



# Khimairal Ink



Volume 2, Number 3

January 2007



Stories by

Stephen D. Rogers    Sharon Hadrian    Q. Kelly

T. J. Mindancer    Barbara Davies



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**W**elcome to a new year! Hope this one brings only the best to your life. I have to admit, writing this issue's introduction was not as easy as some of the others. I did not want to use clichés and write about how a new year offers a fresh start or how it can bring changes in a life. Even worse would be recapping the old year and saying how the new year will be even better. So . . . the only, obvious thing to write about is . . . the great stories in this issue of *Khimairal Ink*!

January's selections capture the essence of our submission statement. ". . . the stories we most enjoy are positive, thought-provoking, and clever." First time contributor, Stephen D. Rogers has penned the clever who-dun-it, "Intermittent," while another newbie, Sharon Hadrian's funny flash fiction piece, "My Father is a Lesbian," is certain to invoke your own scientific studies. T.J. Mindancer has graciously added to her Emoria world with a thought-provoking tale about obligation and choices, while Q. Kelly's exquisitely told story, "The Old Woman," offers a different perspective about true love and second chances. We are fortunate to have an excerpt from Barbara Davies' new book, *Into the Yellow and Other Stories*.

Barbara has been one of our favorite contributors to *Khimairal Ink* and her collection of stories is superb.

By the time this issue hits cyber-space, we will have over 300,000 hits to *Khimairal Ink*. Once again, I'd like to thank the readers of the Merwolf Pack, the Academy of Bards, and our speculative fiction fans for their interest and continued support. I am encouraged by the number of quality of submissions we have been receiving. However, with growth comes inevitable change. Our outstanding artist, Trish Ellis, has found her business booming and will be devoting her time to the many projects lined up for her. We would like to thank Trish for all her wonderful illustrations that made *Khimairal Ink* so distinctive. But this means we will be tweaking the format and design of upcoming issues. The excellence of our writers will remain high and we hope you enjoy the new look.

We will have a booth at the Xena Convention on January 12-14, 2007 in Burbank, so if you are there, stop by and say hello!

See you next issue!

Claudia

Join us for the May 2007 issue featuring . . .

Sentimental by Tyree Campbell  
Prayer by Kirsten Elliott



This is the sixth issue of *Khimairal Ink*. We went into this venture without any expectations beyond simply thinking it would be a neat thing to do. Putting together issues have been easier than I had envisioned. We always seem to get enough submissions that capture our attention and imaginations.

Our circle of readership and authors increases with each issue. *Khimairal Ink* is an organic ever changing entity and while the look may change, the quality of the stories remains at the highest level possible.

While working on this issue, I kept thinking, "Something's missing." Trish Ellis's artwork is missing. She never believed me when I'd tell her that she'd eventually be so much in demand that she wouldn't have time for us. But that's what happened and we're proud to have helped a talented artist build a business out of what she loves to do.

We have some newcomers to this issue. What I like are the contributors who stretch their imaginations to pen a story for us that combines their

preferred genres and our guidelines. Stephen D. Rogers has carved out a niche as a mystery writer and he's brought that genre to our pages with "Intermittant."

Sharon Hadrian gives us an entertaining piece of flash fiction with "My Father is a Lesbian" that pokes fun at how we as a society love to jump to conclusions. T.J. Mindancer gives us a rare serious piece based in her favorite fantasy world, Emoria, with "The Second Coming of K'Miel."

"The Old Woman" by Q. Kelly takes us on one woman's personal journey that begins with a crazy dare.

Our mother company Bedazzled Ink has published a wonderful collection of stories by Barbara Davies and we've included an excerpt from the title story of the collection, "Into the Yellow."

I hope you enjoy this issue.

Carrie



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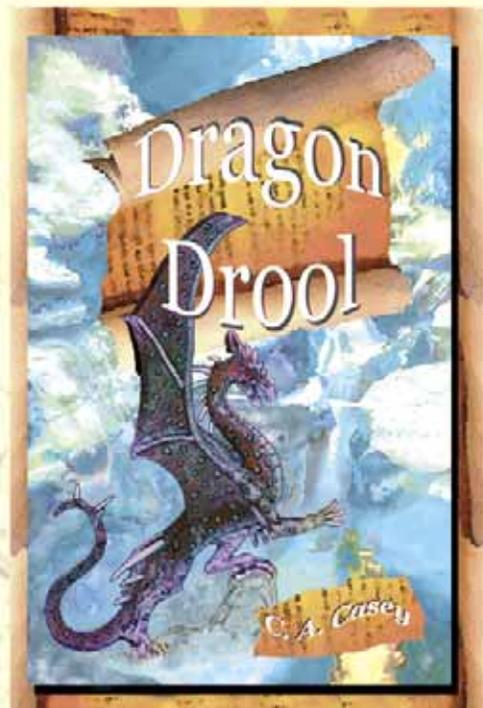
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**M**y client had lost four windshields in as many weeks and she didn't want to lose a fifth. She worked days, couldn't afford to stay up all night with a flashlight waiting for the perpetrator to strike. Me, that's just one of the ways I made my living as the brain, brawn, and beauty of Fran Rivers Investigations.

Some people were meant to be cops but it turned out I wasn't one of them. I didn't like consenting to the constraints of scheduled shifts, working details directing cinema traffic to make ends meet, bowing to a political bureaucracy that favored the boys in blue. After five years on the job I went private and had been that way ever since, no regrets.

Even after three long, boring nights of this surveillance, sitting in my car watching my client's as if it might perform some trick, I loved working for myself.

Frankly, if someone else had assigned me this task, kept me sitting out here night after night while sleeping at home in a comfortable bed, I'd probably resent the duty. As it was, this was my choice, my case, and—eventually—my collar.

Then I sensed rather than saw movement across the street. A baseball bat glowed pale in the moonlight. Someone slight dressed in black approached Vanessa's car from the opposite direction, glanced back and forth between the car and her bedroom window.

I raised my flashlight as the perpetrator lifted the bat.

Then she screamed.

Some of my best friends were women. My life-partner was a woman. I was a woman myself. You'd think with all that experience that I

would have somehow come to terms with the sound of a woman screaming but it still went right through me like a blast of raw electricity. Midwife material I was not.

By the time I picked the flashlight off the floor and peeled my feet off the ceiling, the perpetrator was long gone. I listened for an engine start but heard nothing.

I could see the bat glowing from a spot along the curb and jogged over to claim my prize. Even if the bat didn't prove to hold fingerprints, at least I'd saved the windshield and perhaps convinced the perpetrator to find another hobby.

