers. Its jaw hung low, pink drool flowing down its face. Its exposed teeth seemed to gleam, even in the dim light that managed to penetrate the compacted trees. It growled and she readied herself for the attack. Sweat trickled down her back and blood thundered through her ears. Another feral growl escaped the creature's lips as it lowered its head, hackles raised. An adrenaline-laced fear drove her forward and she charged.





A hound she hadn't known was there leapt at her from her right and latched onto her shoulder as they both fell to the dirt. Hot pain radiated from the gash and down her arm. It throbbed like a pulsing fire with every beat of her heart. She screamed in agony. The other beast lunged, ready to take her head in its maw. She held the spear out

sideways and the dog clamped its mouth on top of it. She pushed it into the back of its throat, forcing the animal back and keeping its dangerously sharp teeth from her face. The second hound released her shoulder and Gna' cried out in despair, knowing the beast would sink its jaws into her neck in a few seconds and rip out her throat.

Hofvarpnir whinnied, then she heard the sound of a hundred crows cawing and swooping. The hound let go of her spear to defend itself from the onslaught and Gna' scrambled back. She pushed the tip of her spear through the roof of the remaining hound's mouth just as the flock attached themselves to the creature's back. It bucked weakly. She pulled out the spear and stabbed it through the top of its head, the only place free from the carnivorous birds. The skull cracked open like a dropped bowl and the birds quieted, happy to feast on the now-dead beast. She looked at the other hound. It lay on its side, its breathing labored. The crows had torn off strips of its skin and were flying above, fighting over the pieces. Blood pooled on the ground beneath, turning the dirt blackish-red. The hellhound's red eyes no longer glowed; now they watched her, their light fading like the dying embers of a fire. She walked to it and stabbed it through the chest, giving it a quicker death than the birds were offering.

She hobbled to her steed and crouched beside him, examining his wounds. He whined, his brown eyes full of pain and fear. She bent forward and kissed his forehead.

'Shhh, it'll be all right.'

She pulled the healing balm from her saddlebag, the one her Elven lover, Ka'nfuer, had made for her the last time she had visited Alfheim. She shrugged off her torn cloak and rubbed the balm against the gaping wound at her shoulder. She did the same to the torn horse's flank. His raspy breath eased as the magical cream soaked into the muscle and provided an analgesic affect. Her shoulder already felt less painful. It would take hours for the wound to close over, same for Hofvarpnir's flank. Next, she rubbed the potion over the horse's broken leg and cringed when he whined and tried to move it away.

'Shhh, just give it a few minutes, the pain will ease.'

The pain would; however, it would be at least a day or more for the bones to knit and for the horse to be able to walk. She would have to leave him behind and collect him on the way back, should she live that long.

She rested for a few hours, allowing her shoulder some time to heal, then she ate, drank and relieved herself behind some trees. The crows continued to watch and while she was thankful for their aid, she hoped they didn't report everything to Odin and Frigga. She left the horse with grain, oatcakes and water, trusting the birds had had their fill of hound and wouldn't steal Hofvarpnir's food.

'I'll be back for you, my friend.'

She covered him with her cloak and set off on foot to meet the goddess of the underworld.

Without her mount the next part of the trip took two days. Fearful she would run into more of Modgud's hellhounds, she had barely slept and was exhausted when she reached the lavafilled pits which signaled her entrance to the underworld. Her boots kicked up red dust as she walked and her eyes watered from the sheer heat. Each breath was torturous as if her lungs were filling with fire. Even the crows found it too hot and waited at the entrance.

She navigated her way around the molten lakes, heading for the citadel, while skeletal wraiths watched with soulless eyes, envious of her flesh-covered form. She ignored them, knowing they wouldn't harm her; it was Hela's army of undead she had to worry about, should the goddess choose to unleash them. A horde of

decaying corpses, hellbent on feasting on the living. She shuddered at the thought as her pulse pounded in her ears. Fear gnawed at her belly and her eyes darted around, wondering what was behind this mound of red dirt, or that one. Her chest tightened, her lungs burned and fear washed over her like a blanket. *No.* She reassured herself. The army would have come for her already if that's what Hela wanted. The underworld goddess would allow Gna' safe passage, since she had gotten this far.

The citadel gates loomed ahead and opened upon her approach. Beyond them stood a cloaked figure, his face in shadow. A guide. He held out a skeletal hand, expecting payment. Gna' cringed as a handful of maggots fell from the sleeve of his robe and onto his hand. He shook them off as she fished out the Labradorite gem and dropped it into his bony palm. The guide nodded and gestured for her to follow.

He led her through a labyrinth of tunnels, a system of branching pathways designed to confuse and disorient, like the empty veins of the citadel. Without the guide she would have been lost in minutes. It was impossible to keep track of every turn and hidden door. The passageway stank of decay and the claustrophobic warmth made her dizzy. Eventually he led her to a room where the goddess herself sat perched on a throne made of human skulls. Gna' dropped to one knee, head down.





'Rise, messenger of Frigga.'

Gna' stood and looked at Hela. One side of her face was beautiful; porcelain skin, flawless with a hint of pink on the cheek. Her full lips were alluring; made to be kissed. Her left eye shone brightly, full of as many shifting colors as the Labradorite gem she had used to pay the guide. When the goddess moved her head, Gna' saw the right side was wretched and decayed, the pallor grey, the milky white eye sat in a sunken, blackened socket. The ruby lips had been sucked of color and volume and perched there like shriveled worms. Gna' had to swallow down the acid that gurgled its way up her throat at the sight of her fellow goddess. Hela's black horns were large and stag-like, with at least five branches to each stem. If she was to stand, they would put her at over eight feet tall. Gna' tried not to recoil as the goddess stared down at her.

'I've been sent by Frigga to negotiate Baldur's release.'

