

Greg Wagner

What Lies Beneath

An Urban Fantasy

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Also By Greg Wagner

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I would like to thank (in this order) My Wife Roberta, Youtube.com, Google Maps, and Wikipedia, because without any of the above this novel wouldn't have happened.

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There be dragons...

Prologue

New York City, the city that never sleeps, the financial capital of the world, the largest and wealthiest metropolitan area in the United States. Early Dutch settlers named it New Amsterdam. More populous and international flavored than any other city, boasting more Italian residents than Naples, more Jews than Tel Aviv, more Irish than Dublin, and more Puerto Ricans than San Juan. For centuries, millions of people have passed through its ports and harbors seeking the prosperity, freedom, and liberty of the most American city in the world.

On the surface New York City is a land of laws, order, and rules. Chaos is not welcome there, but a new order is threatening to take over the city and it's coming from where people will least expect it...*from beneath*.

Chapter 1

Oh crap, not again, Chip Ebersol frowned as he stumbled down the maintenance stairway to the darkness of the subway tracks. *I hate coming down here by myself. It gives me the creeps.* When he reached the bottom of the concrete steps, he looked both ways then started out walking along the darkened tunnel.

Several stories beneath Manhattan's Penn Station, Chip followed the fading beam of his flashlight like a lonely beacon in a torrential storm. Oily water and black mud filled the spaces in between the tracks and the whole place smelled of raw sewage, electricity, and hot grease. Loud squeaks and clanks announced the arrival of a passenger tram on track twenty-one. He carefully sidestepped the electrified third rail and scurried into an alcove until the noisy tram had passed, then continued on his way in the dark.

Chip liked his job as a railroad maintenance worker. The only thing he hated was when they sent him down into the tunnels all by himself.

Anything can happen down here, he glanced around, eyes bugging out of his head. *It's always dark and damp, and sometimes even downright dangerous. So many pinch points and pitfalls, coupled with rats and God knows what other kind of strange creatures lurking.* A hard ball of anxiety formed in the pit of his stomach, *not to mention the risk of electrocution from the six hundred and fifty volts running through the third rail at all times.*

Chip heard a rustling. He swung his flashlight across the barren underground wasteland. The beam reflected off puddles and sent sparkly white ghosts dancing across the wall. *Nothing's there,* he told himself for the twentieth time in the last two minutes.

When he reached the suspected "faulty" rail switch, he unslung his pack and pulled out an electrical tester. Upon inspection, the switch seemed fine so he grabbed his hammer and banged on it a few times then watched as it finally cycled over with a click. He activated the switch a couple more times just to make sure it was working, then started putting his tools away.

Just as he was leaning over to pick up his hammer, there was a quick flash of movement off to his left. Chip spun around and froze at the sight of a small child walking toward him between the two main rail lines.

No way, he rubbed his eyes and looked again, but there was no denying the little kid less than two yards away. He smiled and squatted down. "What in the world are you doing down here?"

Before he knew what was happening the toddler lunged at him with a speed and strength that defied his harmless appearance. Chip hit the ground hard and tried to scream, but found that he couldn't make any sound, because the child had already ripped his voice box out and was now chewing on his face.

Fifteen-year-old Noah Anderson lay in bed fully clothed, listening carefully for any sounds of activity in the slumbering house. Official "lights out" was two hours ago and the caretaker shift change was almost over. Sounds from the busy New York City streets filtered up through brick and mortar walls of the three-story building and through those sounds, he could hear the second shift caretaker briefing the overnight worker as she was on her way out the door for the evening.

After only two weeks in the foster care group home, Noah came to the conclusion that he had to get out. He was suffocating. He hated it in foster care, he missed his mom, he missed his dad, and he missed his somewhat predictable life.

Noah Anderson's privileged teen-age life had been going fine up until a month ago, when he came home from school to find out that both his parents had died in a freak car accident. At first, he ignored the calls from children's services and hid during the attempted visits, hoping to make it on his own. One day, after less than two weeks alone, they caught him leaving the house and put him in foster care, calmly explaining that he couldn't live alone and that letting the state take care of him was in everyone's best interests.

Noah existence is the direct result of a classic "forbidden love affair." Neither of his parent's families wanted them to be together. Love persevered though and Noah got the best of both of worlds. With his mother's fine Kenyan beauty and father's strong Nordic features, leaving him taller than average, with dark caramel colored skin and naturally tight curled light brown hair.

Unfortunately even in an era following the administration of a bi-racial president, old stereotypes die hard and Noah knew that his chances of adoption as a racially mixed teenager, were slim to none, especially when everyone wants a blue-eyed, blonde haired, newborn baby. Besides, Noah didn't want to be adopted, he wanted to be on his own, *and I did it for two weeks without any problems until they found out and threw me in here.*

His ears pricked up when the heavy outside security door slammed and the deadbolt lock clanked home. He held his breath and listened as the night shift caretaker went back to his room and shut the door. Sounds of the cable news channel came back to Noah through the deserted hallway. He waited another half hour in the dark, then grabbed his backpack and arranged the pillows on his bed, so that at a glance, it looked like someone was still lying there.

He opened the door slowly and peeked both ways. When he was sure the coast was clear, he half ran, half walked to the bathroom at the end of the hallway. Once inside he eased the window open and slid quietly out into the warm night air. The majority of the bedrooms were on the third floor, but the bathroom window led out to a small landing over top of the kitchen, from there, it was just a short jump to a garbage dumpster and the back alley.

As soon as Noah's feet hit the pavement, he broke into a sprint. The tiny alleyway was crowded with empty boxes and crates, so he had to dodge back and forth just to make headway. He heard shuffling behind him and glanced back long enough to see someone following.