I wasn't quite certain, come to think of it, whether I'd actually turned on the light before the perpetrator screamed. Maybe I had or maybe she saw me and thought I was aiming a gun at her or something.

Patting the windshield as I reached Vanessa's car, I stopped when I saw what made the perpetrator scream.

There was a dead man in the driver's seat.

At least I assumed he was dead. I wasn't usually quick to make medical judgements, especially by moonlight, but I could see that the right side of his head was missing. I didn't feel it necessary to check for a pulse.

Whoever he was, he was sitting in the front seat of my client's car which unfortunately made him my business. I carefully leaned through the window he probably broke to gain entrance and shined my flashlight around the interior looking for a gun. Broken glass sparkled back at me but there was no sign of a weapon which probably ruled out suicide.

I straightened and took a deep breath. Suicide was bad enough but murder meant the car would be impounded. That was even more inconvenient than needing a new windshield.

A slow scan of the neighborhood didn't turn up any faces pressed against windows. I didn't see lights popping on or hear sirens in the distance. Not even dogs barked. Could all living things have actually slept through the perpetrator's scream?

I glanced at my client's bedroom. Vanessa was expecting trouble and even she hadn't stirred.

Gambling that no one had called the police yet, I walked up to my client's door and rang the bell until my finger developed symptoms of carpal tunnel and Vanessa finally appeared.

My client was rubbing her eyes and wearing pajamas that were so nauseatingly cute that I could feel myself turning asexual as she squinted at me. "Fran. You woke me up. What?"

"Can I come in?"

"Sure." She backed away to let me enter, closed the door, and collapsed against it. "I was sleeping."

"Didn't you hear the scream?"

"What scream?" Vanessa blinked, slowly.

"Your friend with the baseball bat came back to see if your new windshield was any stronger than the previous ones."

"Was it?"

"She didn't have a chance to find out."

"Good work." Vanessa used both hands to cover a yawn but failed to contain it. "So which of you screamed?"

"She did."

"What happened? I thought you were just going to talk to my late-night visitor." She yawned again.

It was no wonder my client hired me to stay up all night for her. I had the sudden impression that she could have been sitting in her car while the perpetrator bashed the windshield and Vanessa might have slept through the whole thing. "I wasn't the reason she screamed. It was the man in your car who made her test her vocal cords."

Vanessa scrubbed her face with her fingertips. "What man?"

I stared at her. "For a client with something to

explain, you ask a lot of questions."

"Do I?" Vanessa coughed, ran her tongue over her teeth. "You woke me up."

"That's the one thing you've told me."

"Well, it's true."

"No kidding." I turned and marched through her living room to the kitchen. After finding the switch and flipping on the lights, I began going through cupboards.

"Can I help you? What are you looking for?" Vanessa had joined me and was draping a hand towel over her head to shield her eyes.

"Coffee."

"It's right there, next to the pot."

I sniffed. "That's right, you live alone."

"What do you mean?"

"Whenever two people live together, one usually develops an unexplainable aversion to leaving everyday items out in the open. It seems to be a law of human nature." I hefted the can. "If you had a partner this would be behind closed doors. Maybe even the coffee pot."

"I don't understand." Vanessa staggered across the kitchen and dropped into a chair.

"Frankly, neither do I." I scooped coffee into the filter and added water before joining Vanessa at the table. "When did you last use your car?"

"Today?"

"That's a start." I peeked under the towel. "Could you be a little more specific?"

She shrugged. "I probably got home at five-thirty or so and I've been in ever since. I worked on the computer some, read, watched a little television."

I'd arrived at ten to begin the windshield watch and apparently I should have taken the time to check Vanessa's car before beginning my surveillance. "Do you have any idea why a man would be sitting in the front seat of your car?"

Vanessa shook her head. "Who's this man you keep talking about?"

"There's a man in your front seat. He's dead." I gave her a thumbnail sketch, guessing height and weight, extrapolating the right side of his head.

"He doesn't sound familiar." Vanessa closed her eyes. "I must still be dreaming although I've never been this tired in a dream before. Can you sleep in a dream? Would it be twice

as refreshing? Do you think you could dream while dreaming you were asleep?"

"Vanessa. Listen to me. There's a dead man in your car. I have to call the police. If there's anything I should know, you should tell me now."

"Did I mention you woke me up?"

I poured us both a cup of coffee before calling it in.

Some six hours later, I found myself sitting on the edge of my bed, a glass of white wine in my hand, Cindy kneeling behind me so she could massage my shoulders.

"So then what happened?"

I waved the glass through the air, watching the wine roll up and down the sides. "Then the police arrived."

"Anybody you knew?"

"Not intimately."

Cindy smacked the top of my head. "That's for being fresh."

"I knew both detectives, about half of the uniforms." I felt safe smiling since Cindy couldn't see my face.

"Did Vanessa recognize the dead man?"

"Not so she said." I took a sip of the chablis, closed my eyes, tried to relax and let Cindy's fingers do their magic.

"Do you believe her?"

"She's my client."

Cindy harrumphed. "Any ID on the stiff?"

"Thomas Terrence. He was a small time hood with a dozen priors, mostly drug-related. Vanessa doesn't take drugs, doesn't have any close friends who do. I couldn't find a connection between the two of them."

My lover sighed. "I hate alliterative names. I bet his hood-friends called him TT. So what do you think happened, that TT tried to steal Vanessa's car before you showed up?"

I nodded. "That's the only scenario that explains everything. TT tried to steal the car and the steering wheel shot him. I'm told the brake pedal has cut a deal and is willing to testify."

Cindy cuffed me again. "I don't know why I bother helping you solve your cases."

"Help?"

"Yes, help. I'm sure Watson never had to listen to such lip as I get from you."

I rubbed my head with my free hand. "And the odds are long that Sherlock Holmes wasn't

smacked around by the good Dr. Watson either. Perhaps that's one of the benefits of being a fictional character."

"Do you think they were lovers?"

"Vanessa swore she never saw him before."

"I meant Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson."

"Watson was married if I remember correctly."

"Oh, I guess that settles it then. It's not like he could be gay if he was married. Silly me."

I laughed. "You just keep working those shoulders and leave the literary analysis to students desperate for a thesis." I sipped my wine.

Cindy shifted. "Speaking of work, I have to leave in forty minutes and I haven't even showered yet."

"You've got plenty of time."

Cindy must have agreed since she continued to rub my shoulders. "So, what do the cops think about TT trying to steal Vanessa's car while you were waiting for a different crime to occur?"

"I don't know. I'm not a mind reader."

"What do you think?"

"I think I love you."

"Besides that."

Frankly, I didn't want to finish the story because I knew it would mean the end of my massage.

