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The Shed in the Garden

A Never Realm Story

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Some say the universe is nothing but a dream of some primordial god, testing out the results of various forms of creation. The other gods all laugh at this notion ... in their dreams. Physicists claim we are just the reflections of natural quantum activities perpetrated on a sub-atomic level. A echo of parallel dimensional waves which drift across weak celestial boundaries. Most writers hold to the theory the universe is simply a joke, in extremely bad taste.

Ellis Chumley paged through the magazines on the rack. Mostly it was taking one down, thumbing through the pages and then getting the next one off the rack. He was particularly interested on the journal of medieval history and archeology. Although he had no trouble picking up a copy of *Fantasy Magazine* at the same time. It wasn't a case of disinterest, but rather the case he'd read them already.

Ellis was a chubby cheeked man in his later sixties. The front of his head was billiard ball smooth, but he made up for it with a thick mane of gray hair in the back and a bushy beard of the same color. His eyes had bags of age under them. Not large ones, they were still small. Only beginning to grow. Slightly smaller than the eyes themselves.

Still holding the copy of *Fantasy Magazine* in his hands he heard a small voice from behind him. "I like the unicorn story in is month's issue." She said.

"The one by Morris Whitley?" He asked.

She seemed excited, almost ready to jump up and down with glee. "You've read it?"

He returned her easy smile. "Although in this issue I preferred the tale about dreaming." Ellis said.

She paused. "Well yes, that one was nice two." Then se corrected herself, "But it was a little predictable. I mean you have to go somewhere else in your dreams, don't you?"

Victoria Kelly was at the age were her wrinkles had passed the ability of her skin cream to manage. She was still able to hide them on her face, but it was harder to disguise the ones about her neck. She wore a set of brown, horn-rimmed glasses with those circular lenses. Her eye backs were small as well, but better hidden by her frames. He had medium length blond hair with had a bit of an unrulily quality to it. As if she had combed it in a rush to get out of the house. It was her eyes which had the special quality. Even when she would gaze directly at you, it seemed she was seeing something else. A place far off in the distance. A bright place with far more sunshine than central New York.

"Most people don't like to read fantasy stories," Victoria quipped.

"Oh, I love them," Ellis replied.

She held out her slightly wrinkled hand, "Victoria Kelly. Pleased to meet you. I thought I was the only fantasy reader in this town. You are?"

"Ellis Chumley," he told her, shaking her hand.

"What do you do, Mr. Chumley?" she asked casually.

His expression dipped. His eyes grew darker. "Oh, I'm in forced retirement. I used to own a bookstore. Book Ends. Maybe you've heard of it?" he asked with a bit of expectation.

Victoria's face lit up. "How exciting. I don't think I've been there. I have a tiny apartment, so I buy almost all of my books online. What happened to your bookstore?"

His face took on a rather grim expression. "Amazon."

Victoria looked both heartbroken and embarrassed, covering her mouth with her hand. "Oh, I'm so sorry."

Ellis gave her a strained grin. "Don't be. It's all in the past now. It's almost as if it was another life. But I can tell you there are other fantasy readers in the area. That's the type of books we sold. That and a few Science Fiction novels." His owl-like face cracked another grin.

"I just love stores from other times." She was working hard to change the subject. "Tales of knights and dragons, maidens and magicians."

"Why is that? Did you lose a store too?"

Victoria's face lost a bit of its brightness. "No, just a husband."

Now it was Ellis' turn to be embarrassed. "Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't mean."

She put a hand on his shoulder, "That's all right. He never liked fantasy. Said it was a lesser genre, only read by children and those with no wit. I was the adventurous one. He was the homebody. I guess I was the juvenile one. Always dreaming."

"Nonsense," Ellis retorted, "all adults dream. It's what makes us who we are. It's what shows us what we need to do in real life. It leads us to adventure."

Victoria gave him a slight frown. "You can't have adventures in real life. Especially at our age."

Ellis gave sheepish looks around the floor, spotting the other customers. When he was sure no one was watching, he whispered to Victoria. "Follow me."

"Where are we going?"

