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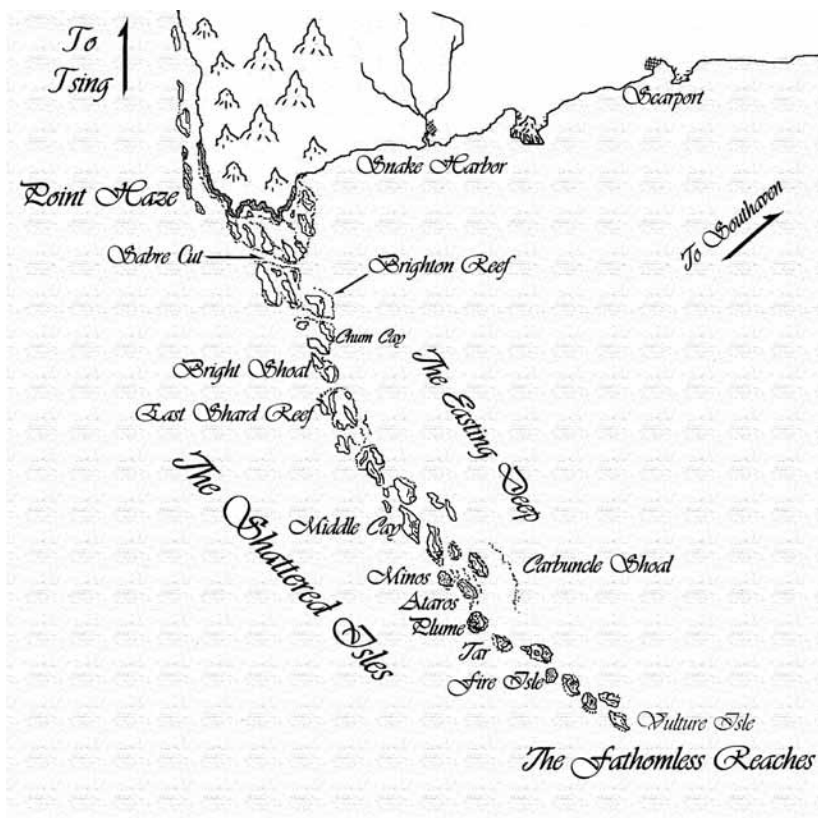
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Scimitar's Heir

A Scimitar Seas Novel
Book Three

By

Chris A. Jackson

Scimitar's Heir

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ISBN 978-1-897492-39-0

Dragon Moon Press
www.dragonmoonpress.com

Printed and bound in the United States of America

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Dedication

This one is for Joe and Kim, dearest friends. Without your inspiration and camaraderie, I never would have put pen to page.

Acknowledgements

A great many thanks go to my editor, Gabrielle, for her friendship, patience and perseverance, and to my publisher Gwen for believing in me. Thanks to Jana and Gail for support and mentorship. A big thank you to the sailing community, including all the Caribbean and Bahamas radio nets for news and friendship, and especially the Seven Seas Cruising Association, for giving a vagabond a feeling of community, and Chris Parker for giving solid weather forecasts that have saved me many uncomfortable days beating to windward.

A special thanks as always to my wife, Anne, for the help, support, editing, plot fixes, continuity checks, and character accent proofs, and for sticking with me through both the beautiful beam reaches and the aforementioned beating to windward.

PRELUDE

The Seamage's Heir

Your son lives, Trident Holder, Chaser signed, foregoing his usual formal greeting as he entered Broadtail's grotto.

Where has Eelback taken him? Broadtail surged up to the scout, his fins flaring with his temper. Six tides had passed since the mer had waged war against the landwalkers. Six tides since he had discovered that the school had been betrayed by Eelback. Six tides since his eldest son, Tailwalker, had been abducted by the traitors. His brood of young finlings, barely longer than his hand, scattered into every nook around the room, while his wife, Silverfin, hung back, well acquainted with her husband's temper.

They swim to the south, Trident Holder. The undine aided us in tracking them through the southern trench, but they refuse to go farther.

And what of Seamage Flaxal's Heir? Did he slay her for betraying us against The Voice?

Seamage Flaxal's Heir lives. Chaser signed, shifting dark, then light, a sign of confusion or fear. Broadtail also noticed other signs in Chaser: sunken cheeks and sallow eyes that spoke of fatigue and hunger.