Hela laughed. 'I know why you're here.' She clicked her fingers and her minions carried in a large cage and dropped it unceremoniously at Hela's feet. Inside Baldur sat, pale and weakened. His eyes widened when he saw Gna' and he shakily got to his feet. Gna' refused to make eye contact with him, fearing if Hela knew he was one of her lovers, the goddess would use it against her.

'What could you offer worth trading for the son of Odin and Frigga?'

'Frigga has promised to fulfil whatever wish you ask of her.'

'And what of you, messenger? You're the one who's here, what have you to offer?'

Gna' thought of what she had. Her swiftness, her steed, her unbreakable staff. Would Hela want any of that? All of it?

'I humbly offer you all that I have for Baldur's release. My swiftness, my magical flying steed and my unbreakable staff.'

Hela leaned forward. 'I know he's your lover. You have many, why is this one special?'

'I am doing my duty as Frigga's messenger.'

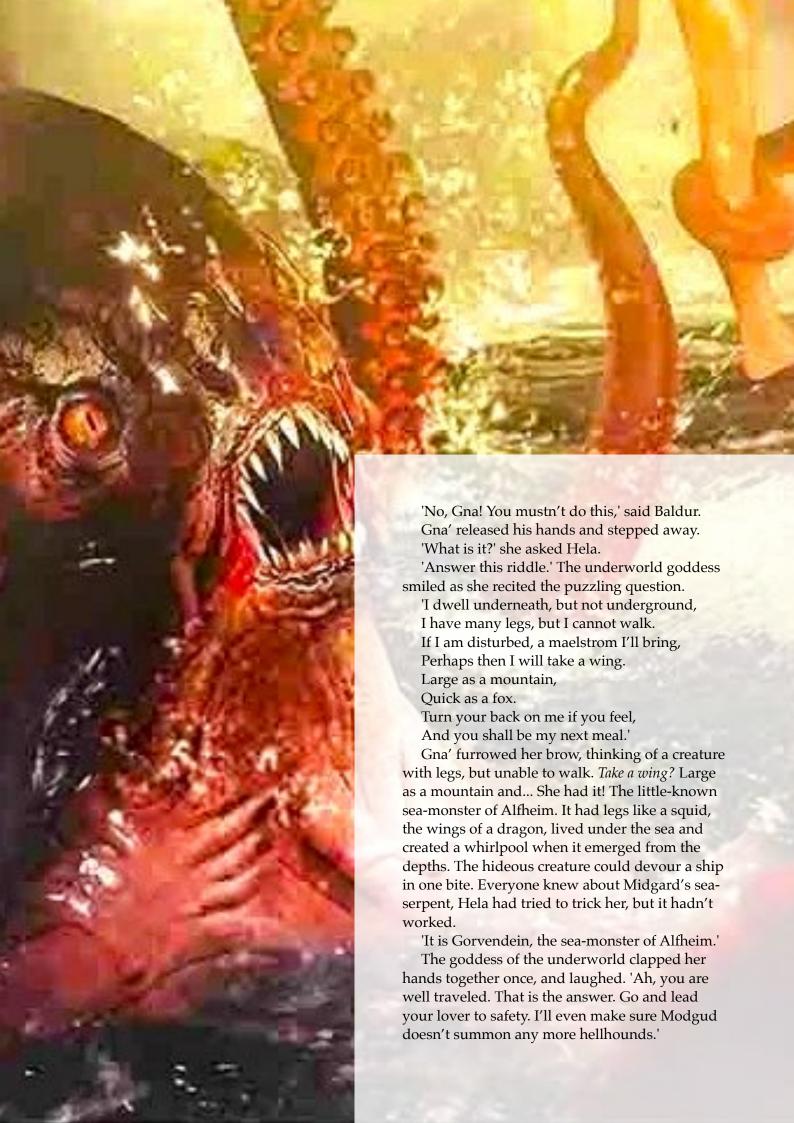
'Hmmm. I don't want any of your trinkets and your horse can't fly down here, nor do I have need of swiftness. What I will take though, is your life.'

Gna' sucked in a breath. She hadn't expected that. Though she risked her life to get here, it was an entirely different matter to give it up without a fight. She turned to Baldur who was shaking his head frantically. Her heart beat painfully fast and a sick sense of dread formed in her stomach. She was in love with him. She had no choice. She moved to the cage and clasped his hands through the bars, then turned to Hela.

'I accept. I will take his place on one condition.' 'And what condition is that?'

'You allow me to guide him out of the underworld and escort both Baldur and Hofvarpnir safely across the frozen river. Allow me to spend a few more days with them and then I'll be yours for the rest of eternity.'

'I'm no stranger to love; very well, but you must do something first.'





'You mustn't do this, Gna', I forbid it,' said Baldur, squeezing her hands.

'It's done!' Hela snapped her fingers again and a minion unlocked the cage.

Baldur ran to Gna' and pulled her into his arms. His kiss sent shivers down her spine and a tingle between her legs.

'Eccch! Get out.' Hela pointed to the door and it swung open. On the other side was the cloaked guide.

Baldur released Gna's lips, grabbed her hand and pulled her towards the cadaverous creature. The door slammed closed behind them but they could hear the distinct sound of Hela laughing.

By the time they reached Hofvarpnir two days later, he was on his feet and walking around impatiently. He was so happy to see Gna' he whinnied and pranced around her in circles like a young foal. They rested there, in the arid land devoid of any real life or color, not including themselves or the crows who had rejoined the party. After eating and tending to Hofvarpnir, Baldur and Gna' made love on the hard ground, knowing it would be the last chance they would have. The next morning they would be crossing Modgud's bridge and saying their final goodbye.

