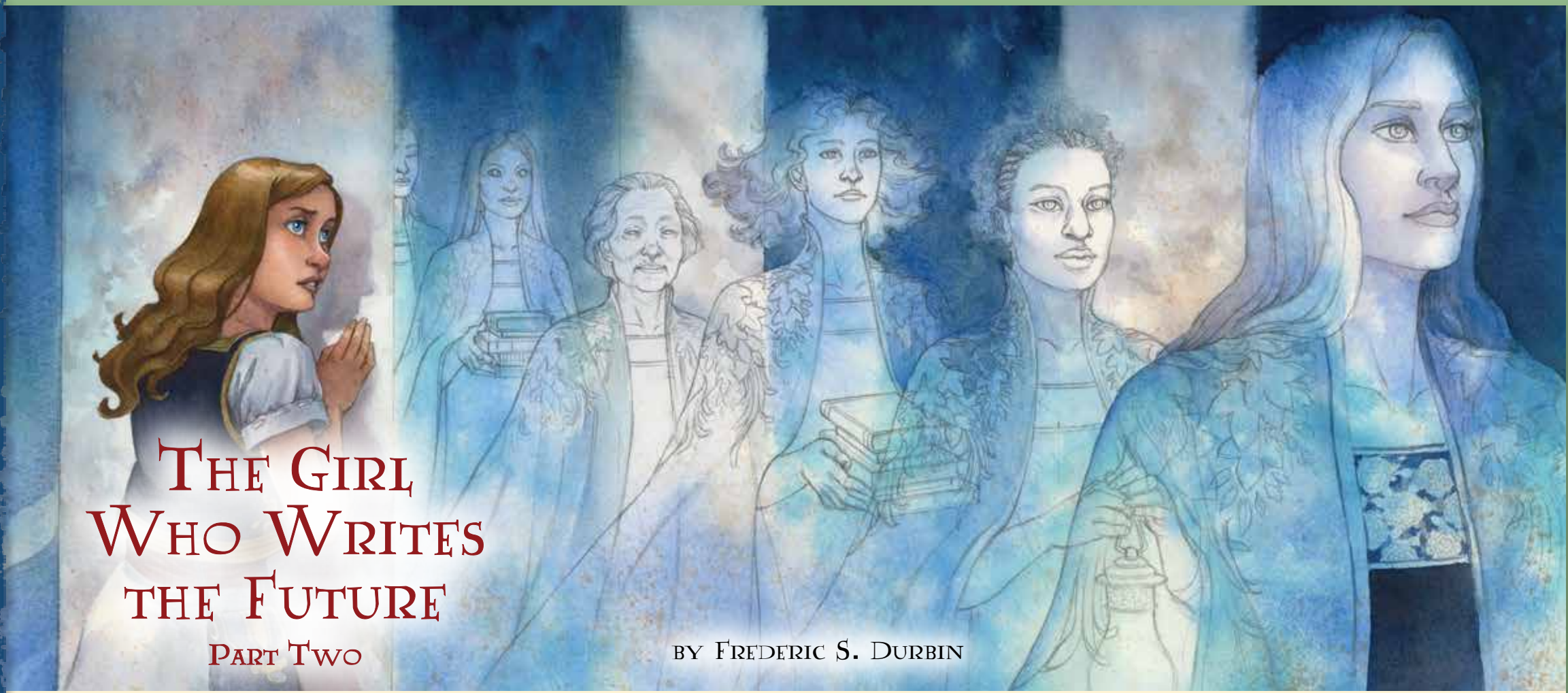


A CROWD-SORCERY STORY

Whatever Fable Thatcher writes about the future comes true—a power she calls both a gift and a curse. Taken in as an orphan by the wizard Roderic the Astonishing, she travels with the Moonlight Faire. Hidden behind a curtain, she writes the future for those who visit Roderic’s wagon wishing to have their dreams come true for the price of a gold piece. Fable doubts that her prophecies make others happy in the end. She is frightened by the One Prophecy—about herself but not yet fulfilled—written when her mind was asleep and her hand moved the pen by itself.

One evening, disguised as a merchant, the wizard Khaos comes searching for the girl who writes the future. He draws a knife and attacks Roderic. A black flame springs from his palms. Roderic shouts to Fable to hide in the Sarcophagus, a box sealed against harm. There, in the darkness, Fable writes the future—that Roderic will defeat his enemy and she will find him alive. When she emerges, Khaos is gone, but the entire Faire has burned. In the rubble, she discovers Roderic—alive, but barely. “Go to Hush Castle,” he says before he dies. “The Silent Sisters will help. Say . . . my name . . .”

An illustration in a blue and white color palette. On the left, a young girl with long brown hair, Fable Thatcher, is shown in profile, looking towards the right. She is wearing a dark blue dress with a white collar. In the center and right, several women, the Silent Sisters, are depicted. They are dressed in long, flowing, light-colored robes. One woman in the foreground is holding a stack of books. The background shows a library setting with bookshelves and a doorway. The overall style is painterly and ethereal.