On the other hand, Cindy's fingers were inches from my neck and she wouldn't hesitate to use them if she felt I was stalling. "In his left coat pocket, Thomas Terrence had a wad of cash. In his right, he had a bag of cocaine."

"Meaning what, oh great detective?"

I finished my wine. "Meaning he just might have skipped out halfway through a drug deal with both the product and the dough. That's no way to make friends."

"How do you know that the money and cocaine weren't his?"

"They could be. But then why would someone have killed him? What was he doing in Vanessa's car?"

"And how else would we explain the smudge of coal dust in the seams behind his left knee and the spot of blue paint on his shoe?"

"Are you making fun of me?"

"Yes." Cindy laughed. "And you figured that one out all by yourself. If you weren't already settled on being a private investigator, I'd suggest a career in psychic forecasting."

"I'll keep it in mind."

"So you think TT double-crossed a baddie, ran, and randomly decided to hide in Vanessa's car?"

I nodded. "He punched out the driver's window. There was glass all over the seat and floor."

"And then the guy TT tried to rip off caught up with him before he could get her car started, however it is that they do that. It always looks so easy in the movies."

"Bang. Blood and brains splattered all over the interior, bullet lodged in the passenger door."

Cindy snickered.

"What?"

"You have to admit, it's kind of ironic. Vanessa hired you to protect her windshield and look what happened. Her car was just about wrecked. Who would want to drive a vehicle with somebody else's brains all over it?"

"I don't imagine it would be pleasant."

"Who cleans that up? I'm sure the police don't."

"A cleaning service I suppose."

"So what did Vanessa say about all this? A drug dealer was killed in her car."

"She said she was too tired to process everything. She just wanted to go back to bed."

"And what did you say?"

"I suggested she move to a better neighborhood. In the space of one evening, nobody responded to either a gunshot or the sound of a woman screaming. Even the shooter didn't expect such indifference or he would have taken the time to empty the dead man's pockets."

"So what does this do to your case?"

"What do you mean?"

"You're being paid to watch Vanessa's car. Is it even going to be parked there tonight?"

"Oh that. It's solved."

"What? You're kidding. You said the perpetrator was long gone by the time you got out of your car."

I reached up and patted Cindy's hand. "After the police were done with us, I took Vanessa's address book and called each person listed, opening the conversation with the statement that I had her baseball bat."

"Sly."

"Thank you." I placed the empty wine glass on the floor. "Took me all the way into the G's. Paula

Grant was a three-night stand two months ago. When Vanessa broke if off, Paula went from carrying a torch to carrying a bat. The woman simply did not take rejection well."

"So you're going to be home tonight then."

"I'm going to be home."

"Well that's a relief." Cindy hugged me from behind. "You know how much I miss you sometimes."

"Just sometimes?"

She kissed the top of my head and then climbed down from the bed. "I need to get ready. Congratulations on solving your case."

"Thanks. And thanks for the great massage." I watched Cindy cross into the bathroom to start the water running.

She called back over her shoulder, "What about the guy who shot TT?"

"What about him?"

"Do the cops have any leads?"

I shrugged. "Someone will talk or the killer will be killed himself during a future deal gone bad. The cops will keep the file open but they aren't holding their breath."

Cindy turned to face me. "So broken-heart pays her debt to society and the cold-blooded killer goes scot free."

"Justice can be that way sometimes, intermittent."

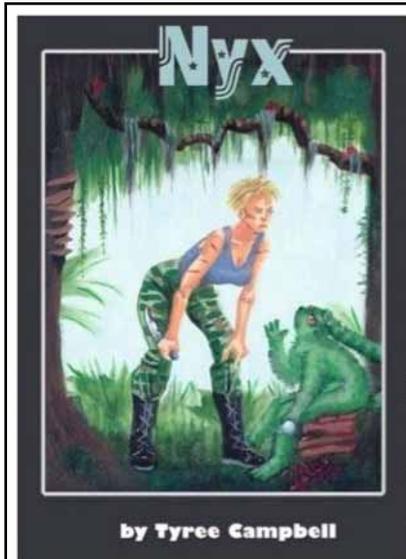
Cindy slipped out of her clothes and through the shower curtains. "Hey, what did you do with the shampoo?"

"I put it away."

"Where?"

Deciding I felt a little grubby myself, I stood. "Don't worry, I'll bring it in to you."





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**July 23, 2005**

**8:54 a.m.**

**T**oday, while brushing my lesbian teeth and lovingly admiring my dripping wet, nakedly feminine body in the bathroom mirror, I inadvertently stumbled upon the newest, clearest theory of sexuality yet. Dr. Freud, watch out! I believe this information should be disseminated immediately, so that young, unaware homosexuals everywhere can embrace their same-sex love at the earliest possible age. Eventually, I hope that my discovery can be applied to pre-natals the world over.

It's so simple, and yet already my "theory" (which henceforth shall be known simply as "my fact") has a 100% success rate. Oh Great Minds of Science, here it is: my Internet girlfriend and I both squeeze the toothpaste tube from the very top, which irks my mother (a "bottom squeezer" and homo-converting Conservative). This leads me to conclude that top squeezing is a distinctly lesbian behavior, and tomorrow I will be heading to the Hygiene section of Target to spread the word to my fellow sisters.

Oh, and on the pre-natal thing. I guess we'll have to wait until they start teething.

**July 24, 2005**

**8:06 a.m.**

**T**oday I have stumbled upon the most amazing realization: my father also squeezes the toothpaste from the top, an uncontrollable condition that solicits further ire from my

mother. No wonder they don't get along.

This newfound knowledge is clear in its intent, and has been revealed to me for one express purpose: to further the study of my fact by including another, more complex group of humans into my research pool. I am very excited by this discovery.

Clearly, my father is a lesbian.