"Hey you!" they shouted.

Noah put on an extra burst of speed. As he neared the end of the alley, something stepped out of the shadows.

It looked like a pile of old dirty rags and smelled even worse. Noah stopped and pulled out the paring knife that he stole from the group home and waved it back and forth. As he stood there brandishing the makeshift weapon, he felt silly and wondered why he even brought it along in the first place. He knew in his heart that he could never use it on someone unless he was in mortal danger and even then, all those years of Karate lessons he took had to be good for something. He self-consciously stashed the knife away and instead assumed a Renoji-dachi defensive stance, one hand down, the other in front, and most of his weight on his rear foot.

The mummy like creature shuffled forward a step and held her hand out, "Hey man, can you spare five dollars for a cup of coffee?" When Noah didn't say anything the old bag lady waved her hand dismissively, "Oh never mind, just make sure that you help her when the time comes."

Noah stopped dead, "Help who?"

"The girl Silly, who else?" The woman chuckled hoarsely.

Confused, Noah shook his head and muttered, "*Crazy old coot,*" as he took off running wildly down the street.

He didn't know where to go, he just knew he wanted to be on his own. He didn't have any relatives that he could turn to, so he was going to have to find somewhere cheap to stay. When he reached the corner of 31st Street, he paused until he spotted the bright lights of Madison Square Garden.

The subway, he thought with a smile, *that would be the perfect place to lay low for a little while.*

Noah had ridden the trains before, so he wasn't completely lost. He hurried down the sidewalk until he reached the entrance to Pennsylvania Station. Once inside he rode one escalator down to the lobby and then another down to the "Grand Hall" where the big arrival/departure board was located. He kept going past the concourse area, noting the free Wi-Fi and cell phone charger hot spots along the way.

Heart still beating a mile a minute from his harrowing escape, he finally stopped near one of the boarding platforms. He didn't see any benches, so he leaned against a support pillar to catch his breath.

The place was a ghost town, nothing like the wall-to-wall people during rush hour. A low hanging ceiling muffled the sounds of trains and loudspeaker announcements. Vending machines and advertising screens flashed vivid digital rainbows to a backdrop of resin-coated cinder block, exposed electrical conduit, pipes, and missing acoustic tiles. A few night owl commuters hurried past without looking up.

Noah stood back up and wandered the connecting passageways for a while trying to figure out what to do. He'd never been homeless before. As a fugitive of the law, he had to rule out homeless shelters or soup kitchens just in case anyone was on the lookout for him.

The only thing left is the streets; he scanned the empty station, *and here.* He checked his watch and yawned, *Two o'clock. I need find a place to get some sleep.*

When no one was around, he started pulling on closed doors along the way, hoping to get lucky. *Locked, locked, locked,* he chanted in his head after each one. About halfway down the corridor, he yanked on a set of steel utility doors and almost fell over when one of them swung open.

He looked both ways, jammed the locking mechanism with a folded piece of plastic cup, then slipped through and eased the door shut behind him. Once safely inside, he retrieved a small LED flashlight from his pack and shined it down the narrow storage area.

Carts and floor buffers crowded the circle that his tiny beam illuminated. The hallway dead-ended out not too far in.

Noah's heart sank, until he noticed a small steel ladder going up into the rafters. At the top of the ladder was an alcove just big enough for him to sit up and lay down in. Electric switching panels lined one wall and a low-pitched humming sound was coming from somewhere beneath him. In the absence of better options, Noah curled up in a ball with his jacket as a pillow and checked the last text message he received from his father before the crash.

The weather is horrible here. Your mother and I are coming home early. Miss you. Can't wait to get back. Love Dad

His father's support and inspiration meant everything to him. *It's easy to be confident when you have someone who believes in you.*

Noah's Mom and Dad traveled half way around the world coming home that day. They made it all the way to the Tappan Zee Bridge just outside of New York City, where torrential rain impaired visibility to the point that they couldn't see the broken-down gasoline tanker in the fast lane, *until they collided with it.* There were no survivors.

Tomorrow is another day, Noah thought.

He powered his phone down and tried to get some sleep. He was scared and he was lonely, but at least for now, fifteen-year-old Noah Anderson was in charge of his own destiny and that was going to have to be good enough.

Chapter 2

Fourteen-year-old Emily Lee sat on a tall stack of boxes near the checkout counter of her parent's corner grocery store and pouted. The screen of the iPad in her lap illuminated her lofty perch with a dim ethereal glow, further darkening her mood

I wish I was anywhere but here, even school. Better yet, I wish I had magic powers. Her almond shaped dark brown eyes narrowed at the early morning shoppers in what she meant to be a mighty scowl. *I am a warrior mage. One wave of my wand and you are all just so much toast.*

An old man walked past and smiled at her. *That's right keep smiling,* she giggled to herself, *I just cast a spell of mild bowel obstruction on you.*

Waves of long black hair cascaded down over her shoulders obscuring her expression from the customers in the crowded aisle. A woman walked past and gave her a sour look.

Ha Ha! Emily waved her imaginary wand again. *Late for supper spell for you, Meany! I hope it's cold by the time you get there.*

Flickering fluorescent lights pulsed out of time to the beat of clacking ceiling fans. Humming cooler compressors generated an anti-rhythm to the beeping electronic cash register, finally breaking her concentration.