Do not fear my anger, Chaser. It is not directed at you. He swept his arms wide in a proper welcome. *Come, eat and take some rest while you sign to me. Silverfin, we have some fresh mussels, do we not?*

We do, my husband. Silverfin flipped her tail and swam into a smaller grotto, returning in a heartbeat with a double handful of succulent mussels and a shucking knife.

Thank you, Trident Holder, Chaser signed, gobbling down the first of the tasty mollusks as he continued his report. *The scents the undine followed were confusing, Trident Holder. Seamage Flaxal is alive, but is no longer with Eelback's school. She has returned to her own grotto.*

He released her? Broadtail's eyes popped wide, his color shifting in horror.

Yes, but there was also some of her blood scent, and another scent, another landwalker, like her, but male. This second scent went with Eelback and your son.

A second landwalker? Where did it come from?

That is the confusing part, Trident Holder, Chaser said, gobbling down another mussel. *The scent came from nowhere. It was very strong at first, like Seamage Flaxal Heir's, but different.*

Her finling! Broadtail's color blanched almost white with the horrible realization of what Eelback had done. *He took her heir, Chaser! Holy Odea, Kelpie was with him! She took the landwalker child for Eelback! Seamage Flaxal will now surely destroy us!*

Took her finling? Chaser's features showed only confusion. *But why?*

I do not— he began, but Silverfin's hand on his arm stopped him.

You say they swam south, beyond the great trench, Chaser?

 she asked. As the trident holder's wife, she was also one of the school's lore-keepers.

Yes, Silverfin. The undine trackers would not follow into the vast emptiness beyond the trench that the landwalkers call the Fathomless Reaches, but the course was true.

And he took the seamage's heir. Her eyes flicked between her husband and Chaser, worry darkening her features. *Akrotia,* she signed, her delicate hands shaking.

What is that? Chaser asked.

Akrotia is a city, Chaser, Broadtail signed, though his eyes remained fixed upon his wife. *An ancient mer city, built and shared with landwalkers. But it is dead.*

Dead? Chaser asked, still obviously confused. *How can a city die? Did its coral become diseased?*

Akrotia was not built from coral, Chaser, Silverfin signed. *It was built of stone, metal and the magic of the landwalkers and mer alike. It lived, infused with the life of a landwalker...a landwalker *seamage*.*

Eelback! Broadtail signed, his choppy motions making the name a curse. *You think he plans to bring Akrotia back to life with the seamage's heir?*

It seems the only explanation, my husband. I will search the scrolls, but why else would Eelback take the seamage's heir? Nothing else makes sense.

One thing is clear to me, Broadtail signed, his attention turning back to Chaser. *Seamage Flaxal must be told what has happened, that Eelback manipulated The Voice and has taken her child. If we can direct her wrath to Eelback, she may not destroy us.*

You wish me to tell her what we have discovered? Chaser asked, flushing pale. Being sent to confront the seamage after what had happened, after her child had been literally ripped from her womb, could be a death sentence.

I do, Chaser. Broadtail grasped the scout's shoulders briefly, a sign of confidence and friendship. *Tell her that we submit to her. Eelback manipulated The Voice for his own ends and tricked us into a war with the landwalkers. We seek to help her get her child back as atonement. Whatever she asks, we will do. Whatever allies we have are hers. If we do this, perhaps she will not destroy us all.*

And Tailwalker? Chaser asked, his eyes shifting from the trident holder to his wife and back.

Tell her he is Eelback's captive. We do not seek her aid in freeing him. That will be our task, Chaser. Broadtail looked to his wife, then back to the scout. *The force I send with you will have this one secret from the seamage: I charge you with freeing my son.*

If Seamage Flaxal does not kill me before I can deliver this message, I will be honored to go with her to find Akrotia...and free your son.

Thank you, Chaser. Broadtail grasped him again by his shoulders and nodded gravely. *But have a care. It is said that Eelback has many allies, and we know nothing of Akrotia. He is not foolish. He must know that the seamage will come after him. He may have already made alliances of which we know nothing.*

I will go to the seamage now, Trident Holder, Chaser signed, gulping down the last of the mussels and nodding his thanks to Silverfin. *If I return, we will discuss Akrotia.* Chaser bowed formally in farewell, and took his leave.