**July 26, 2005**

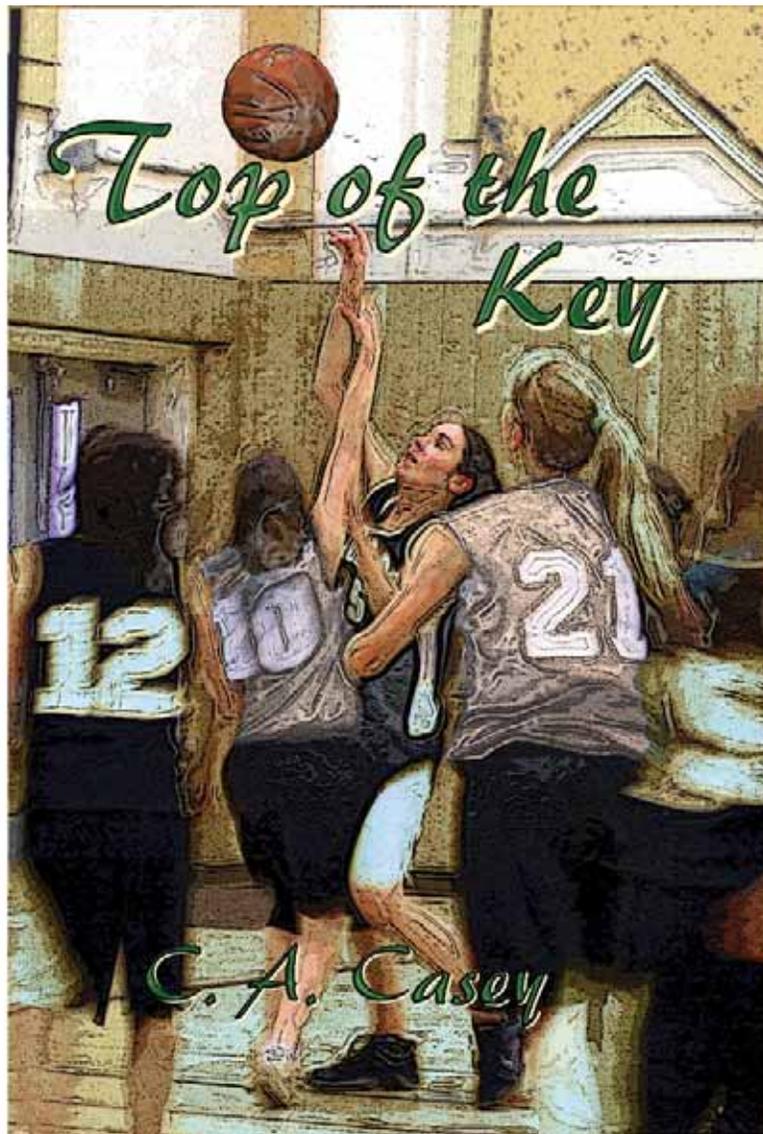
**9:07 p.m.**

**I** have spent the past two days pondering the most effective way to quickly and efficiently pull my father out of his stifling heterosexual male closet. Finally, after much research, I have decided to make him watch *Boys Don't Cry* in reverse until he comes to terms with his repressed sexuality. I figure that the sight of Hilary Swank as a member of the man-gender will make any male wish to be the female that (s)he truly is. He might also cry, but then he is allowed.

Also, I received further conclusive proof today Re: my father. I posted a photo of him on an Internet message board, and several hours later I received a response from a lesbian in England who said (very matter-of-factly might I add), "He pings for me."

I feel vindicated.





## **Top of the Key** C. A. Casey

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Tyhe looked over her flock of sheep with satisfaction. They were freshly shorn and the bales of wool were stacked in the wagon ready to go to town. The black wool was treasured and fetched the most silver of any kind of wool. Yet luck of the distaff kind was supposed to follow where black sheep had tread.

Luck was something other people seemed to have. Raising black sheep never affected Tyhe's life one way or the other.

She soaked up the summer sun and the quiet that floated on the breeze and walked down the small hill behind her house to the gate. She liked to try to capture the feeling she got on days like today in the music she played on her sea fiddle when the moon replaced the sun and the breeze had a bite to it. The contentment and peace she felt on that hill early in the morning didn't seem to be a part of the rest of her life.

The gate loomed on the other side of the stand of young trees much too soon. Once she stepped through, she had to enter the real world. A world she inhabited but never really learned to live in.

She paused before she pulled on the gate and cleared away some overgrown shoots that clustered near the hinges. At least the physical representation of her inner world would be tidy.

Jeight, her horse, whinnied a greeting as Tyhe's feet crunch the straw in the stable.

"Hey, girl." Tyhe patted the white blaze on Jeight's muzzle. "Ready to get the wool to market?"

Jeight snorted and stamped a foot. She knew the word "ready" and that seemed to be enough for her.

Tyhe put the bridle on Jeight and led her to the

wagon. She noticed more blue paint had chipped off the side boards. Maybe the wool would bring in extra silver to buy paint. Not that her family seemed to care what her wagon looked like as long as she made it available when they needed it and her to drive it.

She hitched up Jeight and pushed those thoughts away. Her life was of her choosing and it was no different from any other women of her age and position in the village. Yet . . . she sighed and paused before she climbed onto the driver's bench . . . Yet others like Swile and Yerno seemed to be happy and satisfied with their lives and she just couldn't fathom what they had that she didn't. She often wondered if they were just better at acting out how everyone expected them to behave.

*If we have to act like everyone expects us to act, where did these expectations come from? From people not wanting to admit they're failures at life.*

Tyhe pulled herself onto the seat and gathered the reins. After a check over her shoulder that the wool was secure, she shook the reins and Jeight walked the wagon onto the rutted lane. The wagon rambled to the end of the lane and turned onto the freshly raked dirt road. The downpour three days earlier deeply rutted the road and the villagers did what they always had to do—complain loudly until the mayor ordered the good for nothing Master of Roads to do his job.

She heard the commotion before she rounded the hill. She didn't have to see to know what was happening. Just another normal morning at Kynda's house. Everything was high drama and

high passion for her sister. Life at a constant squeaky high pitch.

Tyhe rambled past the lane to the house. The six youngsters hurried in and out of the stone building, frantic, forgetful, and funny as they prepared for school. Despite the constant chaos that swirled around her sister and her family, everyone seemed happy.

Her sister would gush about the joy she had in her children, her husband, her life. Tyhe only half believed her. She had never felt such joy, at least with other people. She certainly couldn't believe the depth of the love Kynda professed for her husband.

Just a delusion enforced by fireside tales. No one would ever admit to not actually having the same heightened emotions as the perfect heroes and heroines in those stories. She was no less human than those around her, just more realistic about her feelings and too honest to give into society-sanctioned harmless lies.

"Whoa." Tyhe halted the wagon and waited for her sister to run to the road. No matter the chaos swirling around her, Kynda always looked impossibly calm with not a hair out of place.

"Hey Tyhe," Kynda said. "Such a beautiful morning. Would you mind picking up the children a landmark early today? I know it's not your day to pick them up, but the schoolmasters are attending the annual guild meeting and they have to let school out early to get to Glaus in time for the meeting. If you're busy . . ."

She wasn't busy. Her life rarely had the kind of structure where she actually had to be specific places at specific times. Her days just seemed to ramble from place to place and from person to person.

"I can do it." As always, a bit of her inside flame seemed to dim when she agreed to do something that was plainly not her business. Something she had done so many times that the expectation she'd agree to do it again bordered on taking her for granted. Just once she wished she could say, "Sorry but I have something else to do at that time." But she never had such an excuse.

