

Lucas Paul

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Profile – Fantasy and Fiction Writer

A writer and editor with experience in the games industry, fantasy fiction, and content strategy. I've edited over 30 shipped visual novels and am currently drafting a fantasy novel that explores political conflict and magical worldbuilding. I'm looking to collaborate with game developers who need strong storytelling, dialogue, or lore design.

Experience

Editor / Proofreader

2023–Present

Sticky Rice Games

- Edited in-game dialogue, narration, and UI text for 30+ visual novels
- Maintained tone consistency and immersive storytelling through localization
- Worked closely with developers to ensure narrative quality and cohesion

Freelance Writer

2022–2023

Comic Book Resources

- Wrote over 100 articles analyzing anime/manga storytelling and character tropes
- Gained insight into viewer expectations for pacing, arcs, and dialogue

Fantasy Fiction Author

- Wrote multiple fantasy novels with rich settings and character-driven plots
- Focused on inner turmoil, magic systems, and immersive worldbuilding
- Current WIP explores power, loyalty, and the cost of pursuing revenge

Skills and Tools

- Narrative Design
- Dialogue Writing
- Editing
- Localization
- Adobe/Google/Microsoft Suite
- HTML/CSS
- DITA/XML
- Figma

Hylli rolled a wisp of fire between his fingers, prepared to attack his friend once more. The wisp became many as Hylli shot it forward. Bursts of energy from Marland's palms propelled him into the air, dodging Hylli's barrage as the wisps whirled by.

Don't get hit—it was a simple challenge Marland had yet to lose. Of course, nothing bad would happen if he *were* hit, but a man's pride was at stake. Hylli gestured with his hands and waved his arms like a puppeteer, twirling the flames back towards Marland.

Using one hand at a time, Marland adjusted his position in the air with smaller bursts of energy, just enough to get out of the way. Twisting and contorting his body, Marland dodged the second attack as well.

Hylli threw his arms to the side, moving the flames in a circle around Marland. He brought his hands together in a clap, sending them hurtling toward a single point: Marland.

Only several feet from the ground, Marland *pushed* again, sending himself back into the air as the flames collided, forming back into the larger flame once more, completely missing their target. Hylli called the flame back to his hand while Marland gently lowered himself to the ground, breathing a sigh of relief.

Hylli held up his thumb and index finger, showing Marland the tiny gap between them—how close he was to finally hitting him—but the gap never got any smaller.

“Still undefeated,” Marland said, shaking his head with a smile.

“For now. I almost had you that time,” Hylli said, returning the smile.

Training like this was their usual activity in the forest near their hometown; after all, there wasn't much else to do in Edge. Perched on a cliff overlooking the Pale Sea, Edge and its surrounding area was mostly farmland. The village was too high on the cliff face to be effective at fishing or sailing, and visitors rarely came other than the occasional trade caravan.

The only thing noteworthy about Edge was that it was the home of Sunwalker Gideon Staar. “The celebration is tonight, isn't it?” Marland said, taking a swig from his jug of water. “Are we going?”

“I think we should at least stop by, don't you? He *is* the local hero, after all,” Hylli said as he sat against a tree. He took a book out of his bag and flipped to somewhere in the middle.

“*Hero*”? He'd kill us both if he knew we were manifestors. Very *heroic*,” Marland said. “Do you think he's forgotten that *he's* a flaming manifestor as well?”

“Being a Sunwalker means the Order knows where his blade is pointed. Manifestors like you and I? We're unknowns. Unpredictable. The people of Thesom hate unpredictability.” Marland rolled his eyes.

“Pretty wise for someone who's lived in a village his whole life,” Marland said.

“Not my *whole life*; I moved here, remember?” Hylli said as he turned a page.

“When you were *ten*.” Marland propped himself against the tree beside Hylli and folded his hands behind his head, slumping down low. After a training session, he always enjoyed taking a nap to refresh himself, and he would need all the energy he could get if they were going to a social function tonight.

A quiet breeze whistled through the grove as Marland’s body relaxed. Even if he didn’t like that they were forced to train this far outside of town, he loved spending time with his friend. Then again, even if he *could* manifest in town, powers like his would only cause trouble.

A light touch on Marland’s arm woke him; to his surprise, the sun was beginning to set. He rubbed his eyes. “Huh? We heading back?”

“Yeah, my parents will start to wonder where I am.”

“Hylli, you’re nineteen years old; I think you’re allowed to be out on your own by now.”

“You know how they are,” Hylli said, putting away his book. It was late enough that he needed his fire to see the words on the pages, something that had claimed more than one of his books in the past. “Besides, the celebration should be starting by now.”

“Is that why you let me sleep for so long?”

“You would’ve complained the entire time otherwise, and I wanted to finish my book.”

Marland and Hylli left the forest and walked through the fields on the outskirts of Edge. Fires were alight in tribute, causing the town to glow a bright orange. The church in the centre of town, the largest and oldest building, stood above all the others, violently shining light all around.