"You'll see."

He took her to a door marked 'Staff Only.' It was unlocked. He opened it and motioned her inside. All the time craning his neck to insure they hadn't been spotted. She started to protest but he placed his hand on her back and gave her a gentle nudge in. Ellis followed her and closed the door behind them. They were in a tiny room. No bigger than a closet. On the back wall were the rungs of a ladder, built right into the wall. He started climbing. He looked down at Victoria, "come on."

"We can't go up there," she protested.

He held his hand down. "Don't worry, it's only a ladder. Think of it as the ladder up to your attic."

"I don't have an attic," Victoria exclaimed. But it was too late. Ellis had already ascended the rungs and had gone through a metal trap door. Reluctantly, Victoria followed. She could see the gray sky looming as she neared the top of the ladder. Looking around, she saw Ellis standing by a wall at the roof's edge. He smiled and waved her over.

She crawled out onto the pebble covered roof. The tiny stones crunched under her feet as she walked over to the edge. It was chilly and there was a stiff breeze. Victoria pulled her coat closed with her hand. There was patches of snow on the roof. Mostly in the corners, but some remained between the roofing stones. She almost slipped once or twice but managed to make it to the four-foot-high wall at the building's edge.

"Hold out your hand," Ellis instructed. She extended her palm and placed a dozen or so sugar cubes in it. "Ok," he explained, "Here the rules. You throw these down at the people in the parking lot. One point if you hit their head, two ... if you can make them look up here. Five points in you can drop it in their parka hood." As if by way of example, he threw one at a man walking back to his car. It missed. Clattering off the icy pavement and sliding under a blue Toyota Corolla. The send shot landed directly in the man's hood. "There, you see? Five points for me."

There was a glow of pure joy in Victoria's eyes. She tossed the first one way to high. But it landed on the head on a woman pushing her shopping cart out of the supermarket across the way. She looked up and scanned the roof tops. Victoria and Ellis had to duck behind the wall at the roof's edge.

"Two points for me." She cried out with glee. There was raw excitement on her face. A child-like delight and elation.

"Nice shot, but I'm still ahead," he replied proudly.

What followed was a rain of sugar cubes from the sky above the parking lot. At first, they took turns. That quickly evolved into them both throwing at the same time. "Do you always fill you coat with sugar cubes?" asked Victoria.

Ellis made another toss. "I feed then to the horses. My son has a farm not too far from here. He raises them."

Victoria returned his look with one od surprise. "Are you married?" she asked.

"No, it's just me." he replied throwing out another cube into the parking lot.

"Divorced?"

"No," Ellis tossed another one, "widower."

Victoria froze. "I'm sorry," she whispered.

"That's all right." he threw another one high in the air and it landed directly in a woman's open shopping bag.

"Nice shot. I give you three points for that one," Victoria grinned.

Ellis grinned right back. "I take it. But you'd better up your game. I'm still ahead." The rain of sugar continued for the next three minutes. Until Ellis ran out.

"You win," Victoria conceded. They both sat down behind the wall and exhaled loudly. a slight mist rising as they breathed into the cold air. "That was fun," she remarked. "The most fun I've had in years." she panted.

They made their way back down the ladder and opened the door. An employee pushing a cart was walking past the door as they opened it and exited. "You're not supposed to be in there," he complained pointedly.

Ellis looked confused. "Can you direct us to the rest rooms?"

The young man pointed across the store. "They're over there, under the sign that says restrooms." He sounded half exasperated, half frustrated with old people who didn't seem able to read signs. They both quickly hurried off in the direction he had pointed out. As they neared the far side, Ellis stopped and turned to Victoria. "Would you like to get a cup of coffee?"

"I don't drink coffee," Victoria explained unemotionally.

Ellis sounded dejected, "I see."

"I drink tea," she explained.

"Well that's perfect," Ellis brightened up, "There's a nice selection at the *Starbucks* across the street." he started heading for the door, but Victoria stopped him.