"Great, I knew I could count on you." Kynda glanced back at a tremendous crash from the house. "Got to go, see you later."

Tyhe shook the reins and tried to get away as

quickly as possible without it looking as if she was rushing away.

Glaus. Three sandmarks by wagon due south. How she envied the schoolmasters for having a good reason to go there. She knew every landmark and angle of the road from her house to the harbor at Glaus. The road on her map was finger-worn, she'd followed it so many times in her mind.

She'd been there once and the odor of salt water and fish and the breeze hitting her face with a caress she never experienced inland always permeated her senses when she thought of the sea.

She sighed. Why couldn't she have been born next to the ocean instead of boring old Higland, a tiny hamlet hemmed in by tree-covered rolling hills?

"Tyhe!"

She sighed and pulled on the reins. She twisted around as old Keteran ambled out of his shop and dodged around bins of vegetables and fruits.

"Morning, Keteran," Tyhe said. "I see the houndberries have ripened."

"And a good tasting crop they are this year," Keteran said. "Do you have a moment? My niece just visited Ingor and stopped by on her way home to Kittles. She brought me the most interesting shell she found on the beach."

Tyhe frowned. "Ingor doesn't have any beaches."

Keteran nodded. "She said it came from up the coast, Merchants Bay. Where the Ingorans go to get out of the city."

"Merchant's Bay has the longest beach of black sand on the continent," Tyhe said.

"Reile tried to explain the black beach to me," Keteran said. "How the water rolls up on it and leaves different shades of gray from charcoal to ash as the water seeps from it."

Tyhe's nostrils twitched, and she could almost see the beach, alive as the water sifted through the volcanic sand, and feel the salty spray on her face and hear the waves slapping the shore.

"Yeah," she said. "I hear the beaches are spectacular."

"Anyway, I was wondering if you had a moment to take a look at this shell," Keteran said. "My niece didn't know what kind it was."

Tyhe grinned and pulled the wagon off the road. Her hands shook with anticipation as she jumped to the uneven ground and wound the reins around a cross post.

"I told Reile, if anyone knew about the shell it'd be you." Keteran scurried ahead of Tyhe and disappeared into his shop.

Tyhe stepped through the oversized doorway and braced herself for the strong but not unpleasant aromas of rich earth and ripe fruits and fresh picked vegetables.

Keteran pulled a head-sized shell from behind the service bench and held it out to Tyhe.

Tyhe gazed with wonder at the swirl of bright blue and orange. "She found it on the beach?"

Keteran grinned in delight and nodded. "She's been beachcombing since she was a youngster and has never seen anything like it."

Tyhe took the shell in both hands and was surprised at how light it was. The bright colors gave it a counterfeit substance. "It's a blue sun shell. From the Jearwada Islands."

Keteran whistled. "That's halfway across the sea."

"That's why it's so rare to find a whole shell," Tyhe said. "And even rarer to find one so perfect. Usually all that's found on the beaches are small bits of blue and orange."

"Reile will be pleased to know she found a treasure," Keteran said.

"A valuable treasure," Tyhe said. "Collectors pay good silver for a perfect blue sun shell."

"She's coming back through in a few days." Keteran took the shell and found a soft cloth to wrap it in. "She always asks after you when she visits. Perhaps you can come by for an evening meal while she's here."

Tyhe sighed inwardly as she gave him a pleasant smile. "Let me know the day."

Keteran's grin creased his eyes. "I'll do that."

Tyhe walked out of the shop and climbed back on the wagon. The downside of living alone was that everyone knew someone who was a perfect match for her. Keteran had been trying to get her together with Reile for years now. Senik, the weaver, was always arranging for her nephew to stop by to see her sheep. Oegta, the silversmith, made sure her daughter—a student at the University of Artocia—sat next to Tyhe every Midwinter Feast Day.

It was all a part of the games of courtship that everyone played. And it wasn't that she was adverse to finding a life companion, she just didn't feel anything more than friendship for these potential candidates. She wished she felt more, but she didn't.

She waved at Jinde the blacksmith. She probably spent more time with Jinde than anyone. They grew up together and never outgrew each other. Tyhe always thought that Jinde could have been the one because she was so comfortable with her. If Jinde had shown any interest, Tyhe would have probably settled down with her and would have been happy she was sure.

As happy as she thought anyone could be.

Jinde shoved an unfinished sword blade into a pile of pink coals and turned to Tyhe. "Did Keteran show you the shell?" She grinned through a face streaked with sweat and soot.

Tyhe rolled her eyes. "Yes."

"Worth spending an evening with Reile?" Jinde's sapphire eyes sparkled with good humor.

"At least she's half-way interesting to talk to," Tyhe said.

They looked at each other and sputtered a laugh. They had too many stories between them about being the captive of absolute bores for an evening.

But sometimes that illusive something happened. Jinde had met a weaver over the hill in Honfrey and Tyhe knew that Jinde thought she could be happy with this woman.

Or did she just decide she liked her well enough to stop the endless attempts of neighbors to find her a life companion? Could I ever think that about a person? Tyhe sighed. She wished she could let herself go enough to consider the idea.

"Are you sure Sihle doesn't want any of this wool?" Tyhe asked.

"Not this season," Jinde said. "But don't be surprised if she bargains for some next year. She was really impressed by the quality."

"Enough to take on more sheep?" Tyhe asked.

Jinde rubbed her smudged chin with a sweaty hand. "Maybe. I'll talk to her about it."

Tyhe grinned. "Did I just give you an excuse to pay her a visit?"

Jinde returned her grin and her eyes sparked with amusement. "Maybe."

Tyhe laughed and nodded at the coal tray. "Your blade is getting too hot."

**S**he couldn't believe the amount of silver her wool had fetched. Triner, the wool merchant, had told her war was brewing to the north and Ynit was buying up wool for the soldiers. Lucky for her, black wool was needed for night-time raids.

With extra silver in her belt pouch, she ventured into the central market. Maybe she'd buy something special. She grazed from stall to stall, nothing catching her fancy enough to spend hard earned silver on.

She blinked up at a voice behind her. The distinctive mountain inflection grabbed her attention with an almost aching familiarity. She spun around and stared at the woman chatting with Kryra the candlemaker.

K'Miel wore the thirteen years since the last Tyhe had seen her better than well. She looked magnificent, with her tousled blonde hair so sun-bleached it was almost white. She was tall and lean with long strong muscles and looked as if she was born to wear the uniform of the warriors of the sea. The confident yet amiable glow that Tyhe had always envied still radiated from her.