Marland shielded his eyes as they drew closer. “Come on. Is he really that special?”

“Hey, don’t let the Order hear you say that,” Hylli said, “they’ll take you to Solaria for blasphemy.”

“Speaking of which,” Marland said, pointing at a pair of parked caravans at the town’s entrance. Large, covered transport wagons emblazoned with the emblem of the Order of Sol: a pair of cupped hands holding a flame.

The wagons were attached to raptors—bipedal, lizard-like creatures—which were curled up on the ground in a neat circle. They were almost adorable, but Marland knew they could be intimidating when they unfurled to their full size. Much taller than any human and twice as strong. It must have been an exhausting march to get here if they were asleep already.

One of the covered caravans caught Marland's eye. It had a door on the back with bars in a small window. It must have been a prison transport, but no one was inside.

Panic flashed through Marland's mind. Had they come for him and Hylli? But how? They were careful every time they went out, but no one could be careful all the time; that was impossible. Flames. Should they head home? What about—

"Hey," Hylli said, jabbing his finger into Marland's side. Marland snapped to attention as he was broken from his trance. "You okay?"

"Yeah, just uh, still a little sleepy, is all."

"Seriously? If you're this tired, maybe you aren't that much better than me after all," Hylli said, a sly smile on his face.

"Right," Marland said, jabbing Hylli in revenge. Hylli winced, pretending he had been dealt a mortal wound as he cried out for help. "Alright, alright, let's get this over with."

The usual din of the town at this time of day was eerily missing. No one was indoors or wandering around; all 500 townsfolk must have left their homes for this event.

Walking up the main street, the duo came across the centrepiece of Edge: a statue dedicated to the local hero. It was a large bust of his likeness, posed as a heroic saviour of the masses as he towered over the surrounding area, his hand tightly holding the handle of his blade in its sheath.

"I hate this thing," Marland said.

"You mention it every time we walk by," Hylli said. "It must be weird coming back to a place with a flaming *statue* dedicated to you, though."

"Who made this thing anyway? What are the odds he *really* looks like that?"

"You don't think he's actually made of stone, do you?"

"Very funny. I meant the... you know, the pose, the face. It gives me the creeps; a *hero* shouldn't give people the creeps."

"Okay," Hylli said, grabbing Marland's arm and dragging him toward the church. "Seriously. It's like you forgot the town is crawling with his people. What if someone heard you?"

"Good. I'd let them know how I really feel."

"Creator help me," Hylli sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose.

When the church entrance finally came into view, it was plain to see where the townspeople had gone.

And that the church wasn't designed for this many people.

Not only was the interior barely visible through the sea of bodies, but even the surrounding area was consumed. "I don't even know where to start," Marland said, standing on his toes to get a sense of the crowd.

"It'll take forever to find my parents in there," Hylli said.

"Considering the amount of alcohol that's already in everyone's hands, it might be better to just—" Marland had barely finished his sentence before Hylli was off. There was no talking him out of something when his mind was set.

Walking up the stone steps to the church, their impossible task only became more difficult as they got closer to the epicentre of the celebration. A hand shot out and grabbed Hylli's leg. He yelped as he looked down. It was Briscoe, a local favourite. With a tankard in his hand, he stared daggers at Hylli from his position on the ground. "I know what you are," he slurred, spilling his drink as he gestured wildly, "and I can prove it."

Hylli sighed and gently removed Briscoe's hand from his leg. "Have a nice night, Briscoe," Hylli said, continuing toward the crowd. Marland stared at the drunk as he passed, but his eyes were glazed over. It wasn't the first time he accused someone of being something, but no one ever humoured him.

Hylli climbed up on the stone wall surrounding the church's perimeter to get a better look. He pointed to a black-haired man and woman surrounded by a group of people. He tried waving and gesturing to get their attention, but nothing worked.

"Let's just head home," Marland said, "I think they're a *little* too distracted to be worried about you right now anyway." Hylli climbed down and shook his head. "It's barely dark out, and the whole town is drunk."

"To be fair, how often does something like this happen? I think they deserve to let off a little steam," Hylli said. "Besides, it looks like my parents are getting along with everyone for once."

"Did you see *him*?"

"No, he must be inside. Probably getting schmoozed by the mayor."

They walked back through the town, which was becoming brighter as the sun sank lower over the horizon, almost to the point of being blinding.

"Want to set up the telescope?" Marland said.

"You know I hate lugging that thing out," Hylli said.

"What? That's not true, and you know it. Come on, it's a special night. Besides, if *we're* not getting drunk, we might as well do something." Hylli rubbed his forehead. Marland knew this was a sign of acceptance.

Though he would never admit it, Marland also hated setting up the telescope. His parents had supposedly brought it with them when they moved to Edge years ago, having purchased it from a travelling merchant.

It wasn't until Hylli arrived in town that he learned how to use it; his father could never seem to aim it at the right spots in the sky. It was bulky and overly heavy, but he loved it all the same.