Saturday morning, and I have to be here why? She stopped pretending and glowered; *I could be sleeping late or watching TV.*

Emily hated being at the store all the time. Unfortunately for her "Lee's On The Corner" brought in most of the money that her family lived on, *besides that, Mom and Dad insist,* she rolled her eyes, *which makes it mandatory by default.*

Lee's is a unique cross between a discount boutique, bodega, and Asian grocery store. Located on the corner of West 28th Street and 7th Avenue in midtown Manhattan, they carry everything from live squids to automotive parts. Bicycles and household items hang precariously from the rafters and line metal shelves that go all the way up to the ceiling. In the back of the store are the aquariums and ice tables where they sell fish and other strange ocean denizens fresh from the docks.

Emily and her family live on the floor above, but her parents own the whole building that houses the store, their home, and three other apartments on the fourth floor. They don't have a yard. If she wants to go somewhere without pavement, it's either to her friend Ethan's house with its tiny walled in lot or to Madison Square Park, over three blocks away. Her best friend Hannah Garcia lives in the building next door, where her family runs a popular "Latin Fusion" restaurant.

Emily doesn't want to be a grocer, she wants to be a rich and famous fiction author. *Well maybe I could do without the famous part, but most certainly rich.* She is in the process of writing her debut novel, "The Adventures of Amelia Eldritch Teenage Wizardess." The book is about Amelia's travels and encounters with the magical creatures of New Woods, a mystical forest in the fictitious land of Citailia.

Summer vacation is less than a week away, Emily chewed a piece of her hair and dreamed of all the cool things she was going to do, but then reality reared its ugly head when she thought about all the things her parents were going to find for her to do around the store.

Emily was so focused on her misery that she didn't even notice the boy standing right in front of her. "Um, excuse me," he interrupted shyly, "do you know where I can find a battery for this flashlight?"

Emily glanced over at her father. He shrugged and nodded, so she jumped down from her roost, "Sure, what kind is it?" She reached for the light. While she took it apart, the boy just stared at her.

He's kinda cute, she snuck a look, *and tall too.* His short curly brown hair matched the color of his skin, and he had the deepest piercing blue eyes she'd ever seen.

"Oh, it looks like a 28L," she laughed nervously, "that's one of those weird camera batteries, they're back here." She started down the aisle waving her hand over her shoulder as she went, "How many do you need?"

"As many as I can get, how many do you have?"

She checked the display to see two packs. When she turned around, he was standing right behind her.

“Oh!” she jumped back against the canned foods rack and looked up.

Time stopped.

The two of them were suddenly alone in the middle of a lush green forest. Birds flittered through the trees and a warm breeze gently tickled Emily’s long flowing hair. The boy was holding her hands. She gazed dreamily into his eyes. They came to the part in the story where he takes her into his more than ample arms, but instead, he offered his hand to shake and broke the spell, “Oh hey, my name’s Noah, what’s yours?”

“Emily,” she stammered, feeling lightheaded and a little disappointed. “Oh, here,” she came back to her senses and handed the batteries over, “these are all we have, but I can get my dad to order more if you want.”

Noah smiled warmly, “That would be nice.” When he took the batteries, an electric shock ran up her arm. The two stood there staring at each other for another few seconds.

Emily glanced in her father’s direction and smiled awkwardly. “It’s been really nice to meet you Noah,” she whispered, “maybe I’ll see you around sometime, what school do you go to?”

He seemed uncomfortable as he blinked slowly like he had to think about it, but then blurted out, “I don’t go...I mean, I go to a private school, it’s a, really far from here,” and backed away to the checkout counter without another word.

Emily stood there in shock, until she caught the frown from her father that drove her back to the stack of boxes again.

A light drizzle settled over the city like a wet blanket as NYPD Transit Bureau Sergeant Bill Door stared out the windshield of his patrol car. It had been raining for the last three nights in a row and looked like it was winding up to be another dreary one.

His new partner Melody Jones sat across from him and fidgeted with her seatbelt. It was her first night out. Bill looked her over with the critical eye of years of experience on the police force.

Pretty girl, he nodded grudgingly, late twenties by my guess, medium height, and build, African American descent, seems reasonably intelligent. The chief said she aced the Police Academy exams, no problem. She could be doing anything, he shook his head sadly, why she wants to be a subway cop is beyond me.

They were parked in front of a construction site at the end of West 30th Street. From where he sat, Bill could hear the trains of Hudson Yard less than a block away and the West Midtown Heliport right behind him. The smell of the Hudson River wasn’t too bad tonight, much more like mud and fish for a change, than the aroma of raw sewage that you get when the wind’s blowing in from the north east.

Traffic on 12th Avenue was mild at this late evening hour. Bill sipped his coffee and watched the headlights come and go on the near empty six-lane thoroughfare. Overall, it was a typical night on patrol.

At thirty-five, Bill Door was in his physical and mental prime, he had a good job and his own place, and yet for some reason he still wasn’t satisfied. As a young man, he never fit in too well in social circles. A perpetual wallflower, Bill blossomed early. By the time he turned fourteen, he was already six foot five and sprouting facial hair. The kids at school used to make fun of his lantern jaw and deep voice calling him “Herman” from the late night reruns of 1960’s TV show “The Munsters.”

Very early on people told him he should pursue a career as a radio and TV announcer, but he became a cop instead, just like his father and grandfather before him. It was his indisputable destiny.

“So tell me a little bit about yourself,” Melody blurted out after too long of a silence.

He turned and gave her a blank look, not quite in the mood to get personal so soon.

“I mean,” she squirmed uncomfortably, “I do like to know a little about who I’m working with.”

“You first,” Bill replied a bit too gruffly.