Tyhe had never seen so many shoulder sashes on a warrior, including a captain's sash. So K'Miel had made captain. Braids hung from her belt. She was a real Emoran warrior and the village whispers had been that the sash with the purple thread running through it showed she was of royal blood.

K'Miel strolled Tyhe's way.

Tyhe's breath caught at the light blue eyes she remembered so well as they glanced around the market from a sun-darkened face. Some had said she was descended from the great Hekolatis.

"K'Miel," Tyhe said.

K'Miel stopped and turned to her. She blinked and looked shocked, probably at being recognized.

"Uh, you don't remember me," Tyhe said. "I was one of those children you taught warrior

skills to years ago."

K'Miel gazed at her. "You're the one who asked all the questions about oceans and about being a sea warrior. I gave you a list of books to read."

"And I found and read every one of them," Tyhe said.

K'Miel nodded and played with the lacing on her bracer. "I, uh, even memorized your name because I thought for sure I'd see you around Ynit. Tyhe. Right?"

Tyhe stared at her in amazement. "I was only twelve."

K'Miel shrugged. "You haven't really changed all that much. You've just grown older but I still see that curious eager girl in you."

"But that was thirteen years ago," Tyhe said.

"You remembered me," K'Miel said.

Tyhe laughed. "It's hard to forget a sea warrior for a teacher. Even if it was for only two moons."

"It was a memorable time for me, too," K'Miel said. "Recouping from my first severe battle injury and performing my first noncombatant assignment in a place very different from where I grew up."

"I never thought about it that way," Tyhe said. "To a twelve-year-old you were a worldly sea warrior who had lived an exciting life."

K'Miel threw her head back and laughed. "I was a green cadet barely out of training in Ynit, wounded less than a sandmark into my first battle. Hardly exciting."

K'Miel put her hand out to indicate that they walk. Tyhe gladly strolled next to her. K'Miel certainly was now what Tyhe had thought her to be years ago.

"Truth is," K'Miel said. "I was homesick and missing my family. I was young myself. Only nineteen years."

"You seemed much older," Tyhe said.

K'Miel gave her an amused look. "But not now, I bet."

Tyhe realized K'Miel was right. She didn't seem that much older than herself. "No, not now." Her breath caught as something odd inside her stirred.

"I thought for sure you'd go to Ynit." K'Miel looked truly perplexed.

Tyhe gazed at her feet as those desires to flee

this village to be a sea warrior flooded her mind. She felt lightheaded and blinked up in surprise by K'Miel's warm strong grasp on her arm.

"Share a meal with me." K'Miel's gentle persuasive voice seemed to caress Tyhe's soul.

Tyhe took in a ragged breath and nodded.

K'Miel released Tyhe's arm and Tyhe felt a sense of loss. What was going on with her?

"I remember the inn had excellent food," K'Miel said.

"It still does." Tyhe gave her head a shake. "What are you doing here?"

K'Miel gave her an odd almost embarrassed look before erupting with another laugh. "I found myself landbound for a spell and decided to visit some old haunts."

Tyhe didn't doubt this, but there was something else from the way K'Miel said it and her curiosity was on fire.

**"Y**ou've never settled down with a life companion?" Tyhe sopped the last of the stew with a chunk of bread. Nearly everyone in the village had some kind of crush on K'Miel before, and even now, the people around them watched her with fascination.

"Emorans who wander far from home have a different approach to finding a life companion," K'Miel said. "It's hard to explain, but sometimes we first meet our future partner at the wrong time and we have to retrace our steps so to speak."

"Do you usually know who it might be?" Tyhe asked.

K'Miel's cheeks reddened under her deep tan as she gazed into her tankard. "Usually."

"So that means you'd return to where she lives," Tyhe said.

"I really thought you'd go to sea," K'Miel said.

"You've said that already." Tyhe frowned at K'Miel's strange look. Almost a cross between misery and embarrassment.

She felt the heat rise in her own cheeks as her subconscious insisted on filling in this puzzle with unsettling pieces from her heart. How many times had she allowed herself to imagine being on a ship at K'Miel's side, exploring different lands with her, reveling in her companionship?

"What exactly are you saying?" Tyhe was surprised at the hoarseness in her voice.

K'Miel ran a shaky hand through her hair. "I was sure you'd moved on. I was . . . I came here to find out where you went."

"Me?"

"Through the years my thoughts and dreams kept coming back to this village as if I'd left something important here." K'Miel sighed and captured Tyhe's eyes. "Sometimes the woman is too young on the first encounter."

Tyhe felt lightheaded as her own thoughts and dreams collided with reality. "Me?"

"You were the only one who truly made me feel at home and comfortable here," K'Miel said. "We spent a lot of time together."

"Because I was being a pesky tagalong asking a million questions," Tyhe said.

"You were interested in what I did," K'Miel said. "More than interested. You had the spark within you to follow what was clearly a desire."

Tyhe ran a finger around the rim of her tankard. "You're right. I wanted to become a sea warrior so bad, I ached from the longing."

"You would have been welcomed at Ynit," K'Miel said. "You excelled at the warrior arts."

"I . . . I . . ." Tyhe wipe away an unexpected tear. "Sorry."

K'Miel gazed at her with those gentle blue eyes and captured a tear sliding down Tyhe's cheek between her thumb and finger. "Leaving home is the hardest thing a person does. I left home when I was fifteen and was uncertain about it every moment of the journey until I entered Ynit. It was foreign and exciting and I was training to achieve my dream to become a sea warrior." She looked down at the table. "Before I have to return home to assume my duties there."

The feelings Tyhe had buried deep for all those years flooded through her. She had hidden, even from herself, the reason she'd never been interested in potential life companions. It had been too painful. Even as a twelve-year-old, she knew what she had felt for the dashing young sea warrior had been more than a crush. She had made herself forget the long months she couldn't keep the tears and the pain deep in her soul away after K'Miel left the village.

K'Miel grasped Tyhe's hand on the table. "Come to the sea with me."

Shock numbed Tyhe's mind. "What?"

K'Miel released Tyhe's hand.

Tyhe's whole soul ached from the loss of warmth as her reality and dreams crashed together.

K'Miel wrapped both hands around her tankard. She gazed into the dark ale. "I guess you're settled here. Found someone."

Tyhe shook her head. Her mind was in a chaotic panic. "I, uh, have sheep."

"My countrywomen can watch over your sheep," K'Miel said.

The haze of unreality suddenly lifted. "You really want me to come with you?"

"Yes," K'Miel said. "Just as a companion. An old friend. Someone I want to show my world to."

"And if I'm not the one you're looking for?" Tyhe asked.

"We'll still be friends," K'Miel said.