Marland unlocked the door to his house, immediately making for the closet that housed the telescope. It was a long, brown tube with an enormous glass lens at the end, decorated with swirls of golden stars and silver moons. Marland liked to believe that the gold and silver were real, increasing the value of his already priceless artifact.

Marland wrestled the telescope into position so he could carry it. The worst part of this process wasn't the brutal act of getting it up the small set

of stairs to the second floor; it was getting it up the ladder to the roof.

Hylli climbed the ladder, unlocking the hatch at the top and flinging the door open. Marland slithered his arms down the side until he got his hands underneath the telescope and lifted it, hoping that Hylli could squeeze it hard enough to maintain a grip. He continued to lift, using only his legs to climb the ladder.

Hylli gently pulled the telescope to the side and laid it down. When Marland reached the top, he sprawled out on the roof, exhausted from the effort.

Hylli went back down and grabbed the tripod. Together, they hoisted the telescope onto its legs. Marland dropped to his behind as Hylli took over, manoeuvring the telescope into position.

“Why don’t we just leave this up here and throw a blanket over it?” Marland said, panting.

“*What?* How many times have I told you that? You’re always the one that wants to keep it ‘safe from the elements.’” Marland mockingly made faces behind Hylli’s back despite the fact he was right. “There, take a look.”

Marland struggled to his feet, peering into the telescope. A sea of black and blue dotted with yellows and oranges painted the sky. Thesom also had a pinkish-purple hue of mist that swirled around the planet like its own personal, gargantuan-sized blanket. Seeing it was always Marland’s favourite part about stargazing.

According to the church, the mist was the life energy of Thesom itself, burning brightly in the night sky as it sustained all of its creatures, though Marland had no idea whether that was true.

Hylli once told him that the stars they see now had already burned out eons ago, that what they see is just the remaining light they produced making its way to their eyes. It was a sad thought that something so beautiful had already been dead for so long, but that gave Marland a strange feeling of comfort. Even now, they illuminated the sky, sharing their story for all to see.

What would it be like to fly among the stars? Could you touch one? What did a star smell like?

“I know you haven’t been recently,” Hylli said, taking his turn with the telescope, “but Speaker Jordan has been talking about the age of darkness’ imminent return.”

“What? Wasn’t the last one like three hundred years ago? I figured they were, you know, *done*.”

“Apparently not. He said *Sol himself* told him in a dream. Maybe one of us will be marked.”

“The odds are slim, aren’t they? And would you really want to be marked anyway?” Marland said, tapping Hylli on the shoulder to take his turn again. Even though it was the same sky every night, Marland noticed something

new each time. It was a true wonder and one of the only good things about living out in the sticks.

“Probably not; that sounds like a lot of responsibility. Hey,” Hylli said, breaking Marland’s fixation on the telescope. “When do you think it’s time we got out of here?”

“You mean Edge?” Marland said. “Where do you want to go?”

“Anywhere. I want to see the world; I don’t want to spend the rest of my life in a tiny town in the middle of nowhere.”

“I hate to break it to you, but that’s what most people here do. You came here from Greenstone for that, didn’t you?”

“My parents made that choice; I didn’t.” Hylli scratched his head and sat down. “I want to *go places*. I want to see everything and everywhere in Thesom. Who knows, maybe meet some friends along the way.” He sighed.

“So... when do you want to go?” Marland said as he sat next to him. Hylli turned in surprise.

“Just like that?”

“What? You really think I’d let you go by yourself? It’s not like I have anything keeping me here.”

“What about the telescope?”

“This thing? I don’t think we’ll be able to take it with us.” Marland smiled as he saw the expression grow on Hylli’s face. “We can leave in a week, a month, whenever you want.”

“I still have to tell my parents I plan on leaving, you know. They might not take it so well.”

“If you told them tonight, they’d forget they agreed to it tomorrow morning.” They both laughed. “Where’s somewhere you *really* want to go?”

“Tonitrua,” Hylli said without a moment’s hesitation. “They say it’s always covered in a thunderstorm. Some of the books I’ve read say it’s the most beautiful place on Thesom, surrounded by the terrifying power of the sky as the thunder booms and the lightning cuts through the sky,” he said with dramatic gestures.

“I’m convinced already,” Marland said. Hylli’s enthusiasm whenever he spoke like this was always infectious. He continued to tell Marland about all the places he wanted to see.

There was the Great Plains, an enormous, flat region of Thesom characterized by mild weather and large animals; the Crystal Cleave, a vast valley with walls made of rugged, shimmering stones; and even the Scorchlands, the hottest place in the world and an inhospitable desert to all but the most foolish.

“Anyway,” Hylli said, “I don’t want to spoil everything for you. I’m gonna head home to figure out how to break the news to my parents. Let’s get the telescope back inside.” Marland waved Hylli away from it.

“We’ll bring it in tomorrow.” Hylli cocked his eyebrow in confusion. “I

really don't want to lift it again. Say hi to your parents for me when they get in. *If* they get in."