You ask much of him, husband, Silverfin signed, her features grave.

*Yes, my love. For our son, I *will* ask much, perhaps all, and not only from Chaser.* Broadtail took up his staff of office, the trident of the school. *I will tell all the school of Eelback's treachery, and I will ask their help. Any who offer their service will accompany Chaser to Akrotia. Our war with the landwalkers is over, but I will not rest until Eelback is brought to justice.*

Very well, my husband, she signed, raising one hand to brush the fine scales of his cheek, *and thank you.*

Thank me when Tailwalker is home safe, he signed, leaving the grotto, his wife and his curious brood behind.

CHAPTER 1

Rude Awakenings

The screams of a thousand dying men rose on the pyre of the *Clairissa*. A pillar of smoke stained the sky, while below the sea spewed out swarms of scaled horrors that dragged the *Fire Drake* beneath the waves, leaving the surface a slick of carnage.

Fire and water...Blood and death...

Huffington bolted upright, reaching for the dagger under his waistcoat even before he was fully awake. His forehead cracked against the low overhead above his bunk, and stars exploded before his eyes.

“Blast and bloody murder!” he swore as he touched the sore spot. His fingers came away smeared red. *Damn these ships and their cramped quarters!* he thought before the echo of his nightmare overwhelmed his selfish curses. *How many men would thank the gods to be safe in a snug bunk with only a knot on the head to worry about? How many men, he wondered, perished in flames aboard the Clairissa, or drowned as the Fire Drake was dragged to the bottom of the sea?*

He shuddered as he blinked away the dancing lights of his trauma and lowered himself back onto the hard mattress. It was still dark, so it mattered not if his eyes were open or closed; both his dreams and his memories were haunted by visions of the horrors of Plume Isle.

Unnecessary horrors, he amended. This needn't have happened if the emperor had just listened to his opinion of the seamage, rather than to the allegations spouted by advisors who had never even seen the Shattered Isles.

With a start Huffington realized that, with all that had occurred, he hadn't considered the fate of his master, Count Norris. *I hope he survived*, he thought, fairly certain that Norris had still been ashore. If by some stroke of bad luck the count had been meeting with Commodore Twig, there was no hope that he had escaped. The seamage had destroyed the two warships completely. The thought lay uneasily on his mind; something about the attack hadn't been quite right.

The ship lurched sharply, throwing him to the side, and Huffington clutched the bunk's sideboard to keep from being pitched onto the deck. Such a change in motion usually meant that the ship had altered

course, and that meant trouble. The commodore's order had been to sail directly for Tsing with all haste; they should not be changing their course for days.

He swung out of his bunk, ducking this time to avoid the overhead, and recovered his spectacles from his waistcoat pocket. The cabin was tiny, and his bunk was only one of four. His cabin-mates—the young ensigns who were still learning the skills of the navy—were absent, so he could glean no information from them as to the reason for the course change. The view out of the single hazy port showed only gray predawn light and dim rolling swells. He had slept in his clothes, so he just splashed his face with some water from the basin and slipped his feet into his shoes. Snatching open the sailcloth curtain that served as the cabin's door, he ventured forth.

Once on deck, he was surprised to see land so close at hand. The *Lady Gwen* had just jibed, which explained the lurch, and was coming around to the east in the lee of Rockport Rock. The strong outflowing tide coursed along the ship's hull, hindering her progress. The sails luffed in the shelter of the towering rock, and the ship slowed further. At the deck officer's command, the sailors furled the sails, and the main anchor splashed into the sea. Chain rattled through the hawsehole, then the heavy anchor rode came taut and *Lady Gwen* swung around to ride easy on the low swells.

"Lieutenant Fenley!" Huffington called to the first officer as the ship settled at anchor. "What is this? We surely cannot be stopping here."

"Captain's orders, Mister Huffington," the officer said. He turned and strode up the deck, then called back over his shoulder, "Take it up with him if you've got a problem with our port of call. Bosun, have the longboat ready and manned in five minutes!"

Huffington's hasty strides took him to the captain's door, where two marines barred his way. "Please inform Captain Veralyn that I need to speak with him at once."