Both Baldur and Hofvarpnir were sullen as they crossed the frozen river to the sludgy other side. The crows took flight, leaving them behind, their work done for the time being. Baldur sat behind her on Hofvarpnir, his arms wrapped tightly around her waist as she gently guided the horse away from the bridge. The poor god was weakened from his capture and Gna' knew he was wrestling with feelings of guilt. The trees around them loomed large, much larger than in the arid lands, however they were sparse in comparison and the further they traveled from the bridge the sparser it became. The reason she had avoided flight coming in was for fear of alerting Modgud or anyone else who may have tried to stop her, but she had no concerns now. In fact, the sorceress had been ordered to stand down. Gna' leaned forward and kissed the horse's head. He snorted sulkily, until she whispered in his ear. She clutched one of Baldur's forearms tightly, checking he had a firm hold, then shouted:

'Now!'



Hofvarpnir bolted, flinging mud in the air as he ran. Baldur's hands tightened around her waist.

'Faster.'

They needed speed if they were to become airborne. They were swift. As fast as a lightning

strike or predator springing from the bushes to capture its prey. If Hela knew what was happening, she would be too late to do anything, they were already well away from the underworld. Gna' could feel the change in the horse's gait; he was about to leap. Then she saw something that chilled her blood and caused a heavy lump to form in her belly.

From the sludge emerged a skeletal hand, followed by a grey, tattered arm. Hofvarpnir saw it too and swerved to avoid it, but there were more, sprouting through the mud like morbid plants. The horse cantered around them erratically. Gna' felt panic rise from her gut and a feral moan clawed at her throat.

'Go! Up!' She clenched her thighs and pulled the reigns but deep down she knew it was too late. He had lost the speed needed. Abruptly he did take flight, but before she felt relief or hope, there was a jolt as the undead things latched onto the horse's hind legs. It threw off his trajectory and Baldur lost his grip and fell to the ground, landing flat on his back in the soft mud. The creatures held tight and the weight of them pulled both horse and rider down until they dropped into the sludge with a splat.

Gna' was quick to her feet but her horse was slower to stand and a dozen flesh-eaters leapt on the poor creature and started clawing and biting his flesh. Gna' glanced to Baldur who was flinging a skeletal form into a group of oncoming undead. They toppled like wine bottles and the god strode over to the nearest one and ripped its arms off with his bare hands. Gna' couldn't help but smile at the man's strength.

As three of the undead were coming towards her, she ran to her horse before they could reach her and speared one in the back of the skull, then flicked it aside. She did the same to two more before the horse was free enough to stand. She winced when she saw him. His flank was badly torn, chunks of flesh and gore covered his side and his legs were tattooed in blood. He fought hard, kicking his hind legs out and knocking corpses back, their bodies snapping and falling in useless heaps in the mud.

Gna' was smacking the undead down with her spear, crushing their decayed skulls under her boot. They cracked like griffon eggs. Their numbers were thinning, but Gna' could see more rotted hands clawing their way to the surface. Hela's army of undead seemed endless.



'We have to move,' she shouted to Baldur. He nodded, his face pale and covered in a sheen of sweat. The fight was taking what little energy he had left. A corpse bit into her left arm and she screamed, thrusting her spear into its chest. Baldur ran to her and ripped the creature's head from its shoulders, tossing it at one of Hofvarpnir's attackers.

'Hofvarpnir, we need to go.' She saw the horse crush an undead's head in his mouth and spit out the decayed flesh. Then he started to hobble towards her. It pained her to see him like that but she had no time for the balm then. She pointed and the three of them ran, away from the bridge, away from the mud, slaughtering any undead that materialized nearby. Her arm ached, Baldur was drained of color and poor Hofvarpnir shuffled like an old gelding, but they were swift enough. Faster than the horde who shambled on rotted flesh and brittle bones.

When the ground became grass, they mounted the horse. He limped on while Gna' hastily fished out the balm from the saddlebag and smeared as many of his wounds as she could reach. She hoped it would be enough. One look behind showed her the undead were still trailing them.

Soon her noble steed was no longer staggering but had moved into a smooth canter. He let out painful snorts with each stride and Gna's heart ached for the poor creature. She stroked the horse's neck. She didn't need to tell him how crucial it was that he move faster - he knew. Soon he had moved into a gallop and then finally leapt into the air, his hooves moving on unseen air currents and pathways.

Gna' looked down. The undead swarmed at the place where they had left the ground in disarray. She passed the balm to Baldur so he could tend to any wounds he had and looked ahead. He immediately smoothed the lotion into her torn arm, the balm cooling the burning pain within a few minutes. She closed her eyes as his hands roamed the rest of her for any other wounds. No one spoke for a long time. When she opened her eyes again, the day seemed brighter than before, and in the distance, she could see Asgard.

With their homeland in their sights and no one in pursuit, Gna' and Baldur relaxed a little, though Hofvarpnir kept pace, his sense of urgency never faltering.

'You lied to her. You lied to the goddess of the underworld,' Baldur said.

'Yes.'



'You never had any intention of going back?' 'No.' Gna' shook her head slightly.

'But you're Àsynja, the Aesir don't lie. What about our honor?'

'Your mother told me to do or say whatever I had to get you out.'

Baldur was silent, but she felt his strong hands wrap around her a little more tightly.

'Thank you.'

'You're welcome. I was just doing my job.'

He rubbed his hands against her thighs and pressed his lips to her ear. 'Were you?'

She half-turned to look at him and smiled. Her cloak still stunk of horse and she regretted putting it back on. 'Well, I do like you a little bit.'

He smiled back. She tried to gauge his look. Was it skepticism, jealousy? Did he know about her other lovers? Did he care?

Finally, he spoke. 'I like you too.'

Odin was furious. After their initial delight at the return of their son, Odin and Frigga's moods turned dark as Baldur and Gna' relayed the events which led to their escape. Now they sat on golden thrones on the dais, looking down at Gna' and Baldur.