Hylli waved from the street below as Marland watched him walk away. He returned down the ladder and rummaged through his closet for a blanket. He was still using everything his parents owned, a fact that was becoming painfully obvious as he watched his furniture fall apart more and more each day. Everything else was secondhand from the townsfolk, who had taken pity on him once his parents had passed.

Marland pulled a patchy blanket out from underneath a stack of other blankets he had been given. He climbed back up and threw the blanket on the telescope, but every fibre in his being told him he should bring it inside. How could he sleep tonight knowing his telescope was on the roof, scared and alone? Marland tore himself away.

Out of sight, out of mind.

As he placed his foot on the ladder, shouting from below caught his attention. He walked over to the edge of the roof and leaned over as far as he could, trying to pinpoint the location of the sound.

It wasn't like the faint din of people celebrating on the other side of town. This sounded like an argument, and close by. The shouting continued. One of the voices belonged to Hylli.

Without thinking, Marland sprung off the roof and released energy from his hands, guiding himself to the ground. He ran through the streets toward the direction of the shouting—a left and then a right.

Briscoe had his hands wrapped up in Hylli's collar with a firm grip while Hylli's were raised in the air, clearly trying to de-escalate the situation. "Hey! Let go of him," Marland said.

"I know what you are," Briscoe said, "*and* you," he continued, turning to Marland. "I saw you out in the forest."

"Just let me go, okay? You've had a little too much to drink tonight, I think," Hylli said, half-chuckling as he spoke.

"No, not this time. Haven't touched anything tonight. You too, come on," he said, gesturing at Marland. Briscoe released one of his hands from Hylli and lashed out towards Marland. Marland swatted his hand away and reached for Hylli, wrestling Briscoe's grip until he let go.

"Come on, let's get out of here. Crazy bastard," Marland said, making sure Hylli was okay. There was a flash of something in the corner of Marland's eye. Briscoe had drawn a small blade and lunged toward them.

Toward Hylli.

Something churned within Marland—a power, a reflex that took hold of him before he had time to react mentally. His body just moved on its own.

He raised his hand at Briscoe and *pushed*—far more force than he had ever used before, even in practice, exploded from his palm. Briscoe flew backwards as if he were weightless, spinning in the air until he collided

with the exterior of a nearby house. The insides of his head painted the wall behind him in a spray of red. He crumpled, unmoving.

Marland could feel his heartbeat in his ear. His chest felt heavy, his vision was narrow, and his stomach had twisted itself into a knot. He covered his mouth in disbelief.

Hylli raced over to Briscoe to check for any signs of life, but his head had caved when it made contact with the wall; there was no way he could have survived.

Everything was a blur, even Hylli, as he made his way back over. Marland could see his lips moving, but whatever he was saying didn't register.

Murderer.

A hard slap hit Marland in the face, snapping him back to his senses. "Run," Hylli said. "Go home. *Now.*" It was surreal; Hylli had never hit him like that before.

"Hylli, I—"

"He attacked us first; we were just defending ourselves. Okay?"

"I *killed him*, Hylli," Marland said, a wanton disregard for the volume of his voice. Hylli grabbed Marland, forcing him to walk away from the crime scene.

Neither spoke until they got back to Marland's home, at which point Hylli made Marland sit down. "How can you be so calm about this?" Marland said. "There's a flaming Sunwalker in town! He's going to find us, and that's it; we're both dead. Sol's blazing cinders, *we're dead.*"

"Stop it," Hylli said, pacing around Marland's kitchen. He was trying his best to keep it together, but Marland could see his hands shaking. "No one knows we're manifestors; just because he's dead doesn't mean they know who did it."

"What if we left town tomorrow? Before sunrise, before anyone knows we're gone."

"I can't just leave town without telling my parents."

"We're *dead* if we don't leave town. *Dead. We have* to leave. *Tomorrow*, Hylli; there's no way around it," Marland said, thinking clearly for the first time. Hylli stopped pacing and scratched his cheek with his finger. "The investigation won't happen until then, right? You can go home, talk to your parents in the morning, and we'll be gone before they start questioning people."

"Flames," Hylli said, kicking a cabinet door out of frustration. The wood was so old it disintegrated on contact. He took a deep breath, collecting himself. "Okay. Noon tomorrow. We'll go to the forest."

"Noon. Promise?"

"Promise." Marland needed to hear it. He wouldn't have lasted until then without confirmation. He needed *something* to look forward to for the next

ten hours. Hylli shut the door behind him as he left, racing through the streets as he returned home.

Marland didn't move from his seat in the kitchen for hours. He had lost control of himself and killed someone, one of his greatest fears. He always tried to be careful with his abilities. He had once killed a stray dog by accident while training; it was months before he could bring himself to manifest again, and even then, only with Hylli's guidance.

Across Thesom, manifestors are seen as monsters bent on sowing unrest in an otherwise peaceful world. Nights like tonight made Marland wonder if maybe there was an element of truth to it all.