THE GIRL WHO WRITES THE FUTURE

PART TWO

BY FREDERIC S. DURBIN

FABLE THATCHER WAS not alone in the library. Even when there were no scholars about, even when no copyists worked at the long tables beneath the flickering lanterns, someone watched her from the shadows, from behind the rows of books. She heard breathing at times, and footsteps, and the rustle of clothing. Those sounds told her that it was not the Silent Sisters, who cared for the library. The Sisters glided soundlessly among the shelves. They did not breathe; they were ghosts.

Nevertheless, after her long walk over the hills and through the Swamp of Vorpaslae,

when she knocked at their gate filthy and half-starved, the Sisters had welcomed her to Hush Castle, guiding her by the elbow with icy hands. When she’d told them that Roderic had sent her, the Sisters led her to a cozy room where a fire crackled on the hearth, and there was just enough space for a narrow bed and a writing desk. Fable had warm water for bathing and to launder her clothes. Simple, hearty meals always awaited her in the kitchen; but she never saw anyone preparing these things. She washed her dishes and swept the floors to show gratitude, but she always ate alone and never saw a living

soul—except for the visitors to the library, where she spent her days.

These scholars weren’t much good for company. They arrived and departed alone and wanted to be left to their musty pages in peace.

Tonight, Fable meant to discover who was hiding in the library. She would remain when all others had gone. During the dark hours, she could explore every nook and storeroom until she found this shy lurker. Life with the Moonlight Faire had taught her that the world looked different at night. Sometimes, sprites and secrets that hid from the sun would become clear in the moon’s rays.

The sun sank. All visitors had gone out through the tall doors. Gliding in a long, black file, the Sisters turned the locks, snuffed the lanterns one by one, and passed into the corridor leading to their chambers. Ghosts needed no sleep; but in life, the Sisters had performed their tasks to the ticking of the clock, and they kept up their routines after death. Night was the time for rest.

Though Fable stayed hidden behind a pillar, she doubted the Sisters were fooled. If she chose to spend the night here, they would allow it—there was no accounting for the whims of the living. Watching them go,

Fable wondered how long ago the last Sister had died, and why no more living ones came to replace them. Perhaps there were no better guardians of the past than the dead.

The moon rose huge and round. As it peeped above the sills of the leaded windows, it set the main floor aglow with silver. Perfect. Fable could see well, but there were plenty of shadows to conceal her.

I'll work my way from one end to the other, she told herself, if it takes all night. She stood against the eastern wall, the moon blazing through windows to her right and left, and gazed at the tables and chairs, at the books receding into the blackness. Eight balconies soared above, each leading into another warren of aisles and shelves. Fable sighed, feeling foolish. All night would not be enough. There were too many places for the mysterious watcher to hide.

She breathed the dry air, scented of moldering cloth and leather covers. Somewhere a mouse began to gnaw, probably inside a trash bin. Fable thought carefully. Whoever watched her was used to staying hidden. Likely, that person was watching her now.

Fable cleared her throat. "Hello," she said. Her voice carried far through the silent building. "Let me see you. Don't be afraid."

Only silence answered. Even the mouse grew still, waiting.

Somewhere, eyes were peering at her.

Fable spread her arms, then dropped them to her sides. What could she say? "Can't we talk? I'm no danger to you. It's rude to spy on people."

Fable laughed at her own stupidity. Why had she not thought of the solution before? She had only to write a line on paper, a prophecy, and the mystery would be solved. Fable hurried to an ornate chair, pulled it back with a scrape, and sat. Moonlight fell brilliant across the table. She dipped a pen in ink and found a leaf of scratch paper. On the paper she wrote:

*Whoever or whatever is hiding
in this library will come forward
to be seen—NOW.*

With a satisfied nod, Fable scrambled to her feet again and faced the wide chamber, tapping her fingers on the tabletop.

Her eyes widened at a noise: a thumping and deep grunting, as of some wild animal charging over the stone floor. It came nearer, and before Fable could run or even think, a dark shape careened around the end of a bookcase and raced toward her. She glimpsed eyes like flecks of fire . . . a humped, hairy back . . . four pounding hoofs . . . curving tusks . . . and clawed, leathery wings. The monster did not quite fly, but it sprang in gliding bounds. It crashed into a pedestal and sent a sculpted head flying. With another leap, it smashed a smaller table, the chairs skidding away.

Winged boar . . . dragon . . . whatever the thing was, it was making straight for Fable! Only the long table stood between it and her.

Not stopping to shriek, Fable ran to her left. The monster turned and followed her along the table's opposite side. The wings flogged the air, and the creature began to rise.



Fable slid and changed direction, dashing back to her right.

Opening its jaws in a shuddering roar, the beast landed on the tabletop and blundered around, searching for her. As it turned, its wings toppled two more chairs. A stack of papers flew in a whirl. Ink splattered, and the table creaked.

To get out of the library, Fable would have to pass the monster—or jump through the window behind her. But there would be no time to open the window. The snorting beast spread its wings again, bunching itself to pounce. Fable dropped to the floor and crawled beneath the table. There was a cracking of wood. Fable was sure the whole table was coming down on top of her.