'What have you done you foolish woman? Have you no honor, no decency?' Odin shouted

and Gna' winced. She looked to Frigga, but the goddess merely looked disappointed.

'Father she saved my...' Baldur began.

Odin raised his hand. 'Go, so your mother and I can discuss Gna's punishment!'

'Punishment?' said Baldur.

Frigga stepped forward and embraced her son. 'Go now, I'll see that he goes easy on her.'

Baldur kissed her cheek then bowed to Odin. He half-smiled at Gna' before he turned and left the chamber. He could do nothing for her, she knew that, not against Odin. She would have to take whatever penalty he had in store for her.

Gna' dropped to one knee as a sign of respect and bowed her head. 'I am ready to accept whatever punishment you deem fit.'

'Very good. Your promise to Hela was broken. Your punishment shall be to keep your word. You will go back to the underworld, just as you agreed. For all eternity.'

It felt as though the air had been sucked from her lungs as a cold dead hand twisted her insides. She blinked away tears before she looked up at Odin. 'As you command.'

'Be reasonable, Odin. She saved our son,' said Frigga.

'And she could have saved him and still kept 'Forget it, Baldur. Your father won't change her promise. Her actions could start a WAR.' He his mind and if you anger him then he may send slammed his fist on the armrest and Gna' you back.' She offered a wry smile. 'Your mother interjected. He was going to send me back for all flinched, eyes downcast. 'Baldur cares for her, is there no other way?' eternity.' Silence followed and Gna's anxiety bloomed Half a year, in the depths of Hel. She as she waited for Odin's final word. wondered what despicable things Hela might 'Gna'. You've served my wife well for many ask of her. Should she take Hofvarpnir with her? Would she miss her lover? She didn't feel years, and I'm grateful you've brought our son home. Therefore, I shall show you some frightened, she merely needed to adjust her leniency. From now until the end of time, you'll thinking. She would be Hela's messenger for now. 'It won't be so bad,' she said with a smile. spend six months of every year in the underworld, serving Hela.' 'How can we be sure Hela will release you after six months? Was she satisfied with the 'Thank you, Odin. Frigga.' 'You are dismissed.' compromise?' Gna' stood, bowed then took her leave. Gna' shrugged. 'I imagine Odin won't give Baldur was waiting outside, brushing down her a choice. I expect the agreement is to appease Hofvarpnir. He stopped when she approached. her and I suppose it's better than nothing, from 'What did he say?' her point of view.' 'I'm to return to the underworld, for six 'If she doesn't, I'll come for you.' months of every year.' 'Now, that would be stupid wouldn't it? Since 'Six months?' he groaned. 'I'm sorry, you I went through all of this to gain your freedom.' should never have come for me. I'll speak to him Baldur laughed. 'I suppose so. Well, I shall eagerly await your return. Six months, that and demand he... should give you enough time to miss me.' He kissed her. Slowly, without the urgency she had expected, considering this was goodbye. At least for now. When she pulled away, he grinned and pulled her back to him. 'Must you leave right away?' She smiled. 'I have a few hours.' Four months into her service to the goddess of the underworld, Hela summoned Gna' to the throne room. Gna' entered and dropped to one knee before the goddess who sat perched on her skull-throne, a large black staff in hand. The silence stretched out and Gna' was forced to look at Hela. The gueen of the undead intimidated her, though she did her best not to show it. Hela's mismatched eyes seemed to stare into the very depths of Gna's soul.



#### **CLARENDON HOUSE AUTHOR**

### R. A. GOLI



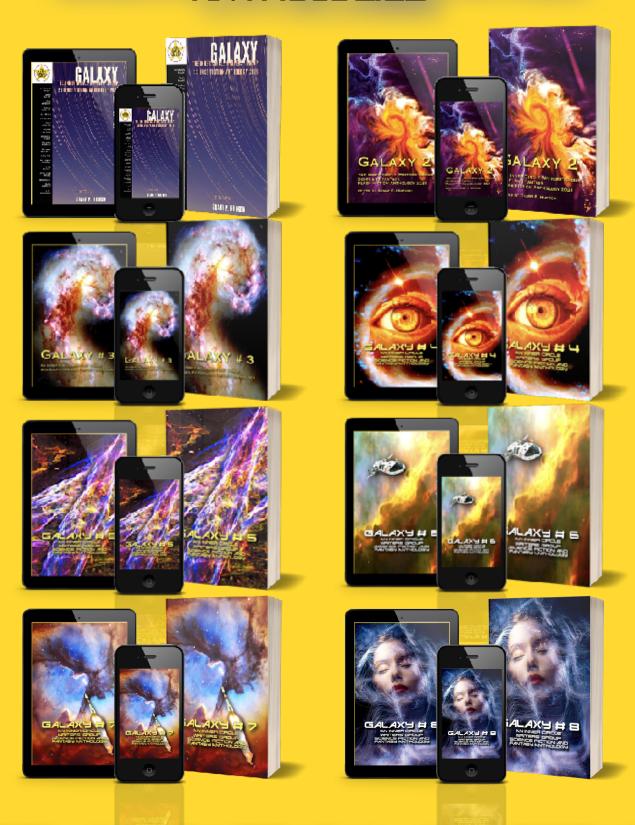
## UNFETTERED:

#### A SHORT STORY COLLECTION

'A bird succubus that comes in a storm; a bed-andbreakfast from Hell; secret histories from before fairy tales and myths; an asylum from beyond your darkest nightmares...'