Tyhe swallowed on a dry throat. How would her sister react? What would Jinde say? What would Keteran tell Reile? What about everyone she saw everyday? She gazed at K'Miel, who stared at a knothole on the table. K'Miel was afraid. Afraid she'd say no. She didn't want to say no.

What did she care what everyone thought? It was her life. But she never really believed it. Before now.

"I know this is all kind of crazy." K'Miel sighed. "I had to give it a try—"

"What?" Tyhe was beyond panicked. "I—"

"If you're contented here—"

"I'm not." The words caught in Tyhe's throat.

K'Miel blinked up.

"I've always regretted not going to sea," Tyhe said. "I can't even give a good reason why I didn't."

"Most people can't." K'Miel put her hand over Tyhe's. "It's not too late. It's never too late."

"I could go on a ship?" Tyhe asked.

"I've been given a new one. It's still being built." K'Miel shrugged. "The reason I'm on leave right now."

"New ship." Tyhe couldn't keep down the rising excitement. She had visited the shipyards on her one trip to Glaus and had dreamed of being a part of the crew on a ship's maiden voyage.

"I'll need a navigator." K'Miel picked at the lacing on her bracer.

"I don't know—"

"There's time for you to be trained in Ynit," K'Miel said.

Tyhe sucked in a breath as her brain tried to grasp what K'Miel was saying. She had dreamed . . . no she had ached for K'Miel to show up at her door and take her away to sea. It was the most outlandish of all her longings, and she only dared to let her mind roam through that fantasy when the real world pounded her down too hard.

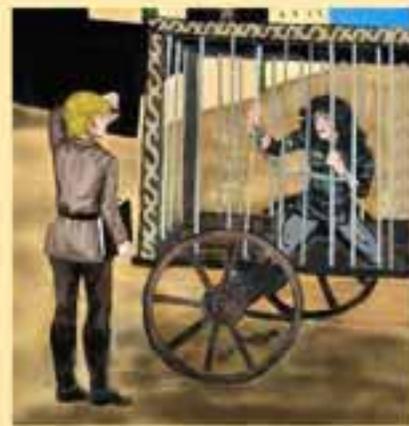
"Say yes." K'Miel's soft voice cracked.

Tyhe gazed into K'Miel's eyes. They were filled with a heart-breaking vulnerability. This magnificent warrior of the sea truly had feelings for her. Deep feelings. For her. A nobody sheep farmer from nowhere.

"Yes."

K'Miel's expression of shock and joy stole Tyhe's breath away. Yes. It seemed so simple now. She didn't have to face life alone anymore.

Tyhe grinned and felt free . . . and happy. Maybe all it took was the right person. "Yes."

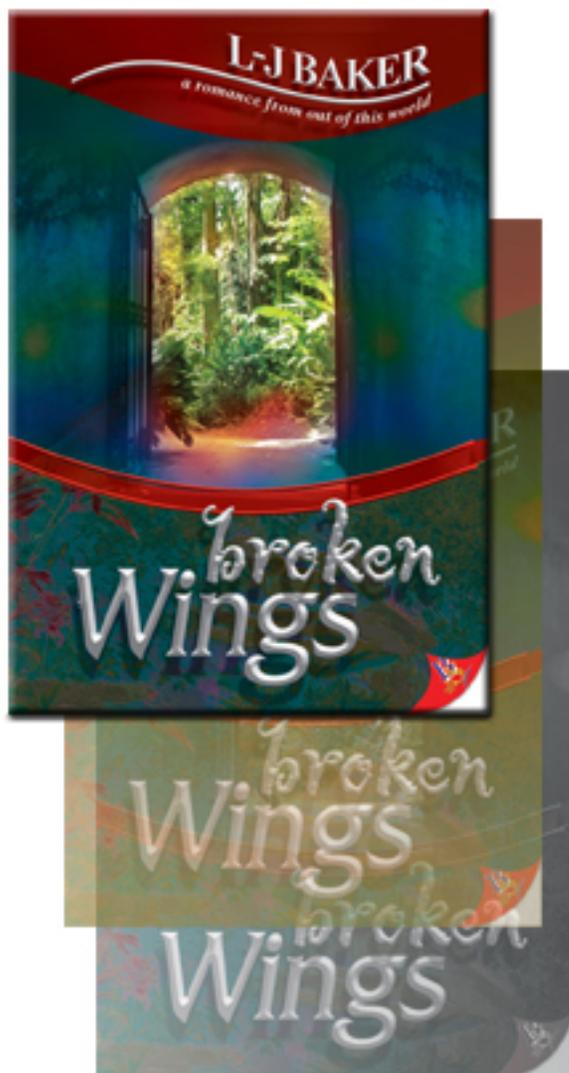


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**The Old Woman** has been temporarily removed at the author's request. It'll be back soon.





**F**rost crystals encrusted the ground when Kesho crawled out to the basking stone. The first to wake, she emerged through a cave strewn with leftover food and dirty utensils, and the bodies of still comatose guests.

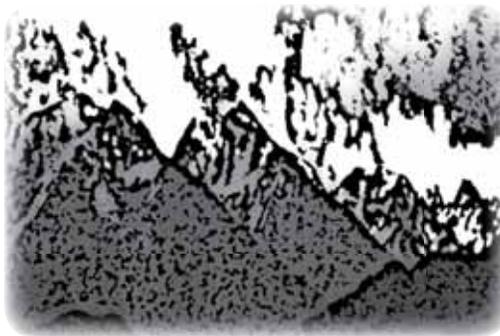
She stretched as the sun's warmth penetrated her hide and quickened her sluggish blood. It was a fine, clear morning, no sign of rain. A good day for cloudskimming.

Kesho had slept fitfully, her stomach churning with too many glimmer-flies, her mind awash with images of handsome males with crests and horns. But there had been that other dream too, the one that came more and more often lately. It returned now, as she lazed in the sun.

She was riding a cloudskimmer, the huge green leaf floating on the surface of the Yellow. The toxic cloud stretched featureless on all sides, and it seemed that she was adrift without oars on some desolate sea covered with nothing but trailing banks of fog. She felt surprisingly calm, given the circumstances—unperturbed by the skimmer's aimless drifting. Then came movement overhead, and she looked up. Spiralling lazily down towards her was a huge bone-bird.

The beady gaze met hers, and Kesho wondered for a moment if it were waiting for her to die so it could feast on her bones. Instead, it began to circle the skimmer—once, twice, three times—and then it set off away from her in a straight line. The skimmer, its means of propulsion a mystery, began to follow the bird.