“I don’t know,” she tugged at her seatbelt, “I like living in the city. I used to work as a nurse. The money was good but I was bored to tears. I want some action. I want some excitement in my career.”

“Well you came to the wrong place for that,” he chuckled. “Working night shift, you’ll be lucky if you can stay awake, not to mention seeing anything exciting.”

Just as he said that, he noticed something moving over in the bus parking lot. He sat up and leaned forward.

“What?” Melody sat up now too.

Bill shook his head, “I don’t know, I thought I saw something over there.”

Through the clinging mist and intermittent flicking of the windshield wipers, he could just make out a large white blob floating across the parking lot, followed by several more just like it.

“They’re coming this way,” Melody practically squeaked with excitement.

As the white blobs came near, Bill thought at first that they looked like big horses, but then he spotted the straight twisted black horns coming out of their foreheads...

“Hunh? Unicorns?” he whispered and sat his coffee in its holder. “What in the world are they doing here?”

He put the cruiser in gear and pulled across the street to get a closer look. When he trained the spotlight on them, they stopped as one and turned to face the car. Their eyes reflected like sparkly stars in the high beams and their coats glowed a luminescent ghostly white as they started walking slowly toward the car.

“They’re beautiful,” Melody shook her head and stared at the impossibly strange mythological creatures come to life.

The leader stepped right up to Bill’s window, whinnied softly, and fluttered its long “my little pony” eyelashes.

Bill relaxed and reached for the door handle.

Without warning, the cutesy equine eyes flashed red and the unicorn rammed its three-foot long black horn into the side of the cruiser. It sliced through the steel door panel like warm butter and missed Bill’s leg by less than an inch.

The unicorn yanked the horn back out with a growl.

Melody screamed. Bill slammed the shifter into reverse and floored it. The car lurched and the backward momentum threw him against the steering wheel while the herd of unicorns stampeded after them. The car quickly ran out of parking lot as he swung the wheel hard and slammed on the brakes to avoid running into a row of buses. The car slewed sideways and skidded to a halt just inches from a tall chain link fence.

Somewhere in all the excitement, the engine stalled. Bill tried the key, but the starter only clicked and then went dead.

They were trapped.

Grey mists clouded the windshield as Bill squinted at the advancing beasts. The only sounds were the “ting ting” of the hot engine cooling down and the “clip clop” of hooves on wet pavement as the unicorns quietly surrounded the patrol car like a pack of hyenas toying with their food.

One on either side sauntered up and casually rammed their horns into the tires. The front of the cruiser dropped with a loud hiss.

The leader stepped forward and rammed its horn into the grill. A huge cloud of greasy grey steam exploded in its face, while sprays of coolant squirted out at different angles, drenching the windshield and scalding the other unicorns that were standing near.

As one, they whinnied and jumped back, scattering randomly, then coalescing again and taking off in the direction of Hudson yard.

Bill grabbed the mic, “Dispatch, this is car fifty-four. I want to report a herd of...” he stopped for a second and looked over at Melody. She shrugged and nodded.

When he didn’t finish right away, dispatch came over the radio, “*Go ahead car fifty-four.*”

“Oh crap,” he said and then keyed the mic again; “Dispatch we’ve just been attacked by a herd of unicorns. Our cruiser is damaged and will need to be towed.”

There was a moment of silence and then, *“I’m sorry fifty-four could you repeat that?”*

“I said, we have been attacked by a herd of U-N-I-C-O-R-N-S,” he articulated slowly, “the car is not drivable, and we will need a wrecker here as soon as possible.”

The radio went quiet for a few seconds before the dispatcher’s voice came over the speaker again.

“Ten-four car fifty-four, if you say so,” Bill thought he heard a snicker in the background, *“a, you need back up or anything?”*

He looked across the seat and Melody shook her head. He closed his eyes and keyed the mic again, “No, dispatch I think we’ll be fine, but you might want to put a BOLO out on the unicorns though, they really did a number on the cruiser.”

Chapter 3

Emily shrugged her backpack up on her shoulder and hurried next door. When she banged loudly on the front door, Hannah Garcia popped her head out with a bright smile, “Sorry Em I’m running a little late, give me just a sec I have to grab my lunch.”

Emily rolled her eyes, but her best friend had already ducked back in and missed the look completely.

Less than a minute later, Hannah was back, smiling sweetly and munching on a pop tart. “Wamph sum?” she asked breaking off a piece.

“No thanks,” Emily shook her head and scolded playfully trying to sound like her mother, “you know all that sugar will rot your teeth out?”

Hannah giggled, shrugged in reply, and they started down 28th Street.

Towering skyscrapers hovered precariously as they moseyed down the sidewalk. Lofty glass fronted sentinels blocked out the morning sunlight and created an echo chamber that channeled the traffic noise back at the two teens from every angle.

When they reached the corner of 8th Avenue, Ethan was already waiting, bouncing in place with excitement, “Hey guys, are you ready for the last day of school?”

“What’s there to be ready for?” Hannah scoffed, “The school year is already over. The last day is always watching movies and play work anyway right?”

“Yeah I guess so; I’m still psyched though, two whole months off.” He did a double fist pump gesture that looked a little awkward coming from a skinny, slightly geeky redhead.

As they walked past Penn Station, Emily noticed police cars lined up and down the block. Four paramedics lifted a white sheet covered stretcher into the back of an ambulance. Ethan caught her looking and nodded sadly, “My dad said they found one of the maintenance workers down in the tunnels last night. It looked like he tripped and got run over by one of the trams, he said it completely chopped the guy’s head off.

“Eww,” Hannah squealed and hid her face, “that’s gross.”