INNER CIRCLE WRITERS' GROUP SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY ANTHOLOGIES



VISIT ANOTHER GALAXY TODAY!

www.clarendonhousebooks.com/anthologies

## RAVEN STARKAND MOLLUSC MAN ARAVEN STARK ADVENTURE

ALEXANDER MARSHALL



The bullet-like cocoon cut through the upper atmosphere, its wake a giant blade slicing through the golden gas of Kniton. The cocoon's tip almost immediately began to glow crimson, then red, then bright gold, then white as it whistled into denser air. Mountainous yellow clouds parted to let it through, regrouping around its passage in immense swirling masses that cracked with thunder on the plains below. Then real mountains of stone appeared on the rapidly approaching horizon and remained steadfast.

There was another clap of thunder as the cocoon exploded within seconds of striking the stern rock faces. From its hurtling and disintegrating shards a larger egg-shaped segment was blown backwards, dancing in silence in the air and then falling slowly to the barren earth under a pale canopy of silk. Metal feet extended from its base and it lurched to a halt in a small cloud of golden dust.

For an eternity of several seconds nothing moved as an invisible star-laser burned through seventy metres of stone and metal shielding,

turning the earth to liquid pulp and then atomising it. Then at last a slender figure emerged from under the egg and plunged into the cleanly cut abyss, hanging by a single thread of n-steel. Within thirty seconds she had touched the bottom of the self-made shaft and was standing on top of an artificial ceiling. A tiny pinhole star-laser in her helmeted bio-fabric suit pricked the thin metal plating and she peered through the visor's wide-angle lens into a dark bed-chamber. Adjusting to capture the most light through her eyepiece she noted that she was above the night-quarters of a senior staffer in the Kniton subterranean city, someone who could both afford a room of some size and one near the surface. She watched the chamber's incumbent having sex with a lesser city dweller in the round sleeping bay to her right. Moving along the ceiling until she was just above the duo, she cut a metre-wide hole in the plate and using the magnetic fingered gloves, quietly removed it, masking any tiny sounds with the passionate cries of the lovers below.

She checked her timepiece. She had only two minutes left. Spider-like she dropped into the sleeping bay and garotted the male as he writhed under her. The female had no breath in her to scream as her lover's dark blood spilled over the plastic sheets. Two seconds later she had been rendered unconscious by the excision of pressure on the key arteries leading to her brain.

The intruder twisted off her victim and to the wall - a panel gasped open in the darkness and she looked into a hidden screen which sprang into a garish light as she worked the keyboard beneath it, scanning maps, diagrams and security pictures of the city. Isolating the deep chamber that the Ordnance satellite had guessed at, she rapidly calculated directions and speed. Clearly, Kniton's own satellites had missed her torpedo's entry - not surprising considering that it had been fired from well outside planetary orbit and would have appeared to any casual scan like an ordinary meteor.

She slid down several steel staircases and then emerged into a well-lit pleasure complex with swimming pools and exercise fields below her through a thick glass ceiling. Tropical forests and cascading waterfalls obscured her progress across the top of the overhead structures until she reached a thick metal door at the end of a long gantry. Placing an explosive the size of her nose against the rim of the door she crouched beneath the gantry and covered her ears over the biofabric helmet.

The door blew sixty feet into the air and crashed in a nova of splintering glass through the ceiling below. Smoke and gas cloaked the intruder as she threw herself through the gap that had been created in the wall and spun round a corner on her hand. Security men, their helmets unstrapped as they froze in mid-conversation, collapsed to the carpeted floor with parts of their bodies burned away before they had even had time to register her presence. She ignored their spasmodic screaming and leapt over them into the bright reception area, slicing off a red-haired receptionist's fingers as she reached for an alarm, and then disappearing into the gaping sliver cylinder of an elevator.





The doors hissed closed and the silver cylinder hurtled down. An alarm had begun to sound far above, but she was banking on there being a thirty-second delay before anyone shut down the elevators. She was right - the doors hissed open on level 47, where her target was secreted. It was dark down here, pale lights leaking meagre pools of illumination along seemingly endless service passages, but she only needed to sprint one hundred and ten metres before she reached door 17. She entered a master code - the door slammed open.

There, on the floor, as though placed there by someone unaware of its significance, was the frozen part-humanoid, part engineering component statue of a Skarkan Mollusc-man. There was nothing else in the featureless room. The intruder stabbed the sleeping shape's metallic side with a stubby needle that whined its tip through the creature's outer shell and into the living flesh beneath. Multi-faceted optic sensors opened suddenly all over the prostrate form and it emitted something like a groan. Its statuesque body quivered into an impromptu life, convulsed twice as it twisted in the cold floor, and then collapsed again. It turned a portion of its frame toward the masked intruder. She unzipped the mask, letting her dark hair explode into the cool air of the room, letting the dim light reveal the lines of her face to the Mollusc-man. He muttered something, a combination of machine-chatter and organic sound that meant nothing to her - then, as his cerebral integrators gained purchase on neural synapses, he found the right language.

'Angel,' he croaked, an appendage reaching for her.

'Conceptually perhaps,' she whispered, 'but my name is Raven, Raven Stark. I'm from Seven Worlds Ordnance Response Directorate. I'm here to either rescue you or put you out of your misery depending on your condition and our environmental circumstances. We have less than a minute before the Kniton security net closes on us.'

'Designate Champag,' the Mollusc-man replied, raising its assymetrical body on three appendages. 'Mobility extensions severed; unit sentience expectancy ten hours. Suggest termination.'