There was a reason that only the Sunwalkers, government-sanctioned manifestors, were allowed to manifest. Through years of rigorous training, they had learned to control their innate desire to exert their power over others, meaning the public didn't fear them. After all, those with power seek to use it, and these urges must be kept in check.

Sunwalkers like Gideon Staar were heralded as heroes for this exact reason. They had conquered their inner demons and become paragons of the Order.

Heroes. The kind of people who battle evil.

But Marland wasn't evil. He didn't kill because of an urge; it was to protect his friend, and even then, it was an accident. Right?

Would an evil person feel this guilty? Would an evil person be this afraid? Would an evil person look like him?

The sun peeked over the horizon once more as day broke, and the light that came with it pulled Marland from his downward spiral. He needed to prepare and pack as much as he could before leaving. What do you even bring for a journey across the world?

Marland tore through his house for everything and anything he could think of; if he could carry it, it was going with him. When he was done, his old pack was nearly bursting at the seams.

He had nothing left to do other than leave for the forest, but he'd be there hours before Hylli. Would someone notice he was gone? The crime scene was only a few dozen metres from his home, after all. He had to take the chance. He promised he would meet Hylli in the forest. He had to be there.

Marland peeked through his front window. A man dressed in a black uniform adorned with golden suns and a purple sash tied around his waist walked up and down his street. It wasn't a Sunwalker uniform, but he had never seen that man before.

He must be with Gideon, and if he was this close to the house, the investigation was already underway.

When the man disappeared from view, Marland flung his door open and ran across the street into the small gap between the houses. Living near the

outskirts of town meant it wasn't difficult to escape into the fields.

Breaking into a full sprint, Marland ran to the forest, never daring to look back. He could barely breathe by the time he reached the meeting spot.

The small clearing in the forest had been a haven for him and Hylli ever since they were kids, free to practice manifesting from the prying eyes of the townsfolk. Marland still vividly remembered the day he was training and saw the new boy from Greenstone approaching, a flame rolling across his fingers.

Marland touched the stone that hung around his neck. Emberite, Hylli called it—an ore native to Greenstone that only formed on the volcanoes near the island. Not only was it always warm to the touch, but striking it with nearly anything could produce a flame. It was also nigh indestructible, even more durable than sunstone.

These unique properties made emberite valuable and rare, especially for common folk. Marland never asked Hylli how it came into his possession, but the fact that he was willing to give it to him as a gift said enough. "Come on, Hylli, you have to be here," Marland said to himself, still touching the necklace.

A formation of clouds swept in, blocking the sun overhead and ruining Marland's perception of time. He sat, stood, and paced, but nothing kept his mind away from the fact that Hylli still hadn't arrived. Eventually, he couldn't take it anymore. He didn't care what time it was or how long it had been; he had to make sure Hylli was okay.

Racing back through the forest, an unfamiliar sight caught Marland's attention. The church was fully illuminated as if it were in service, and even the enormous braziers on the roof, which were used only for special ceremonies, had been lit. Something was wrong.

Marland felt it in his gut—Hylli was in danger. He ran again, headlong into that danger. Dangerous or not, nothing could stop him from helping his friend.

The pit in Marland's stomach grew deeper as he reached the entrance to the town. As he raced up the main street, Marland noticed a crowd gathered outside the church, just like the one from last night. It was oddly quiet. There was no merriment, no drinks being sloshed together, just an ominous silence.

Flames. Something was happening. He tried to think of what he could do. If Hylli had been captured, that meant a Sunwalker and his Illuminators were holding him—an elite team.

But there had to be *something* he could—

Marland was slammed to the ground as something rammed into him. He scrambled to get away, but something—someone—was already on top of him. A pair of hands lashed his own together with a rope and yanked him to his feet.

Two men, one of which he had seen earlier, had tackled him and bound his hands. Marland kicked his legs wildly, trying to break their hold on him, but a swift strike to his stomach drove all of the air out of his lungs, sapping the fight from his body as he was dragged down the street and up the church steps.

The men started shouting at the crowd, ordering people to move out of the way. The faces of the townsfolk that had once taken pity on Marland had turned to disgust and fear.

He was no longer the little boy who lost his parents; he was a threat. They hurled insults at him as if they had never met him before, as if he hadn't been living alongside them for the past nineteen years of his life.

Monster. Daemon.

Murderer.

Marland was pushed into the church, smashing the doors open as he collided with them. He was dragged further inside, where a dark red liquid staining the carpet in the aisle between the pews, pooling near his knees. He didn't want to look, but he had to.

Hylli's family had been gathered together. His parents were on the ground, limp, with smoking holes in their chests and their ashes hanging in the air. Hylli was beside them, weeping over their corpses. He was bound as well as blinded by a cloth.

A tall figure stood before the bonfire at the centre of the church, looming over the crowd. He had a cleanly shaved flat face, receding, buzzed blonde hair, and a bright uniform decorated with a black and gold sun across his chest, just like his statue. He held a silver longsword that gleamed in the light—a purification blade.