Emily had heard about trains hitting homeless people before. She shook her head; *I wonder why anyone would bother going down there in the first place when there are so many shelters and soup kitchens around the city.*

As if on cue, she spotted a small group of homeless people gathered in front of the Post Office.

They all looked to be cut from the same cloth even though they came in all shapes and sizes. Most appeared to be somewhere in between fifty and a hundred and fifty years old, wearing a hodgepodge of jogging suits, utilitarian clothing, and last year’s Whatever-Mart chic. They lined up against the wall on their milk crates and collapsible chairs, with loaded shopping carts kept protectively near, cowering from the morning sun like a brood of newly turned vampires.

Emily was so repulsed and entranced at the same time that she almost ran into someone coming up the sidewalk in front of her.

“Whoops,” she spun to the side and narrowly avoided colliding with an overloaded shopping cart. She felt a strange surge of revulsion as the old woman stopped and smiled at her, revealing an unusually perfect white set of teeth. Without warning, two hands snaked out of the many layers of clothing and grabbed her arms. Emily struggled, but was helpless against the iron grip of the bag lady.

“Let me go!”

The woman grinned maniacally and pulled her close. Her breath smelled of peppermint as she gazed deep into Emily’s eyes, “That’s right Your Grace, don’t you ever give up, even when the cause seems hopeless.”

“What are you talking about?” Emily stopped struggling, “Your Grace?”

Without saying anything else, the old woman released her and continued down the sidewalk, leaving the three teens staring in shock.

“What was that all about?” Emily shivered.

“Oh don’t mind her,” Ethan waved his hand, “that’s just Mrs. Finklestein, she’s harmless.

“She didn’t exactly feel harmless to me,” Emily said rubbing her wrists, “and what was that *Your Grace* stuff about?”

“My Dad says she’s a little touched in the head,” he blinked and pushed his glasses up on his nose.

Emily shook her head, “Or something.”

“I wonder what happened to Mr. Finklestein,” Hannah joked.

Ethan tapped his watch meaningfully, “Probably the same thing that’s going to happen to us if we’re late for school this morning, come on let’s get going.”

NYPD Sergeant Bill Door stood in front of his commanding officer’s desk and tried not to look crazy.

“I guess you know why you’re here,” Captain Murphy frowned over his paperwork.

Bill nodded sideways and shrugged.

“Internal Affairs is breathing down my neck Bill. They think you’re losing it and they want me to pull you off the streets completely until we can get this straightened out.”

“Aw come on Captain, you know me, do you think I’m crazy?”

“I don’t know what to think. You have to admit it does sound a little cra...I mean farfetched.”

“What did the garage say?”

“They said they’ve never seen anything like it. The hole in the engine block looked like it had been melted, but there weren’t any burn marks. It’s like the iron molecules just got squished out of the way to form the hole.”

“I’m telling you captain it was unicorns that did it, and no I wasn’t drinking too much coffee. I saw it and my partner saw it too.”

“I know, your story checks out, but do you realize how that sounds? I can just see the headlines, ‘Mythical Creatures Terrorize the Streets of New York City’.” He shook his head, “The next thing you know it’ll be dragons and pixies in Times Square.”

Bill tried not to smirk.

“What are you laughing at? I’m serious.”

“I know, I know.”

“I don’t think you do. So I’m putting you and your new partner on temporary subway patrol.”

“Aww come on captain, walking the beat?” he whined. “You’ve got to be kidding me.”

“No I’m not,” his commanding officer looked him in the eye. “Look, I got you off the hook for now, but you better keep it under control or I guarantee you, the powers that be will have you behind a desk pushing paperwork so fast it’ll make your head spin.”

Bill opened his mouth, but then closed it again before he made things worse; instead, he snapped off a reluctant salute and mumbled, “Yes sir,” on his way out the office. Once out in the hallway he punched the block wall and immediately regretted it.

Chapter 4

Eighty-three-year-old Silas Miller hobbled off the escalator and leaned heavily on his cane as he pulled the little two-wheeled cart across the crowded concourse floor.

The cart carried all his worldly belongings. It bristled with umbrella handles, canes, wire coat hangers, plastic bags, blankets, and even an old garbage can lid strapped across the front. *You can't take any chances living on the street*, Silas nodded resolutely, *leave something lay, it will be gone in a heartbeat*.

The aroma of fresh fried donuts made his stomach growl as he ambled past the Krispy Kreme store and down to the lower level of the Penn Station. He immediately went to track twenty-one and walked all the way to the end of the platform. When he was sure no one was looking, he stepped off the platform and hurried along the tracks in the dark.

A little further in Silas stopped and faced the wall. At this point, the wall looked just like any other in the tunnel. Same damp soot covered gray rock, same utility conduit lines, and pipes running along the ceiling. He gestured with a wrinkled old hand and a section of the wall started glowing. Again, he looked both ways before walking right through the wall and out into another almost identical tunnel. He turned right and started walking briskly along the new track. When he came to a branching he turned left and then stopped. Again, he held his hand up to the wall and again it started glowing. He slipped through, but this time instead of a darkened tunnel, a blinding bright light and an awful racket like someone dragging a loaded metal shelf across a concrete floor greeted him. He couldn't see the source of the noise, but the light was coming from just around the bend.

Silas tried his best to be quiet.

As he crept along, his old wooden cane flashed and became a four-foot long two-handed shining broadsword. He stopped and unshipped the garbage can lid from his cart and it changed into a tall metal shield. On the front of the shield was a strange coat of arms done out in gold filigree depicting a great firebird with its wings outstretched against a field of stars. When Silas stood back up from his cart, he was much taller. Gone were the stooped shoulders of a street person and in its place a broad posture befitting of royalty. He was still an old man, but now he looked like a hero.