"I rather go to your house," She explained. "I've got tea bags in my purse. If you've got hot water, we're in business." Ellis stood frozen, not knowing how to respond. "I'll bet you have quite the book collection at home. I'd love to see it," she continued.

"I do," Ellis seemed to snap awake from a brief stupor. "I have quite the collection."

Ellis's car was an old Honda Ridgeline pickup. The kind they like to use in wars in Chad. Chumley's looked like it had been through just such a confrontation. The mud was caked on six layers deep. He strove over to the passenger's side and opened the door.

Victoria gave him a quick glance as she hopped up into the seat. "You know that have car washes which can take care of you," she explained.

With an embarrassed glance, he looked down at his feet. "Yes ... well ... it just keeps getting dirty."

The drive to Ellis's house was quite extensive. They passed farm fields full of cows, great stands of maple and oak trees, down a set of progressively narrower roads. The last one appeared to be little wider than a single lane. At a mailbox number 35,245 there was a gravel road heading off into the woods. Next to the post was a purple sign. Black letters on it read, "Secret Lair. No Superheroes allowed." Victoria snickered.

The road soon turned into a dirt track and Victoria got the impression why the Honda had the appearance it did. At the end of a very long drive way stood an impressive house. It was cross between a mid-eighteenth-century railroad station and the Addam's family house. Some of the shudders were loose, but it looked warm and friendly. Victoria instantly felt at home. Ellis opened the pickup door and showed her up the walk. The path was a neat pile of assorted garden stones, carefully arranged. The air was fresh and clean. There was not a single sign they were so close to a built-up urban area. It was one of those places you could forget there was civilization elsewhere. Even the jet planes seemed to avoid flying overhead.

"I could get to like this." Victoria's eyes gleamed.

Ellis held the house door open for her. She noticed he didn't even get out a key. The house wasn't locked. "I did by it to get away from it all. Although I don't spend much time here anymore."

Victoria walked across a beautiful, gleaming hardwood floor. The walls were complete covered in bookshelves. All except for the corner with the fireplace. There was not a television in sight. In the center of the room was a group of comfortable chairs, no two of which matched or were the same style. There were two rocking chairs, one older than the other. The paint on the older rocker slowly peeling. The rocking chairs surrounded a marble chess board sitting on a small table. The pieces were lathed metal, silver and gold. All neatly lined up in their starting rows. The other chairs were large cloth covered arrangements common to antique store in the region. The cushions seemed well used, but clean. Victoria walked over to the chairs and carefully felt the fabric. Running her hands gently over the arm rests.

"I used to keep these in the store," Ellis explained. "That's why they look so used. I don't get many visitors this far out. It's one of the reasons I bought this place. You can be alone here to dream."

Without saying a word, Victoria glided over to the nearest bookshelf. She caressed the book bindings with the same reverence she used in the chairs. Her eyes grew moist as she read the titles one by one. Barfield and Nevill Coghill, Lewis and Roger Green, Percy Bates and Roy Campbell. First editions mixed together with trade paperbacks and mass-market copies. They were strewn across the shelves in the same haphazard manner as the chairs.

After a time, Ellis interrupted her reverence. "Can I get you that cup of tea now?"

"Yes, please." she replied. Her eyes never leaving the shelves.

Ellis disappeared through a decorative archway into the next room. The side columns were covered in carved ivy leaves. The room behind was a gray-tiled kitchen, filled with refrigerator and stove. All the standard amenities, yet far more modern than the exterior of the house might suggest. It seemed a veritable high-tech oasis. "What kind would you like? I have all sorts or varieties," asked Ellis.

"Decaf, if you have any," Victoria proclaimed, "No. On better make that a black caffeinated. The stronger the better. I may be here reading these all night." Her hands ran over more of the bindings. Her eyes gleamed with a smoldering fire. In a flash, she pulled on volume down from the shelf and began to thumb through the pages. "Oh, A Robert E. Howard, I love these."

"Are you a fan?" Ellis asked as he put his kettle on.