The gliding motion had lulled her almost to sleep when she realized that the bird had alighted on something up ahead. At this distance, it was hard to make it out—a tree, a rock? In the middle of nowhere? And then the fog bank rolled away, and the unmistakable forked outline of Batian Mountain materialized. As her skimmer crunched onto its lower slopes, the bone-bird stared down at her from its branch, and gave a single loud croak.



Batian Mountain dissolved like smoke before the wind, and a confused Kesho watched the Storyteller approach her with his measured tread.

"Hello, young Kesho," he wheezed, and she became aware of the basking rock, hard beneath her belly and knew she was awake.

She yawned, dispelling the remnants of the rapidly receding dream, and made room for him, shifting another inch when his bony knee dug into her side.

"Did you enjoy yourself last night?" he asked. She gave a noncommittal grunt, and his nearer eye swivelled towards her. "You are healthy, and loved, Kesho. And it won't be long before you marry Buki and have younglings of your own. Why should you be unhappy?"

She fidgeted, uncomfortable under his piercing stare. "I don't know what's wrong with me, Storyteller. I'm so restless these days. And there's this recurring dream."

"Tell me."

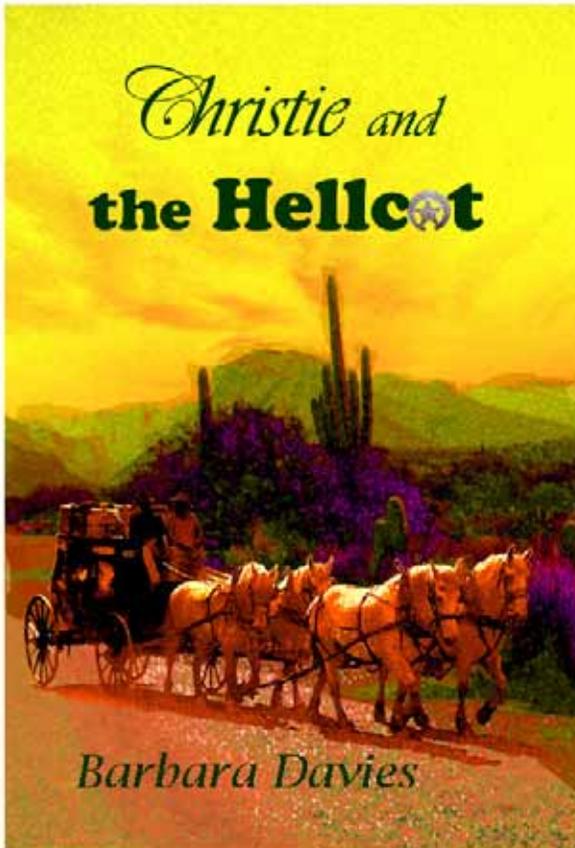
So she did. "What does it mean?"

He considered for several moments and tasted the air with his warty tongue before answering. "You're not the first to feel this way, Kesho. Some years ago, Grofor became obsessed with Batian Mountain and felt compelled to journey there, in spite of the dangers. I advised against it, but there was no stopping him." He gazed sadly at Kesho. "Fight against these yearnings, if you can."

A shadow blocked the sun, and Kesho glanced up.

Ngojea loomed over her. "You've basked long enough, little sister. It's my turn now."

With an apologetic glance at the Storyteller, Kesho rose and went back to the cave.



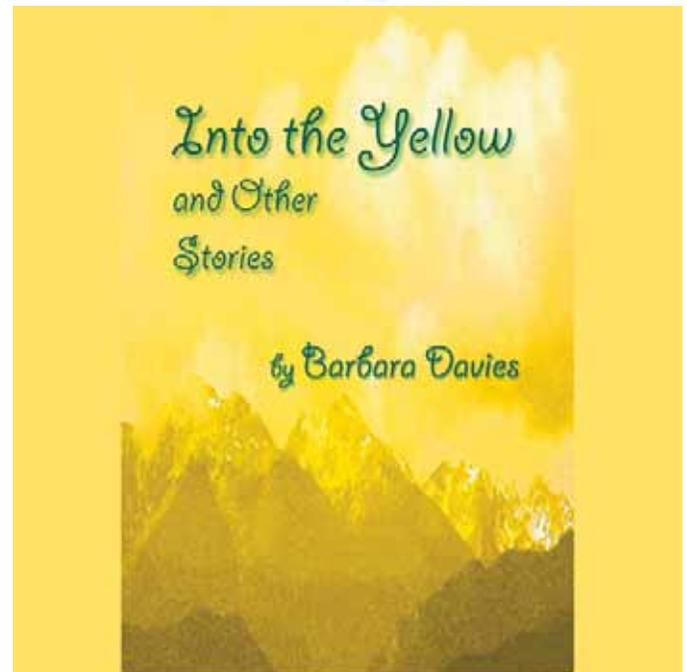
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Over three hundred of Stephen's stories and poems have been selected to appear in more than a hundred publications. His website, [www.stephendrogers.com](http://www.stephendrogers.com), includes a list of new and upcoming titles as well as other timely information.

### **Sharon Hadrian**

Sharon Hadrian was born and raised in a tiny, homogenous town outside of Baltimore, Maryland. She has written everything from rock operas and screenplays to movie reviews and children's books. Now a staff writer at [AfterEllen.com](http://AfterEllen.com), these days Sharon can be found crafting more serious works, particularly those related to diversity and minority visibility. She is also the founder and senior editor of *Antithesis Common*, a literary magazine with a diversity slant. She currently resides in England.

### **T.J. Mindancer**

As fictional as her fantasy stories, T.J. Mindancer is a figment of C.A. Casey's imagination and Casey takes no responsibility for what Mindancer forces her to write. Mindancer roams the World of Emoria. Casey's writings include articles in library journals and in *Strange Horizons*, and stories in *Aoife's Kiss*, *Beyond Centauri*, and an upcoming issue of *The Lorelei Signal*. She also penned two novels for kids, *Dragon Drool* and *Top of the Key*.

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Q. Kelly is an editor living in Froot Loop Land, Virginia. She has won numerous short-story and journalism competitions. She's also authored several novels and is in the process of finding roosting places for them. She loves flirting, mocha Frappuccinos and royal families. You can e-mail her at [yllek\\_q@yahoo.com](mailto:yллеk_q@yahoo.com).

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Barbara Davies published her first short story in 1994. Since then, more than forty of her stories have appeared in various magazines, including *Marion Zimmer Bradley's Fantasy Magazine*, *Rage Machine Magazine*, *Farthing*, *Electric Spec*, and *Here and Now*, and in several anthologies, including *Ideomancer Unbound* and *F/SF Volume 1*. The readers of *Kimota* gave one of her stories their 1999 Best Story Award.