"Very well, sir." One of the marines rapped on the door.

"What!" called an impatient voice from inside the cabin.

"Mister Huffington says he needs to see you *at once*, Captain," the marine said, sparing no sarcasm as he cast an amused smile at his companion. Huffington fumed silently, but remained impassive. Marines were notoriously scornful of anyone non-military, and he, a commoner and no more than a secretary, earned even less respect.

“Show him in, Corporal,” replied the voice from inside the cabin, “and see that Lieutenant Fenley has my shore detail ready.”

“Aye, sir.” The corporal swung the door wide and ushered Huffington into the cabin with a thin smile.

“Captain Veralyn,” Huffington began, “We are making landfall at Rockport? I really must—”

“Ah, Mister Huffington!” the captain said, forestalling him with a wave of his hand. He buckled the baldric that held his dress cutlass, inspected himself in the small mirror that hung on the bulkhead and adjusted the jacket of his full-dress uniform. “I should have sent someone to wake you. Sealed orders, to be opened only in the event of an emergency—and if the events of two days ago don’t qualify as an emergency, I don’t know what does!—have directed me to bring the *Lady Gwen* here. As the senior surviving member of the *diplomatic* contingent to Plume Isle, you are welcome to accompany me ashore to determine the crux of these orders.” He grabbed his hat and strode toward the door. “That is, if you can be ready to board a longboat *at once*.”

Huffington stepped back to avoid being bowled over. He was speechless, though whether due to this abrupt change of plans, the captain’s assumption of Norris’ demise, or being considered the *senior* member of the diplomatic contingent—he was the only member aboard—he knew not. He dashed to his cabin, grabbed his satchel, and made it to the longboat just in time to shove off.

Eight burly sailors pulled the longboat into Rockport Harbor, straining at their oars against the ebbing tide that had kept the *Lady Gwen* from entering. Huffington focused his attention on maintaining his grip on the gunwale as the small boat bobbed about like a cork on the chaotic outflow. Thus, it was only as they rounded the breakwater into the harbor and the coxswain muttered, “Holy Gods of Light!” that he brought his eyes up.

Huffington’s mouth fell open in mute astonishment.

A forest of masts crowded the harbor, and all but a few flew the Imperial Navy flag. Three first-rate battleships, six frigates and four drake-class vessels, as well as two supply ships the size of *Lady Gwen*, all swung at anchor. The largest of the warships, the flagship *Indomitable*, flew the black and red pennant of the commander of the Southern Fleet, Admiral Joslan.

“Got the whole emperor’s navy ‘ere, they do,” a seaman muttered as he twisted around to see.

“Belay that!” the coxswain snapped. “Mind yer oars.”

The gig’s crew bent to their task, and the little craft cut unerringly to the side of the flagship. Huffington noted the captain’s grim expression and commiserated; the bearer of bad news was never welcome, and Veralyn bore plenty. An old sailor caught his eye and grinned as Huffington struggled to grab the rope ladder and ascend to the ship’s deck after the captain.

“There’s gonna be nine shades of the unholy hells ta pay now, sure enough.”



Kelpie swam with slow, steady strokes of her tail. After six tides and too few periods of rest, she was weary. Her duties as high priestess did not generally require prolonged exertion, and she felt the strain of their travel. At least they swam in formation; the score of warriors that Eelback had brought formed a tight wedge, providing easier passage for those in the center. *Dear Odea*, she prayed as she glanced at Tailwalker, who swam beside her, *give us strength*.

Tailwalker’s hands were bound behind his back, and a thin cord of ironweed was looped around his neck; if he slowed, the line came taut, shutting off the flow of water over his gills. This was happening more often now as he tired. His face looked pale and mottled in the light that filtered through the mats of floating seaweed overhead, his expression strained. He caught her watching him and glared, then looked away. It stabbed her heart to see the accusation in his eyes.

He hates me, she thought, resisting the urge to go to him, to try to explain. *What can I sign; that I betrayed him, but only to save his life?* A muscle in Kelpie’s arm cramped, and she looked down to the fragile bundle she cradled, the son of Cynthia Flaxal, Seamage of the Shattered Isles. Another friend betrayed to save Tailwalker’s life, all because she had believed Eelback.