Victoria sniffled. "I love the old adventure classics. One one's with barbarians and princesses, Filled with strange landscapes and delightful exploits. Some of the modern works are nice. The characters are well developed, but they don't have the awe and the mystery of the old pulp fiction. The places no one has visited for a thousand years. Sometimes a place in fiction can be too familiar, as if you already been there. I love the travel to places I've never imagined. Places not built by the hands of man."

Reaching for two coffee mugs out of the overhead cabinets, he called out, "Sugar or cream?"

"Both, please."

“Do you travel often?” asked Ellis.

Cradling the book in her hands, Victoria at no time looked up. “I’ve never been more than 50 miles from where I was born. That’s why I love these books. In their pages, I can travel to other worlds, other lands, well beyond the reach of Walmart. Otherwise, I’m on a fixed income. I can’t afford to travel.”

Ellis brought out two steaming white mugs. One had the Book Ends store logo on it in a blue so dark, it was almost black. The second showed the image of a well-armored knight astride a horse. He bore a banner, a white field with a single golden shield in its center. He handed her the store mug. Victoria took the mug with one hand, refusing to relinquish her grip on the book with the other. She smelled the rising steam from the cup and took a slow sip of the hot liquid. “May I sit?” she asked.

Chumley was taken aback. “Of course, How rude of me.” He waved her over to the chairs in the center of the room. Victoria chose the rocking chair with the more stable paint job and Ellis sat in the one across from her, the one facing the gold chess pieces.

Victoria tore her eyes from the pages long enough to peer at Ellis’s coffee mug. “That’s a strange banner, is it also from the store?” She asked quietly.

“No, I designed this one personally,” Ellis remarked, “the banner is the royal marshals Kingdom of the Never Realm.”

“What book is that from? I don’t think I’ve heard of it.” She closed the book she was holding and gazed at Ellis in wonder. “It was not often I hear of something I’ve not read.” She turned to look at the shelves.

“It’s an obscure work. Not often read,” Ellis explained.

“Do you have it here?”

Ellis’s face grew serious. “Oh, I can do much better than that. Much better.” He picked up the golden queen and leaned over the table, putting his cup in the center of the chess board. “Would you like to see something exciting?” He asked in a tone scarcely above a whisper. Victoria put down her cup in the same manner and gently laid the book down in one of the other reading chairs. “Where shall we go?” Victoria asked.

Ellis rose. “Follow me.” He took her hand and led her out through the front door. They travelled out, passed the pickup, and around the side of the house. They came to a place where what might have once been a rose garden sat empty a few feet from a garden shed. He led her past the door on the shed’s front and took her to empty wall on the side without any windows. A standard garden shed. It was in better condition than most, but still nothing better than a tool shed. He stood, pointing out the lightly green paneled siding. “You can’t see it can you?” asked Ellis.

“See what?” she asked.

Ellis took out the golden chess queen from inside the house. Holding it on its side, he pressed the base against the siding of the shed. First, he raised the queen and then lowered it. Sliding the base against the wall. There was a barely perceptible click and a door opened. It was half the length of the wall. Ellis grabbed the edge and pulled it open wide.

Victoria expected to see a set of concrete stairs running down to an underground bunker or shelter. But she couldn't see any stairs. In fact, she couldn't even see the inside of the shed. Beyond the door was a wooded glade, bright sunlight streaming through the leaves. A much brighter sun than had ever graced the skies of Central New York. Victoria took Ellis's hand and walked through the portal.

The air was astoundingly fresh. She felt new and alive. It was wonderful. Still holding his hand, Victoria turned to Ellis. But it wasn't Ellis. Not the Ellis she had met. This one was forty years younger. His hair was full and wavy, his cheeks thinner. The bags under his eyes hadn't even started. There was a strength about him. But it was still Ellis. Gone were the baggy trousers and the professorial sweater. He was wearing a shining silver suit of armor. Emblazoned on the center of each plate was a golden lion, reading a book. Hanging on a chain about his neck was the golden queen from the chess set at the house.

Speaking of the house, it was nowhere in sight. Behind Ellis stood a massive oak tree and a half-ruined building with its roof missing to the right. At this point, Victoria didn't much care. She strode up to Ellis and caressed the sword handle at his hip. "Does it have a name?" she asked.