Raven pondered for four seconds. There were now only eight Mollusc-men left inside the Seven Worlds - the rest of the race had either been destroyed or had disappeared. This was the first one she'd seen for quite a while. They were a unique and vital species - their organic technology had enabled the Seven Worlds to leap from a stagnant dark age into the forefront of galactic affairs. It was of the utmost importance that she rescue this one if she could - there was the possibility of it falling into Minmash hands, where the Directorate believed other Mollusc-men had gone. If the Minmash found out how to exploit them, it would mean the end of the Peace Equilibrium. Besides, she liked Mollusc-

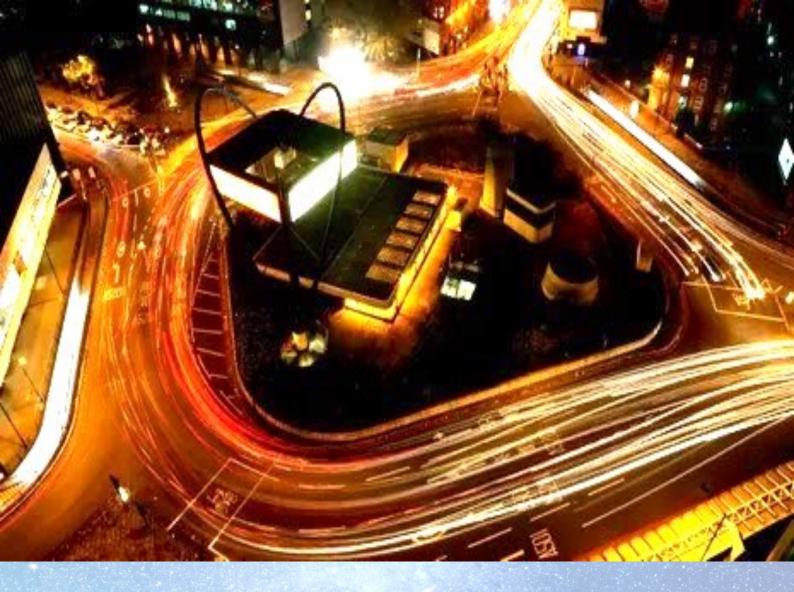
'Okay Champag - I have another idea. What can you discard while retaining sentience?' she said. The creature considered the notion briefly deep in its computer banks. Without replying, it started to shed lumps of complicated metal - its body seemed to disintegrate into meaningless bits with a clatter all over the smooth floor. From somewhere in the mass of twisted shapes came a small voice.

'Entering hibernation.'

Raven picked out a slightly squirming metallic slug half a meter in length and clipped it round her neck. Dim red lights glinted like a chain of rubies along its length, indicating a sleeping intelligence.

'Okay, here we go,' Raven muttered to herself and slid through the cell door - straight into a blaze of projectile and laser fire that she rolled and slid across the metal plating to avoid. She sat upright in a dark alcove and tossed a finger-sized grenade from her suit pocket round the corner. Purple fire erupted with screams down the passage and under its cover she sprinted two hundred metres, burning open the elevator doors as she ran and throwing herself inside as bullets began glancing again off the walls around her. They were firing blind, she thought, but that was often more dangerous.

The elevator was dead. She punched her way through its ceiling and into the shaft. No light in the shaft but she could feel the cables swinging slightly in her magnetic gloves. She began climbing.



Within seconds, a voice rang in the depths beneath her: 'Fill the shaft with lasers, cut her down!' A small forest of bright blue beams ignited in the shaft, severing the cable and scorching the walls into showers of metallic sparks - but Raven had already gone, leaping for the side and prising open the door on level 45. Two security men lost their legs below the knee as they fired at the space where they had seen her emerge from the darkness. Before they had even gathered breath to utter any kind of protest, she had ripped two passengers from a floatercar and shot out into the mainstream of a busy Kniton intersection. Security bikes plummeted after her through a maze of traffic-filled chambers - she lost the plating on the left of her vehicle to their cannons and then found herself under a floating bus. She opened the roof and let the car fall away from her as she jumped for the axle struts of the bus, her magnetic fingers helping her gain the purchase she needed. She had almost swung aboard the lumbering giant when one of the

passengers, a worker in one of Kniton's huge munitions factories from his light blue uniform, decided to try for a loyalty medal by hammering her fingers with his work-spanner. She groaned in pain as the metal smashed through her bio-fabric glove and the skin underneath. He hit her three times and she spun on one hand as they emerged into a huge three dimensional intersection. The bus hurtled along six hundred feet above the web of metal that was Kniton City yawning beneath her. Despite her directive to minimise civilian casualties, she brought up her left leg and swept his right foot out from under him, simultaneously swarming aboard and crushing his throat immediately in her bloodied left hand. She paused for two seconds, absorbing the terror of the rest of the passengers as they lurched away from her prostrate form, then got to her feet on the swaying bus and tipped her attacker overboard, watching him for a fleeting moment as his body disappeared against the tapestry of traffic below.



Laser pulses swept the bus - the Kniton government clearly had no directives to minimise damage to their own population, as several passengers fell limbless and dying either to the floor or over the edge. Raven sliced the driver unconscious and heaved the steering array back to snapping point until the bus lurched straight up, its gravity motors whining and sizzling complainingly and its safety alerts singing as she smashed the tip into the glass ceiling of the chamber and through into a smaller dome where a placid lake and blue trees were abruptly disrupted by falling glass plate and nsteel girders. The remaining passengers threw themselves to relative safety as the bus's hulk was raked by laser and machine fire.

Raven calculated she was still about ten levels from the surface, but while in traffic she had noted an aircraft launch silo nearby.

Bullets stung the artificial forest as she ran through the blue and purple foliage and crashed through another plate glass partition into a control room. She threw one technician aside and looked down on the sleek starzipper class interplanetary freighter that stood ready to go on its launch platform below. But before she could breathe relief or even hope, a huge Wiggian technician slammed the back of her head with a chair. She fell forward and lost the Mollusc-man necklace as it skated under the entering feet of twenty or so security staff whose laser pistols were all raised towards her. But their aim was interrupted by the burly bulk of the Wiggian, who, satisfied that he had her at his mercy, lurched closer to finish her off. She used his body to block the laser muzzles and crawled backwards across the floor whimpering pathetically to encourage her attacker to continue forward. In an image-filled split second she spotted the Mollusc man's inert slug body on the floor two metres away and noted the launch countdown - five seconds to freighter take-off. Already, she glimpsed through the console window, cables were flaccidly falling away from the shining arrow of the ship as fumes rose from its ignited motors below.