"Hylli!" Marland shouted, but Hylli didn't seem to hear him. "Let him go! He didn't kill Briscoe, I did. Hylli's couldn't have—"

"*Hylliro Memre* isn't guilty of murder, but he *is* guilty of being a manifestor, just as *they* were guilty of harbouring one," he said, gesturing to Hylli's parents with his blade.

"*You're* a manifestor! How can you do this?" Marland said, thrashing against his bindings, but a kick from behind bounced his face off the floor. A foot pressed against his head, shoving it hard into the stone below. Gideon lifted his sword again, positioning it on Hylli's back, ready to deliver another killing strike.

That turbulent sea of energy rose from within Marland once again. A shockwave exploded from Marland's palms, sending the two soldiers behind him flying. There was a sickening crunch as they collided with the crossbeams in the ceiling.

Marland got to his feet. He could hear the crowd stampeding out of the church behind him. The ground rumbled as they fled, shouting and screaming as they exited. Marland looked directly at Gideon, who had

paused to observe his outburst.

Marland strained against the ropes that bound his hands. They burned and tore his flesh as he pulled, straining harder and harder until they began to fray. His whole body felt like it was on fire as the ropes snapped. He charged towards Gideon, barely in control of himself.

Marland knew nothing about fighting. What he was doing was tantamount to suicide, but it didn't matter.

They had to get out together. They promised.

Marland raised his hand towards Gideon's head and *pushed*. A burst of energy erupted from his palm and slammed into the Sunwalker. Gideon raised his sword to block it but was still pushed back by the immense force, his feet dragging as he skidded backward.

The energy bounced off the church wall and was propelled back toward Marland, sending debris, pews, Hylli, and himself flying. He landed hard on a pile of splintered wood, struggling to reorient himself, but he snapped to it when he saw Hylli on the ground, face down.

Marland scrambled forward, grabbing Hylli by the shoulders and flipping him over. "Hylli!" Marland looked his friend in the face; he was still alive, but the light in his eyes was missing. "Hey, come on. We're gonna get out of here, okay?" Marland tried to pull Hylli up to his knees, but he wouldn't budge. "We have to go, Hylli. Let's get out of here. Just like we promised, okay? Hey. Hey—"

"Marland," Hylli said. He placed his hands on both sides of Marland's face, tears streaming down his own, tracing lines through the ashes that stained his face. "Don't die here. *Live*. Get out while you can."

"What? N-No—not without you. I can't, Hylli, I can't—" A shadow loomed over them, the darkness cut through by a gleaming, silver longsword.

Gideon thrust his blade down, piercing Hylli's heart, the tip stopping just below Marland's rib as it punched through his friend's flesh and bone.

Gideon muttered something under his breath, and soon after, his blade was wrapped in flames, travelling down from the handle of his purification blade. Hylli's heart was incinerated, the heat unbearable and causing Marland to recoil.

"*No!*" Marland cried out as Gideon retracted his sword from Hylli's body. Hylli collapsed forward, falling into Marland's hands as he caught him. Marland placed his hand on his friend's back, feeling the hole left by the blade, the heat burning his hand as he left it there.

Marland looked up at Gideon, feeling his own heart shatter with pain. He fell limp, his consciousness fading. His best friend was gone, and he was probably next—a miserable death at the hands of a monster.

Gideon's face burned into Marland's brain—the face of a killer with the eyes of a daemon. Dead and listless with nothing behind them, Gideon's eyes were the worst of all.

But Marland finally understood.
This was evil.

THE NOISE – A HORROR SHORT STORY

Shhrrr-shhrrr-shhrrr.

Every hour or so, I hear that sound. I don't know what it is or where it's coming from, but I know it's real.

I just can't prove it.

My husband thought it was funny at first. I'd make him stop and listen whenever I heard it, but he always said the same things. "I don't know what you're talking about," or worse, "are you sure you're not going crazy?" It wasn't until I had unplugged every appliance in the house that he finally started to believe me, but he never admitted he heard it as well.

He believed that *I believed* I heard a noise; the worst possible result.

At least he was kind enough to put my prescribed ear drops in for me. My doctor suggested it was an inner ear problem. An inflamed muscle or something pushing a vein closer to my eardrum. I know what my heartbeat sounds like, and it's definitely not shhrrr-shhrrr-shhrrr, but I humoured the diagnosis.

Who knows? Maybe she's right. She's the professional after all, and I'm just the crazy woman hearing noises no one else can with my head tilted over the sink.

“Instructions say to hold your head like that for thirty seconds after they go in,” John said.

“This feels weird,” I said.

“She said it could take a few days for it to heal whatever’s damaged inside,” John said. “I really hope this helps; I haven’t slept on the couch this much since college.”

“No one’s making you sleep on the couch; that was your choice.”

“I’m sorry, maybe you’ve mistaken me for your other husband, who doesn’t mind being woken up every hour throughout the night.”