He left his cart behind and started walking toward the noise. It seemed like whatever was down the tunnel hadn't sensed him yet, so at least he had the element of surprise on his side. *For however long that lasts*, he thought with a solemn nod. As soon as he rounded the bend, he found out what was making the racket.

There, looking completely out of place in the subway tunnel was a fifteen-foot tall classic eldritch dragon. Its head literally scraped the ceiling, and tiny jets of flame wafted out of its nose holes as it tore up the ground with massive claws. The dragon appeared confused and had already set fire to part of the tunnel. Its iridescent green scales glinted here and there in the burning yellow light.

Silas was so enamored by the greatness of the beast that he accidentally kicked a rail tie and stumbled a few feet. The noise echoed down the suddenly quiet tunnel as the dragon spun around and lowered its saurian head toward him.

"So much for the element of surprise," he muttered wryly and dropped into a defensive stance.

The dragon didn't waste any time and charged straight at Silas, who deftly sidestepped and brought his sword up in a glancing blow to the snout which only served to make the beast madder. The creature spun around and lunged wildly. Silas ran for the wall, did a flip up over its head, and drove his sword point downward as he passed over.

He must have hit a sore spot because the monster started screaming, pawing at its face, and staggering around blindly.

Without warning, the dragon stopped flailing and brought its head up slowly. A thin lance of fire snaked out and Silas instinctually threw himself against the wall to avoid being fried to a crisp. He regained his balance and brought his shield up just in time to deflect a second fiery blast. This time he felt a surge of intense heat and smelled singed hair. He realized that the shield wasn't going to be able to withstand the dragon's fire much longer so he said a prayer and closed his eyes just long enough to form a ten foot ball of magical purple fire around him.

The temperature went back down a little bit and Silas had a few seconds to think. *What's going on? Dragons in the subway? I've never seen it this bad.*

The dragon roared and blew fire at him again, when he stood back up the flames parted like river water flowing around a rock. Silas waded toward the dragon again. The great beast was wounded and screeching loudly now and it backed away from him in horror.

I'm sorry buddy, but I can't let you go, he thought grimly, there's just too much at stake.

Being a creature of magic the dragon shouldn't exist in this world to begin with, yet there he was. His presence on this side was a sign that something strange was going on.

I can feel it in my bones. The balance is shifting, he frowned and remorsefully pursued the retreating dragon. The line between magic and science is blurring, as if to accentuate that thought, the dragon screeched loudly and backed up against the far wall, finding its final escape route blocked.

Silas bent down and prepared for another flare, but the dragon caught him completely off guard when instead, it lunged straight at him. He stepped back and brought his shield up just in time to block the lunge, but stumbled as the dragon flew past and stopped suddenly.

Expecting another lunge Silas dove sideways just as the dragon let loose with a huge lance of fire. The old man flipped through the air and landed awkwardly, slamming head first into the wall, and almost losing consciousness. In a twilight daze, his purple force field dropped just as the dragon's next flare hit, instantly incinerating him.

The dragon screamed a victory call and the magical shield and sword dropped to the ground with a hollow clattering sound on top of a small pile of ashes that was all that remained of Silas Miller the last Gatekeeper in New York City.

Teen Wizardess, Amelia Eldritch held on tightly to the centaur's mane as they thundered down the twisting forest path with the dreaded Vampire Wraiths of Algaroth hot on their tail. The glowing dragon's eye crystal on the end of her staff shined weakly in the pitch-black gloom.

Her little brother pointed behind them and cried out against the noise of the battering storm, *"They're getting closer!"*

Amelia sensed them too and pointed her staff over her shoulder without looking back. A white bolt of lightning blasted from the glowing tip and one of the shadowy creatures disappeared with a hollow pop.

The remaining vampire wraiths floated effortlessly through the rain right behind Amelia and Max, barely more than tattered black sheets with glowing red eyes. A shiver ran down her spine at the sound of their ear piercing screams, because she understood what they meant.

Oh, the wraiths look harmless enough from a distance, she thought, but that's the only way you ever want to see one, because while they call them vampires, they don't drink blood, they drink human souls. One touch from their dreaded proboscis and the victims instantly become a hollow shell, doomed to spend the rest of their days wandering aimlessly until they finally die.

Amelia and Max were almost to the edge of New Woods. She could see the towering Linden trees in the distance as the boundary to the Elven domain came into view. *Just a little further, she thought and glanced nervously back over her shoulder. We will be safe in Queen Galaxia's territory, if we can only make it that far.*

The wraiths must have sensed the boundary too, because one of them screamed desperately and put on an extra burst of speed that brought it soaring right up beside the wildly galloping centaur.

Max yelled, *"Look out!"*

Amelia spun around and brought her iron shod riding boot up into the face of the flying monster. She kicked out with all her strength and it barely did anything. The wraith just screamed again and opened its mouth to reveal row upon row of razor sharp teeth and a tongue that looked like a thick eyeless snake. Amelia jumped back just in time to avoid being bitten and would have fallen off the centaur if he hadn't shifted his weight just then. When she looked again, the black wraith was still there floating not five feet away.

Great globs of rain threatened to blind her as she aimed her staff and let loose with an emerald green ball of fire. The flame travelled lazily through the gloom. On contact, it engulfed the wraith and froze it rock solid. The law of momentum persevered and the evil creature kept right on flying for a few seconds before it slammed into a big tree and shattered into a thousand glittering shards of black ice.