The security chief entered behind his men and smiled - he had this alien bitch now, he thought. He was sure to get his loyalty medal when he displayed the tattered shreds of her decimated body to the Commissioner.



The Wiggian technician picked up the metallic whip of the Mollusc-man and balanced it in his hand, his mind conjuring images of beating this pathetically wiry, dark-haired female to a blood-meshed pulp with it.

Raven placed herself so that the huge Wiggian was between her and the poised laser weapons of the security squad, the thick plate glass of the blast window at her back. The freighter's engines roared into take-off; the Wiggian raised his makeshift whip; the security chief gave the order to cut through the technician to kill the intruder.

Raven grasped the Mollusc-man's thin form as it descended and pulled the Wiggian down to the floor at the same moment as the laser guns fired. They sliced through the plate glass as the freighter slid up its silo. She curled under the console as the small room filled with roasting chemical flame, blowing the flesh from the security squads' bones as the wind blows seeds from flowers. Emergency blast shields crashed into place too late - the emergency lighting showed only the ashen husks of the squad collapsing to the floor as Raven throttled the Wiggian technician with the Mollusc-man necklace.

But it was the freighter that she needed. Coughing her way out of the fume-filled chamber, her own flesh scorched and her biofabric suit in tatters, she stumbled into the corridor and punched a fire-guard off his hoverbike. Ramming it into full throttle, she ploughed through the crowds of uniformed Kniton troops and into one of the emergency service corridors that ran almost vertically upward, parallel with the freighter silo. Light streamed towards her from the tunnel end - the freighter was emerging through the surface and into the atmosphere. She squeezed more speed out of the bike - she knew that she had to stay ahead of the freighter's engine exhaust or she would be fried in less than a second.

Shooting out into the open air dazzled her for an instant but she gained her bearings rapidly and toppled the bike towards the freighter as it gathered speed alongside her. Setting her starlaser for its widest blast she punched a hole in the freighter's slender hull and steered the bike for it. They were now several hundred metres above ground and the fire-bike's motors were beginning to cut out. She leapt for the opening she had made and grabbed hold of the first thing her hands touched.



'Emergency evacuation code XX79/00A2 red alert,' she shouted. The headless robot immediately released her and disappeared through the forward hatch. Raven leapt to her feet and followed, in time to see the stewardess struggling with the robot pilot and co-pilot as she attempted mindlessly to convince them of the validity of the emergency code that Raven had fed to her. While all three were distracted, Raven pressed the ejector sequence and slid back into the rear chamber as both pilot and co-pilot were catapulted into the upper atmosphere. Then she re-pressurised the control cabin and climbed back in.

Red lights and alarm relays were flashing all around her, and half the piloting array had disappeared in the ejection, including the pilot's seat. Raven punched in an override sequence and hung on. The freighter responded. Within minutes they were no longer heading back to Kniton but outward into the lower reaches of space.

She checked that the Mollusc-man was still safe around her neck. The ruby lights gleamed a silent acknowledgement as the first stars blazed out ahead.

Mission accomplished.



#### CLARENDON HOUSE AUTHOR

#### ALEXANDER MARSHALL

# ALEXANDER MARSHALL Selected Writings Volume 1



You'll be taken on fastpaced trips to the stars; you'll see distant futures; you'll journey to alternate realities. You'll meet larger-than-life as well as ordinary heroes and heroines; you'll travel to the past and into fantastic forests full of the strangest things; you'll get to know people who might be real as well as people who are decidedly not. But, perhaps more significantly, you'll start to wonder about the boundary between fact and fiction, stories and truth, reality and illusion. 'Metafiction' is defined in the dictionary as 'fiction in which the author selfconsciously alludes to the artificiality or literariness of a work by parodying or departing from novelistic conventions and traditional narrative techniques.' But in practice there can be a bit more to it, as you will find out, if you read on. Or you can put the book back on the shelf and never know...

—Grant P. Hudson, Editor

CLARENDON HOUSE PUBLICATIONS

#### NOW IN ONE GIANT VOLUME

'From the fertile mind of Alexander Marshall comes a complex world of Gods, legends, dragons, ancient evil and unlikely heroes... I predict that in years to come, The Sword Sundergost will be hailed as a classic.'

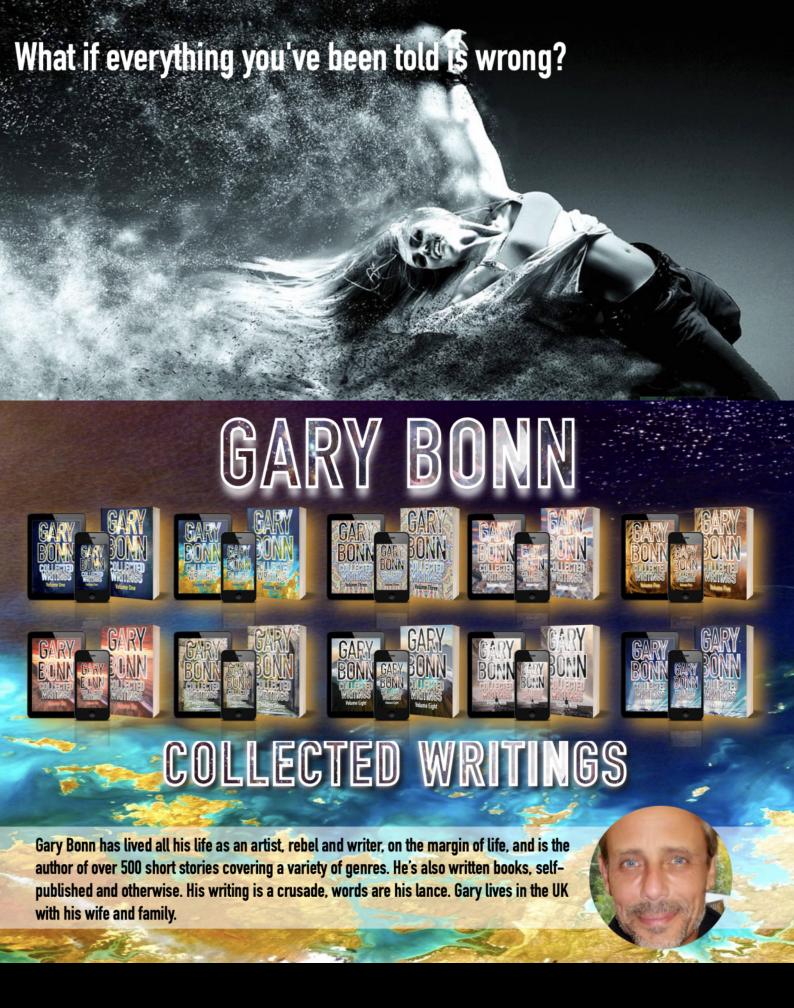
-David Bowmore, author of The Magic of Deben Market