“Very funny. You think I want to feel like this?” I tilt my head back the other way and grab a tissue, wiping out the excessive liquid John dropped into my ear. Three drops, the doctor said, but you’d think he was trying to pressure-wash the inside of my head.

“No,” John said, squeezing more drops into my other ear, “I’m just worried about you. I’d hate to think something was really wrong. I keep hoping it’s some weird frequency in the house that you can hear and I can’t, but I can’t think of where the sound might be coming from.”

“We didn’t try unplugging the water heater or the furnace yet.”

“Let’s consider those the ‘nuclear’ options. The coffee maker I didn’t mind, the fridge and the deep freezer were when I started to get concerned.”

“We could always—“

Shhrrr-shhrrr-shhrrr.

John stared at me as I cut my sentence off. He sighed, twisting the cap back onto the bottle of drops. “God damn it,” I said under my breath, dabbing the remaining drops out of my ears. The liquid felt cold as it was exposed to the air, an unpleasant sensation.

“Let’s get to bed; I’m sure this stuff’ll work its magic overnight.”

It didn’t.

I’m still awake every hour of the night. Some miraculous nights, I’m able to sleep through it, but those are few and far between. Tonight was particularly bad.

I always come out to the garage whenever it’s like this; something about the cold helps me relax. There was too much junk in the garage for us to park the car inside, which always made John unhappy this time of year. Going to work with your ass freezing to your leather seats would do that to anyone.

I shouldn't call it "junk" exactly; our garage was used as storage for my father's woodworking projects. He kept telling us that he would clear it out soon, but it felt like every day a new tool would appear, or an unfinished chair would be tossed on the pile.

He was one of those guys who was in love with the idea of a project rather than seeing it through to the end.

He died last month. 65 years old. Speaking of seeing projects through to the end, he wasn't even alive as long as he was supposed to be. He was supposed to be the fun grandpa I could take our kids to when we had errands to run, but now he's just dead.

I think John was relieved when he died. Dad was always trying to drive a wedge between us. I could never figure out why, but he always hated John. He was very traditional, in a "sex after marriage" kind of way. That's how he and Mom made me, something he told me many times.

When John asked if he could marry me, my father said no. After Mom died, I was the only woman left in his life, and I think he thought John was going to take me away as well. He didn't even come to the wedding. I went to visit him afterwards and somehow got sucked into taking in his woodworking collection. Maybe part of me thought it was a way to repair our relationship, however minor of a gesture it might've been at the time, but it didn't work.

He died bitter and angry at the world. At John. At me.

And yet I can't help but smile when I look at some of the projects in here. Every week, he would build me something new when I was a child. A rocking horse, a push car, and even a chessboard that I still play with to this day.

He'd always have a big smile on his face whenever he brought something to me. "Come outside and see," he'd say, or, in the rare case where I managed to break something, he'd say, "Don't worry, honey, I'll fix it for you."

He always said that whenever he knew he could solve one of my problems.

I was always fond of his handsaw. It was rugged and imprecise, but he knew how to use it like no other. I lost track of how many times I'd seen him cutting a piece of wood with it, wondering what he was building next.

Damn it Dad, you really tried your hardest to ruin all those memories.

I went back inside and crawled into bed for another sleepless night. I missed getting up early and going for runs. I missed having a job to go to. I missed sleeping beside my husband, the human furnace.

Shhrrr-shhrrr-shhrrr.

I desperately hoped those drops would work soon.

Four days without change. It was enough to make a woman go crazy if she wasn't already. I told John he should just douse my ears with the drops, but he refused. According to the doctor, overuse could be just as bad, if not worse.

What could be worse than what I was experiencing now?

I stared up at the ceiling from my bed. My eyes were heavy and glossed over. I could feel my body desperately trying to shut itself down so it could rest, but I couldn't, knowing that shhrrr-shhrrr-shhrrr would wake me up at any moment if I did. It was a game of chicken with a supposedly imaginary noise.

"I'll be in my office," John said, kissing my forehead. He used to do that before he left for work, but he changed jobs so he could stay home and take care of me. Some data entry thing that I know he hates, but at least it lets us keep the house.

Shhrrr-shhrrr-shhrrr.

That's it.

I tore the covers off the bed and stormed into the bathroom. There was an easy way to make the noise stop. I ripped open the drawer under the sink and started rifling through for the— ouch. I found what I was looking for: a sewing needle.

Mom would use one to remove splinters from Dad's fingers. She swore it worked better than tweezers, and to her credit, it did. We didn't get splinters often, but I always kept a needle in the bathroom out of comfort.

For me, they served another purpose.

I could hear John running up the stairs. There was no way he would let me do this. I needed to be quick. I lined up the needle with my ear and gritted my teeth, thrusting it in. At first, there was no resistance, and then I felt the tip pierce through the fine membrane inside and into my pesky eardrum.