Coming down the last stretch of trail, the storm opened up and blew a relentless horizontal deluge, thrashing the two siblings as if the skies too had joined forces to detain them.

The remaining wraiths spread out. From all sides they attacked through the cyclone force gale, screaming like demons at the end of the world.

Lighting split the sky and a massive old oak tree smashed down on the trail right in front of them. The centaur launched into the air at the last second. They soared weightlessly until his feet caught on one of the branches and then the ground rose up to meet them sideways.

Amelia tumbled violently and rolled to a stop beside a tree. She gasped for breath and scanned her surroundings, hopelessly preparing to fight, until she spotted several Elven warriors standing among the trees and the distinct absence of dreaded vampire wraiths. The storm had disappeared too. A small unassuming woman in riding leathers stepped out of the shadows just then and the forest lit up with a warm ethereal glow that seemed to come from everywhere at once.

Queen Galaxia nodded to Amelia, “Well met brave wizardess. These are dire times and evil is abroad in the land, it is good to see that we are not alone in our resistance.”

“You honor me your majesty,” she blushed and lowered her head, then slapped Max because he was still standing there with his mouth hanging open. “I come bearing news from the hills. The lord of the Ramen says his people cannot hold much longer.”

“I agree, but what can I do? Every day the forces of evil encroach further and further into New Woods. It is all that we can do just to keep them at bay. How fare the people of the plains?”

“They too defend their own and hope to hold alone.”

Galaxia shook her head sadly, “Divided as we are, we cannot hope to prevail. We need to join forces and meet this evil head on, it is the only way.” She stood taller and looked around. “We must attack the evil where it lives. The Pits of Nonone.”

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*Nonone?*

Emily Lee frowned heavily at her tablet, *what kind of name is that?* She shook her long black hair dramatically and deleted the hastily made up name from her manuscript, then sat back and stared at the computer screen for a couple minutes.

It really shouldn't matter what name she gave the barren stronghold of the Evil Dark Lord, but for some reason Emily couldn't move on until she had it right.

*This is my debut novel after all. It needs to be perfect.* She studied the paragraph again. *Ok, how about the Dark Abyss, or the Desolate Precipice?*

She'd been working on her story for almost three months now and had all the characters figured out, but the plot was still a little thin and needed work in more than a few areas. Naming people and places was a major weak point for Emily and for some reason she always felt inadequate.

*Mount Doom?* She brightened up, *oh yeah that's perfect*, then she frowned again, *oh no, wait a second, I think that one's already taken.*

Emily put the tablet down and powered it off. She had to stop writing for a little to go visit her grandmother, but she wasn't worried, there would plenty of time for writing on the long train ride to the Lower East Side.

## Chapter 5

Noah Anderson stood on the corner of 28<sup>th</sup> Street and 7<sup>th</sup> Avenue and stared at the front of the little grocery store. Ever since he met Emily Lee, he couldn't stop thinking about her. He wanted to go over and talk to her, but he couldn't help thinking that she was out of his league, at least in his current financial situation and even then, her father probably wouldn't approve anyway.

*She's so pretty, he sighed picturing her face. When she smiles, it lights up the room. There's just something about her, something different, something electric. I feel like I've known her my whole life.*

He lingered a little while longer then turned away from the store and made his way back to Penn Station.

Noah never really had too many friends.

Growing up “new money” in Manhattan had a way of alienating him from both the “have's” and the “have not's” on the social food chain. Before the car accident, his father was a highly successful investment banker and his mother a tenured teacher at the private school he attended. He spent the last ten years of his isolated life in a luxury penthouse overlooking the reservoir in Central Park. In the absence of close friends, Noah turned to extracurricular interests. As a result, he is not only a certified black belt instructor of Isshin-Ryu Karate, but the founding member of the Loudon Heights fencing team, and an avid Chángquán enthusiast.

*Just four short weeks ago, I had it all. Now all I have is my little cubbyhole in the subway.*

His new home has come a long way in just a few short days. He now had it stocked with blankets, a small camping lantern, water, and even a little food. By all indications, no one has been to visit the maintenance hallway since he started living there. Just to be safe Noah dragged an old sign and some boxes in front of the ladder and stacked shelves in front of the door so that if anyone did come, they would make enough noise that he would at least get an early warning.

Before Children's Services took Noah into custody, he did a thorough search of the house and managed to scrape up a few hundred dollars in cash. The money situation was ok for now. He still had quite a bit left over, but no idea how he was going to get more or what he was going to do past the next ten minutes.

As he rode the escalator down to the main floor, he thought about his parents. Noah learned early on that life wasn't fair, but never in his wildest dreams did he think he would lose either his mother or his father, not to mention both at the same time. *I have to be tough*, he nodded solemnly, and stepped up to the door to his little room, *it's just me now*. As soon as he pulled on the handle, he heard someone calling.

“Noah wait!”

He spun around to see Emily Lee coming up behind him. She grabbed his arm and glanced past his shoulder at the open doorway. “What are you doing down here?”

“I a,” his thoughts raced trying to come up with a lie: Instead, he dragged her into the hallway with him and slammed the door.

“What are you doing?” she asked, a note of fear tingeing her voice.

He grabbed her arms and looked deep into her eyes. “I'm not going to lie to you Emily,” he said with all seriousness, “I'm not who you think I am.”

Emily shook his hands off and stood back, “Well, considering I don't know who you are in the first place, that doesn't surprise me.”

Not to be dissuaded Noah continued along the same vein, “I need to be able to trust you.”

She shrugged, “You can, why, are you doing something illegal?”

“Sort of.”