## SWORD SUNDERGOST



#### **ALEXANDER MARSHALL**

www.clarendonhousebooks.com/alexander-marshall



www.clarendonhousebooks.com/gary-bonn





## SIRE ELECTION OF THE PARTY OF T



Follow the adventures of the Emerald Queen, an old green CX19 cargo dropship with a colourful history; meet characters who will linger with you long after you've finished reading; be drawn into a whole universe of planets, spaceships, companies, corruption, tricky decisions, passions and tragedies.

Each one of these interwoven stories is a gem, blending human emotions and situations into a rich and textured science fiction background.

Andrew and Helen Birch have created something special here: exciting genre fiction with literary qualities.

www.clarendonhousebooks.com/andrew-and-helen-birch

Get published.

Build a career.

Contribute to creating a better world.

Become a PROFESSIONAL AUTHOR COURSE

Write Stories That Work and Sell Them Effectively

#### The Become a Professional Author Course

·14 modules

instantly downloadable onto almost any device

·full-colour

·fully illustrated with diagrams and maxims

- ·the complete text of the book Become a Professional Author
- •a **step by step guide** through the book, with course exercises and major assignments

#### with **BONUS DOWNLOADS** including

- •an e-copy of the best-selling How Stories Really Work:
- **Exploring the Physics of Fiction**
- •an e-copy of **The Story Creation Handbook**, containing templates for 1,000s of stories
- •an e-copy of the book **Myth & the 'Now'** which voyages into the depths of fiction

#### **PLUS**

Students of the course are entitled to **massive discounts** on Clarendon House editing and other author services, including **unique** workshops and consultancies!

Sign up for the course

Only **£47.00** for the first 50 students (after which the price is £470.00)



www.clarendonhousebooks.com/course



'Our little ICWG family is certainly a wonderful group full of kindness and encouragement. It's wonderful to see the growth of so many writers from the help and quidance they've received from this group alone.' - E. Montague,

author

The Inner Circle Writers' Group is the social arm of Clarendon House Publications.

ProWritingAid recently listed us as one of the best groups for writers on Facebook:

'Everyone loves Grant, the founder of The Inner Circle Writers' Group, almost as much as they love the warm, supportive environment that always stays professional and ontopic. The members are encouraging, and the moderators keep abusive non-writers to a minimum. Several professional writers call The Inner Circle Writers'

Group "home." Join the group and get ready for lots of interaction and engagement in a friendly, family atmosphere. Everyone shares and celebrates each other's successes. and many feel spurred to become and do better.'

This group is for writers interested in the craft and practice of writing and everything connected with that. Members are entitled to exclusive services from Clarendon House and are offered multiple submission opportunities.

It's completely free and fun.

Learn more

#### What people have said about

### CLARENDON HOUSE PUBLICATIONS

#### J. McCulloch, Author

Clarendon House has what the majority of other publishers lack; the personal touch. Grant Hudson draws people into his cosy library (also known as the Inner Circle Writers' Group), sits them down and works his magic. Many new writers lack confidence in their ability, so Grant fine tunes their perspective, boosts their morale and sets them up to win. I have been humbled by his untiring efforts to help us all. We are his people. He is our mentor, our eccentric English professor and our much valued friend.

#### D. Taylor, Author

As I was scrolling fb, and seeing all these ads from people claiming to help authors do this and do that, I thought to myself, Grant Hudson is the genuine mentor. Thanks for your solid advice.

#### P. O'Neil, Author

Grant is the model mentor for this new age of writing.

#### A. Delf, Author

The world is better with all this beautiful work seen at last.

#### M. Ahmed, Author

A place where good literature is nurtured.

#### **Brandy Metheney Bonifas, Author**

Clarendon House Publications is everything publishing should be.
Grant Hudson is a caring editor and mentor who works closely with authors to produce top quality publications, and his writing community, The Inner Circle Writers' Group, is a safe and encouraging environment where established authors share their expertise and new writers are nurtured to spread their wings. I highly recommend!

<u>Learn more</u>

#### Look out for the next instalment of

## Clarendon House Short Story Magazine

Satisfying Fiction from Clarendon House Publications

## Free to download wherever you are

The next issue will be announced in the



www.facebook.com/groups/innercirclewritersgroup

### CLARENDON HOUSE PUBLICATIONS

© 2023 by Grant P. Hudson.
Clarendon House Publications,
76 Coal Pit Lane, Sheffield, South Yorkshire,
United Kingdom S36 1AW
www.clarendonhousebooks.com
Email: grant@clarendonhousebooks.com