I might as well have used a hot poker for how painful it was, but if I kept going, I could maybe—

“Holy shit,” John said, racing into the bathroom. He grabbed my arm and wrenched the needle free from my grasp. “That won't solve anything!” A trickle of blood fell from my head. My left ear seemed to think John was underwater, but my right could still hear him perfectly fine.

I threw up into the sink as the world around me went dark. The last thing I remember was John's arms catching me as I fell.

I still don't understand why they had to handcuff me to my bed. Maybe I shouldn't have shoved a needle in my ear to make an imaginary noise go away, but it wasn't like I was going to do it

again; that hurt like hell.

Even worse was the fact that there was a shrink sitting at my bedside asking me all these annoying questions. According to him, the noise is most likely some form of grief over my father's death. He went on to explain how the body can do things like that when it's stressed, but knowing that didn't help, and it definitely didn't make the noise go away.

I could see him talking to John outside once he left. John kept looking at me as they spoke. He must've told them what happened when he brought me here, including the noise. Great, now everyone thinks I'm crazy.

John slid the door open after the shrink left. I could tell he was forcing himself to smile. "What'd he say?" I asked.

"They want to put a psychiatric hold on you for a few days," John said. "It's just to make sure you won't hurt yourself again."

"I promise I won't. I want to go home."

"I know. But it's only a few days while they try and figure out what's going on," John said, stroking my hair. He had a look on his face that suggested he had more he wanted to say.

"What?" I said. He closed his eyes, clearly bracing himself for whatever he was about to say.

“They want to start you on antipsychotics.”

“And what did you tell them?”

“I thought it was a good idea.”

“John, I’m not fucking crazy. I don’t need pills, I don’t need—“

“It’s just for a while to see if they help. If not, we’ll move on to something else.”

“Like what, tossing me in a psych ward? Well, you can forget it, I’m not consenting. I want to go home.”

“No one’s tossing you anywhere; we just need to figure out what’s wrong with your ears.”

“Take me home, John,” I said, tears starting to form in my eyes. “I don’t want to be here anymore. I want to go home.” I repeated it over and over again. I thrashed against my handcuffs, trying to rip them free. If I could just get them off, then maybe I could get home. John tried to calm me down, but a nurse ran in and hit me with a sedative. My muscles relaxed as I sank into the bed.

I don't even know what time it was when I finally woke up. John was passed out on a couch in the room, covering his face with a pillow. I had seen him a few times like that on the couch at home. I felt bad then, and oddly enough, I felt bad now.

I know he was just trying to help me, but it feels like he did everything wrong. A group of strangers were examining me like I was a nutcase, trying to figure out if they could crack me open and rewire my insides to make me normal.

Then again, I was currently tied to a hospital bed because I perforated my eardrum; maybe they were onto something.

Shhrrr-shhrrr-shhrrr.

For God's sake. I tried to ignore it, but it was here, too? Part of me hoped that it was something in the house we hadn't found yet. Did John sneak the coffee maker in under his arm? There was nothing from home here other than—

Wait.

“John,” I said. “John, wake up.” He pulled the pillow off his face and looked at me. “I think the noise is coming from you.”

“What? That doesn't make any sense,” he said, rubbing the sleep out of his eyes.

“None of this makes sense.”

“I’ll say. Why don’t you try going back to sleep?”

“Every time I’ve heard it, you’ve been nearby. We’ve been attached at the hip ever since my father died.”

“Let’s experiment. I’m going home to get some sleep, and I’ll be back in the morning. You let me know if you heard the noise or not.”

“Fine.” He left.

It turned out I was right, proven by the fact that I didn’t hear the noise for the next five days. But I didn’t see John again either. I tried to call him from the hospital, but he wouldn’t pick up. This noise, whatever it was, had killed our marriage.

They discharged me several days later with a series of prescriptions and a set of instructions to return should anything unusual occur. Nothing about this was usual. It did, however, mean I could finally get a full night’s sleep in my bed.

I stared at the ceiling as I drifted off. I reached out to the other side of the bed for John, but then I remembered. I missed him, even if he was the cause of my temporary insanity. The pills finally

kicked in, ejecting me from this world and into unconsciousness.

Shhrrr-shhrrr-shhrrr.

No.

I forced my eyes open, tearing myself from sleep.

Shhrrr-shhrrr-shhrrr.

It was louder this time. I got out of bed. God damn it, where was he?

Shhrrr-shhrrr-shhrrr.

It was different this time; it sounded wet. I felt my blood turn to ice.

“John?” I said. My heart was pounding, but my feet shuffled forward on their own. Squish. There was a pool of crimson running from the kitchen and soaking into the edges of the living room carpet. I braced myself as I rounded the corner.

John’s body was lying on the kitchen table.

Shhrrr-shhrrr-shhrrr.

The sound of a saw cutting through his spine. The noise stopped as his head hit the floor. A man stood over my husband with a smile so wide it tore the flesh in his cheeks.

“Don’t worry, honey, I fixed him for you.”