The school abruptly halted, their formation jumbled as they jostled together. A large shape loomed out of the endless blue ahead, and the warriors raised a wall of tridents and lances. But Eelback, in the position of honor at the point of the wedge, raised his hand, and the weapons were lowered. Cutter, their scout, swam into the dappled light.

Hunting is good in these calm waters, he signed as he displayed the large, brilliantly colored fish impaled on his harpoon. The fish was almost as long as he was, blue on top and yellow beneath, with a domed head and a slender body. *These fish lurk beneath the mats of weed just waiting to be speared!*

Good catch, Cutter! Eelback signed, drawing his long knife to cut the carcass free of the harpoon. *We need the food if we are to reach Akrotia.* With a few deft strokes he separated the head, with its succulent eyes and cheek meat, and gave it to Cutter as reward. The rest he cut into strips and doled out to his school.

Cutter, where are Kip and Fah? Kelpie signed with difficulty, burdened as she was by the baby in her arms. *I need them here.*

The dolphins obscure the blood trail of my catch, Kelpie, Cutter explained. *I did not want any sharks following me back. They will return soon.*

How is your charge, Kelpie? Eelback signed after handing her several strips of tender fish.

He only lives by the grace of Odea, she signed back, swallowing the meat without pleasure. She folded back the covering of woven silkweed to uncover the round face of a landwalker baby. The child turned its face from a sudden ray of light, its mouth gaping like a fish's. *He struggles to breathe, even though Odea's blessing keeps him pink and warm. Food is my main concern. He is hungry, and Fah's milk is not healthy for him.*

But he is surviving, and you can keep him alive, yes? Eelback's motions signified worry. *We cannot resurrect Akrotia without him.*

I can keep him alive, Eelback, she signed, irritated that his concern was not for the child itself, but for the role it must play in his plan, *but you must let me feed him more often.*

It slows us down, he complained. *Can you not feed him while we swim?*

No, Eelback, I cannot. I must invoke Odea's blessing to calm Fah so she will hold still. Otherwise the baby does not swallow well, and he takes in water and regurgitates. Only by—

How can anything so large at birth be so fragile? Eelback interrupted, his fins waving in frustration. *Mer finlings are fully weaned and swimming out of their grotto by the time they are this big!*

This is not a finling, Eelback! This is a landwalker infant, and it will not be weaned for several seasons. She covered the baby again and

held it close, calming its agitation with the grace of Odea.

Seasons? Eelback gaped in shock. *How can an offspring eat nothing but pap for seasons?*

I do not know, Eelback. That is simply the way it is. Landwalkers grow more slowly than mer. If you do not let me feed him more often, there will be no Seamage Flaxal's Heir.

He stared at her long and hard, then gestured acquiescence. *The heir must live to reach Akrotia. We will stop again when Kip and Fah return. You can feed the child at that time, and call for a stop whenever you must feed him again. Now, we swim!*

Kelpie fluttered her fins in resignation as she resumed her place in the formation, and the school started off at a brisk pace. Bits of bone and brightly colored fish skin fluttered in their wake and slowly sank into the depths.



“Destroyed? What the hells do you mean, destroyed?” Admiral Joslan's fists hammered the top of his broad desk, and his face flushed the color of a ripe pomegranate as he surged out of his chair. “The schooner attacked without provocation?”

Huffington stood behind the captain of the *Lady Gwen*, out of the line of fire of the admiral's wrath, trying to remain inconspicuous while observing the encounter over the captain's shoulder. Beyond the men, the great cabin's open windows provided an impressive view of the armada and admitted an occasional feeble breath of air that did little to diffuse either the oppressive heat or the tension of the discussion at hand.

“No, sir. The schooner was still miles to the south when the *Fire Drake* came under attack by a large school of merfolk, sir.” Captain Veralyn's rigid bearing demonstrated his years of military discipline, but his hands, clenched behind his back throughout the lengthy explanation, were white with the ferocity of his grip. Huffington empathized—the ire of superiors could be taxing—but approved of the man's sharp and forthright explanation. The admiral, on the other hand, was finding it hard to control his impatience; he repeatedly tugged on the hem of his waistcoat, and his jaw muscles clenched until Huffington thought he might hear teeth crack.

“Merfolk!” The admiral's face darkened even more.