"She does," Ellis replied, "I call her White Fyre."

As she stood, gazing at Ellis's sword, she caught her reflection in the shining plates of his armor. Victoria saw that she too was armored. She had felt so good, she hadn't even noticed its weight or encumbrance. Victoria's metal attire was an undecorated flat gray color, utilitarian, not flashy. About her shoulders, however, was a bright red cape. She leaned in closer. Her hair too had gone red, absent was the grey color which had once been its primary appearance. Gone too were forty or more years, wear, feebleness and care. Victoria grasped her own sword, belted at her hip. It was long and delicate, its hilt covered in a fine red velvet.

Victoria pulled it from its scabbard. It felt light as if she was holding a pencil, not an armload of steel. She spun the sword in a figure eight before her. Victoria had no idea how she performed this feat, never having held a sword before. But it came naturally. As natural was the act of walking. It flashed through the air silently and practically fell back into her scabbard. "Can we go on an adventure?" Victoria asked, her eyes bright with fire.

"I don't see why not," Ellis replied. "I know a little village not far from here. It's a good starting place."

Victoria cleared her throat as they started walking. "Shouldn't we have horses?" She asked.

Ellis looked at her. "Can you ride?"

"I don't know." Came her casual reply.

"I ... I ..." he stammered along, flailing for the right words. "I didn't think to bring the horses."

She raised one eyebrow. "I'm not sure which to be more surprised at. The fact you forgot to bring horses or the fact you've been here so many times before you think it second nature to bring them along."

Ellis smiled. "Did I mention the house was special?"

Victoria grinned back. "Is this why you don't spend a lot of time at the house? I take it you spend most of your time here."

“No hiding anything from you,” said Ellis.

Before they got to the village, they could smell it. It had the odor of burning wood. The smoke rising from the sky on the path ahead wasn't a single fireplace, nor many. No, this seemed as if a whole forest was burning. Victoria broke out into a jog, with Ellis close behind her, trying to keep up. As they neared the sound of steel ringing upon steel could be heard. It was the clash of arms. To Ellis, Victoria appeared almost giddy. She was going into battle.

Cresting the nearby hill, both of them could see a group of black robed men, torching the town. People ran screaming from burning houses. Only to be captured and placed in chains. Those who resisted were put to the sword. Victoria rushed down the slope, drawing her sword. “It's the Black Company,” Ellis cried out, following her. “Take care. They are freebooters, cutthroats and scallywags.”

“Who uses words like that,” Victoria snickered. She sliced one of the raiders with a simple swing of her sword before he had even noticed she was upon him. As he fell, two more of the black clad warriors took notice of her. In the blink of an eye, Victoria was in the midst of combat. Ellis could see there was no fear, no hesitation as her sword rang off her opponents.

From the smoke of the fires rode another black robed man. Atop his destrier, his robes were fringed in gold brocade, a wide blood-red sash at his waist held a curved, ivory hilted dagger. “Baliel,” he shouted as if calling to an old friend. “I see you've brought company.”

The men in the black robes took a step back. Their attacks halted, but they remained in a defensive posture.

“The Lady Megan Clasco Of House Burguera. The company you keep is improving.” the man spat.

Ellis gave him a harsh look. “Pay Daithí Magauran no mind as he has no heart to go with it.” Ellis retorted.

“Why does he call you Baliel?” Victoria asked, holding her sword high as if to strike.

“It's just a little nickname, he calls me. It means the devil.” Ellis explained, raising his own sword.

“We've given Owen Rhys, Lord Marshall of the Realms many names of the years,” Magauran leaned back in his saddle, “He's earned them all, my lady. But enough of the past. Let's make an end to talking ... and to you both. Gentlemen kill them.”