“Oh.”

He felt like he was losing her so he told her the truth about the last month of his life. When he finished, she stared at him wide-eyed.

“I know it sounds messed up, but I don’t have any choice.” He hung his head, “I understand if you want to leave.”

She leaned forward and put her arms around him in a loose hug then patted his back, “Oh no Noah, that’s horrible, I don’t blame you.” She let him go, “What are you gonna do now?”

“I don’t know.”

“Where are you going to stay?”

“Here for now.”

“In this hallway?”

“No,” he smiled impishly, “here come check this out.” Noah led her back to the ladder, then helped her climb up to his little hole.

“Oh wow, this is so cool,” she peered around in amazement. “It’s like a home away from home.”

The two of them crawled about on their hands and knees until they found themselves facing each other by the light of the camping lantern. Noah stopped. Their eyes met for just a second too long and before he knew it, they were kissing. When he finally pulled away, Emily blushed and looked at her watch.

“Um, I really have to go,” she said and started climbing down the ladder.

“Wait!” he called after her, “I want to see you again.”

Emily turned back and shook her head at first, then frowned, “I’ll be at Madison Square Park tomorrow with my friends, meet me near the big fountain around noon.”

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Myron Furman tapped his foot impatiently on the grey tiled walkway near the 42nd Street entrance to Bryant Park.

It was just getting dark and there was not a soul in sight. The air smelled like rain. Roiling dark clouds hung low over the city of Manhattan, threatening to block out the quickly setting sun. Fifty foot tall “London Plane” trees lined the walkway on both sides and towered ominously overhead, like a saber arch executed by gigantic wooden soldiers.

He was out walking “Honey Foo Foo,” his wife’s beloved teacup poodle. Who instead of actually doing anything productive, was torturing Myron by mincing around slowly and stopping every five feet to sniff at God knows what.

“Good lord would you please hurry up?” he muttered to the little dog.

Myron Furman was not a happy man. *I’m miserable*, he rolled his eyes skyward as if looking for wisdom from the heavens, *I’m forty-three and I feel like I’m sixty*. In the last few years he has lost three teeth to abscess, his hairline has retreated well beyond his ears, and his complexion has transformed to a most depressing shade of deep sallow due to excessive stress.

He makes his living as a lower level clerk at his father-in-law’s accounting firm, but his entire job description could be summed up in two words “punching bag.”

Myron has never been a fan of confrontation and as a result, has been pushed around his whole life. When he married Edna, nothing changed. All day at the office, his father-in-law abuses him, then when he goes home, his wife takes over for the evening and weekend shifts.

*I’m trapped*, he frowned, *I don’t know how I ever got myself into this mess, but I’m damned if I can figure out how to get out of it. Edna hates me and any respect she ever did have for me was lost years ago.*

Honey Foo Foo stopped at a brightly painted fire hydrant and snorted loudly like she just discovered something interesting.

“Oh come on you stupid mutt,” Myron frowned without looking back. When the dog didn’t acknowledge his urgency, he yanked on the leash and started walking away. The leash pulled back and he heard the tiny poodle yip and growl menacingly.

Myron rolled his eyes, turned around slowly with his hands on his hips, and then almost jumped out of his shoes when he spotted what appeared to be a fifteen-foot tall dragon hovering over the little dog, eyeing her up like an early evening snack.

The eldritch mythical creature looked so out of place in the urban setting, all iridescent scaled and glowing green like a page torn out of a classic fairytale.

He stared in amazement for a few seconds then snapped out of it and yanked urgently on the leash, but the little dog was too busy barking her fool head off. The dragon turned its attention to Myron now and its eyes flashed an eerie shade of yellow. Honey Foo Foo chose that moment to attack the creature's tree trunk sized ankle, nipping at it fiercely. Her hackles rising up, as if she was the alpha dog in the confrontation, while her peanut sized brain goaded her on to take the lizard down all by herself.

"Come on you stupid dog, let's get out of here before you get us eaten!" Myron demanded with as much authority as he could muster staring at a creature straight out of his nightmares.

The dragon showed its teeth and blew a thin lance of white flame that snaked out to stop two feet short of Myron's face. The heat from the flare singed his eyebrows and he felt something warm run down his leg. Instead of continuing to yank on the leash in futility, he threw it at the dragon and started running blindly down the walkway in the dark. *My wife is going to be mad*, he reasoned in between random thoughts of survival, *but this dragon is going to eat me, and in spite of the long term consequences of either choice, I'd much rather take my chances with my wife.*

He didn't look back as he took the corner at 6th Avenue sideways and didn't stop running until he reached 43<sup>rd</sup> Street. When he finally thought he was safe, he stopped and leaned against the Hippodrome Center to catch his breath. He was going to need to come up with something to tell Edna that wouldn't make him sound like a total loon.

*I can't tell her the truth*, he shook his head, *she'll have me locked up*. After a couple of minutes, he stood back up and headed home. *I guess I'll just say the stupid mutt ran off. What's the worst Edna can do?* As that thought passed through his head, Myron Furman felt his bowels constrict.

Greg Wagner lives with his wife Roberta and their three dogs Esme, Abby, and Jackie, on the side of Wagner Mountain (actually more like a big hill) in Maysel, West Virginia.

In between plotting to take over the world and seeking spiritual enlightenment, Greg manages to find time to spin yarns of wonder and amazement. In whatever spare time is left over, Greg enjoys making glass beads ([www.randgswv.com](http://www.randgswv.com)), reading, riding motorcycles, and playing music.

[www.gregwagnerbooks.com](http://www.gregwagnerbooks.com)