“Yes, sir. They swarmed her sides, sir. When she cut her cable and tried to make sail, she broached. They must have hooked a kedje into her

hull." The captain's dispassionate tone quavered for just a moment, and Huffington knew he was reliving the horror of the *Fire Drake's* struggle.

"Go on," the admiral ordered.

"Yes, sir. The *Clairissa* was beating close under sweeps and tris'ls, coming to the *Fire Drake's* aid, when the schooner sailed right between the two."

"You just said that the schooner was miles to the south."

"Yes, sir. She came up very quickly, faster than I've ever seen any ship sail. She made five sea miles in the time it took *Clairissa* to make half a mile to windward."

"The seamage," the admiral muttered as he narrowed his eyes dangerously.

"Yes, sir," Veralyn continued. "Just before the schooner arrived, the wind shifted and took the *Clairissa* off course, so she doused all sails and proceeded under sweeps alone. I can only assume that the seamage was aboard the schooner and manipulated the winds to do this, since we were also making sail and had no such difficulty."

"You were making sail? Under whose orders?"

"Commodore Twig's, sir. He was directing the armada by signal from the *Clairissa's* quarterdeck. That was when something very curious happened, sir. Something made a sound under the water, like a great clap of thunder. It shook our keel timber, sir, and the attack on the *Fire Drake* broke off."

"The mer retreated?"

"Yes, sir. Then the schooner tacked, came about in a single ship-length, and we saw her name; she was the *Orin's Pride*, the one said to have been working as a privateer along the Sand Coast." The captain swallowed and continued without prompting. "The schooner had tacked once more, drawing a line between the two warships as clear as day, sir, when the attack on the *Fire Drake* resumed. The mer were dragging her under, and she didn't have the men to repel them. The *Clairissa* was coming in under sweeps, and that was when the *Orin's Pride* jibed. As her bow swept toward the flagship, she fired a single catapult at her, sir."

"So the schooner fired first." The admiral's fist cracked into his palm, his lips set in a grim line.

"Yes, sir, and though it fell well short—a warning shot—it was quite impressive."

“The incendiary weapon we were told of? Distilled naphtha or flaming tar, I imagine.”

“No, sir. Neither,” Veralyn said with a firm shake of his head. “A single cask, probably five gallons in size, but it was not aflame when it was fired. It exploded in the air, and sent a cascade of burning white streamers in all directions. They left trails of smoke as they fell, and, Admiral, you may not believe this, but they kept burning even after they hit the water! The lookouts atop our masts confirm that they could see them sinking and still burning!”

“Magic!” The admiral spat the word as if it were a curse.

“We thought so, too, sir. Then Commodore Twig fired a broadside of ballistae, raking the schooner good.” He looked down, then back up, obviously uncomfortable with what he had to say next.

“Go on, Captain! Continue!”

“The *Clairissa* jibed under sweeps, sir, and she was going to rake the schooner with another broadside, when...she exploded in flames, sir.”

“Exploded?” Joslan’s eyes widened in disbelief, his jaw muscles suddenly slack. “No shot from the schooner? She just caught fire?”

“No shot from the schooner, sir, and she didn’t just catch fire, either. She exploded. Every bit of wood and canvas on her—topmast to waterline, beak-head to poop—burst into flames at the same instant. We couldn’t do anything for her, sir. By the time she sank, the *Fire Drake* had gone under, too. No survivors from either ship, sir.”

Admiral Joslan collapsed into his chair, his eyes staring blankly ahead. He sat silently for so long that Veralyn began to fidget.

“Sir?” the captain finally ventured.

Joslan’s eyes snapped up, and he looked at the captain as if surprised to see him still there. He cleared his throat, stood and jerked his coat straight. “Very well, Captain Veralyn. Bring *Lady Gwen* into the harbor when the tide shifts and moor her alongside *Indomitable*. I expect a written report to me by sunset. We will convene a court of inquiry tomorrow morning to assess the loss of two of His Majesty’s ships. You are dismissed.”

“Aye, sir!” Veralyn saluted and turned on his heel for the door.

Huffington followed a step behind, relieved that he had not been called to bear witness during the exchange. But before the door closed behind him, he heard the clatter of decanter against glass, and a single muttered word.

“Magic...”