The black robed man threw himself upon Ellis and Victoria with the suddenness of a rushing steam locomotive. The sound of steel ringing upon steel echoed in the village streets. Victoria was hard pressed to keep her opponents at bay. Ellis swung White Fyre with a purpose. His steel sang as it brushed aside his opponent's weapons. Bringing White Fyre down on one of their heads, his adversary burst into flame. As if the sword had been as hot as its name implied. He scurried off, rolling on the ground in a vain attempt to extinguish the flames. In a few moments, he lay still. But their foes were undaunted, and they continued to press their attack. Victoria finished another with a clean cut to his exposed throat. The man fell back, clutching his neck as blood poured down his robes.

Having seen the result of Ellis's attacks, his enemies gave him some distance. They slowly encircled him on all sides, carefully narrowing the ring. Victoria was too occupied to offer much assistance. She had

seen some of the men holding back, keeping well out of Ellis's sword range. Now these men drew bows. The bows were tall, perhaps six feet in length. They nocked arrows in their weapons and let fly. Some of the shot Ellis deflected with lightning swings of his sword. Still other bounced off the silver armor harmlessly. A few points though found a home. Fanning out from the metal like feathers on a bird's wing.

The assault seemed not to slow Ellis, but the rain of blows and arrow points continued. Without so much as a thought, Victoria drew a dagger. She placed it in the eye sockets of one of the archers besetting Ellis. He fell with a crash. To her astonishment, once the man was down, the handle reappeared in its scabbard. As if it had never left. She threw again, and another man fell.

Ellis rushed his closing opponents and two burst into flame. Those behind rush up to stab him in the back, but they were too late. As if sheathing his sword, he thrust the point under his arm. The tip caught a man in the chest and he staggered backward, a sheet of flames. Victoria cut down the man who had foolishly gotten between them with her sword. She adroitly stepped over the remains and managed to get into position to protect Ellis's back. Now the two fought back to back. Her dagger flew from one hand as the sword kept the others off. Ellis made barbecue of several more, yet their number did not seem to grow less.

The encircling the two the black-robed men marched closer. Their feet stamping on the ground. The ring was so tight, the archers could no longer fire for fear of hitting their own men. Ellis swung White Fyre in a great arc, take down a five in a single blow. They were so closely spaced they could not evade the White Fyre's approach. But more men filled the gaps.

Yet shortly after this one man turned tail and ran. His retreat inspired a few others. Before long a trickle became a flood of men fleeing. In a few moments, only Magauran sat astride his black charger. "Well then," he announced, "Another day." Clashing his heels into the animal's sides he caused it to bolt. Horse and rider turned for the hills and were soon racing out of site.

Ellis looked about but could not see Victoria. In a blind panic he scanned the horizon. Next to killing, the Black Company relished making free folk captive. His eyes darted about, his head turning in dread. He cursed under his breath. At last his eyes fell upon her. She was using the crashing swings of her sword to part the chains of those the Black Company had tried to place into bondage. The links split with the plaintive cry of steel scarping against blacksmith's iron.

When she was done, He approached. He placed his gentle hand upon her armored shoulder. "I think I'll call it Lady Guardian," she announced.

"What?" He asked.

"The sword," she explained, holding up the blood dripping blade. "It needs a name. Don't you think?" She gleamed. As she sheathed it, she became aware of the arrow shafts tittered across his shining armor. "You're hurt." she cried.

"This?" he pulled out a shaft and dropped it on the ground. "It's nothing." Ellis smiled.

As she watched, the hole the point made in Ellis's armor closed. Now it appeared as if the plate had never even been punctured. She pulled out other and saw the same result. Soon they were both

plucking arrows from him as if he was a spring chicken. When they were done the ground was littered with wooden shafts, but the armor appeared unchanged.

“Quite handy, your armor,” Victoria noted.

“Yes,” said Ellis, “I only wish it came with a helmet. If they even learn to shot me in the head, I’m in a lot of trouble.” Victoria sniffled and gave him a crushing hug. “You sure know how to show a girl a good time Ellis.” she quipped.

“Perhaps you should call me Owen here,” he remarked casually. “To be honest I never like Ellis much. That is, if you don’t mind Lady Megan.”

Megan looked up at him, her eyes filling with water. “You mean we can come back?”

Owen grinned, “Anytime you wish ... anytime you wish, my lady.”