The nightmare beast slammed down onto the floor behind her, its snout plowing chairs aside as it snuffled, trying to find her. She could smell the foul, hot gusts of its breath. Its jaws clashed shut, barely catching her sleeve. Fable ripped the cloth free and rolled onto her side.

She became entangled in a forest of chair legs. She thrashed, but she couldn't get leverage to push herself free. In another instant, the terrible teeth would close upon her.

At the monster's roar, Fable screamed, too.

She braced herself, but the crashing was farther away now. The beast shrieked as if in pain.

Fable raised her head and saw the enormous black shape floundering, hoofs kicking in the air, wings beating against the floor. Moonlight glinted on a steel blade like an

icicle. Then there was a flash of red fire that seemed to well up from inside the monster. The glare was so bright that Fable covered her eyes. She choked at the stench of burning. When she squinted through her fingers a moment later, the huge body was gone. Only a black ooze remained, a pool like oily mud, pouring smoke into the air.

Fable stared. Slowly, the shape of a person became visible through the smoke—someone standing in the shadows beyond the moonlight, quietly watching Fable. It was a girl about her age, short and slender. The stranger's pale skin seemed to glow, almost as if she were one of the marble statues. But she was clothed in darkness. Her hair was a midnight waterfall, her dark eyes piercing, vividly alive. In her hand was a long sword covered in the monster's oily blood. Before Fable's eyes, the blood turned to smoke, curling upward, and the blade was clean.

"It's you," Fable said. "The one who watches me. You killed it."

As the girl stepped into the moonlight, her long, ink-black cloak whispered. It was made of thousands of . . . leaves?—no. Feathers. She wore a cloak of blackbird feathers. It seemed woven of the night itself.

"What was that *thing*?" Fable asked, crawling from under the table.

"A homunculus," said the girl in a quiet voice. "The spy of a powerful sorcerer. What it sees and hears, the sorcerer sees and hears. It's been watching you. They can change size and shape—it only took on this monstrous form when you made it show itself."



Fable climbed shakily to her feet. "I made . . .?"

The girl swept her hand in a wide gesture, and Fable saw hundreds of mice in a circle all around. Fable drew a wondering breath. More mice peered from the tops of bookshelves, from around corners, whiskers twitching. There were spiders, too, and a few hard-shelled bugs. Once Fable had gotten a

good look at them, the creatures dispersed, scurrying back in all directions to their business.

What could it mean?

The prophecy she'd written. "Whoever or whatever is hiding . . ."

"Are you satisfied?" asked the girl. "We've all shown ourselves to you."

Fable drew nearer. "Who are you?"

“What does it matter?” The girl tucked her long, straight hair behind an ear.

As the girl’s words about the monster sank in, a chill crept through Fable. She remembered the sorcerer who had come into Roderic’s wagon—and spoken of her. “How do you know it was a . . . homun . . . a spy?”

The girl smirked. “I’ve been with my father to places you wouldn’t believe. My father dealt with plenty of sorcerers. Now he’s dead.” She pointed at the smoking mire that had been the creature. “Look. You can still see the swamp vines and bit of pig skin the homunculus was made from—boiled together with who knows what else in a cauldron and brought to life with magic. I knew it was a homunculus, because we would have noticed a winged pig in the library.”

Despite the fact that she’d nearly died, and that the one who had killed Roderic had found her again—despite all that, Fable laughed. She liked this sly girl. After all, the girl had saved her life.

“I’m called Fable. Fable Thatcher.” She offered her hand.

The other girl only stared back, raising an eyebrow. She slid her sword into a sheath at her belt.

“The sorcerer will gather that I didn’t kill this spy by myself,” said Fable. “So couldn’t you use a friend?”

“I don’t use my friends.” As the girl brushed past Fable, she said, “Come with me.”

“Where are we going?”

“Someplace safer. What a mess!” The girl picked her way past the wreckage. “The Sisters will have a fit.”

“That I’d like to see,” said Fable, hurrying to keep up.

The dark-eyed girl looked at her curiously, and Fable was sure she was hiding a smile.

They entered a dark aisle between bookshelves. The girl walked beside Fable, steering her deeper into the library’s maze. “My name is Araceli Luminè. Call me Luminè—it’s easier. No one gets ‘Araceli’ right.”

“Araceli,” said Fable carefully.

The girl narrowed her eyes. “Call me Luminè.”

She led Fable up a marble stairway, past the second floor, the third, the fourth . . . on and on. Fable wiped her forehead with the hem of her vest. They reached the ninth floor, and Fable was eager to slump onto a bench. But Luminè pulled her into an alcove, where they squeezed past the statue of an angel with a sword.

As Fable gulped air, Luminè pushed on the alcove’s wall, and a hidden doorway swung inward. Moonbeams falling through the skylights revealed a shaft leading upward, a ladder fixed to its wall. Luminè closed the door behind them and began climbing.

Fable took a deep breath. Tired though she was, she followed the rustling hem of Luminè’s feather cloak up toward the moonlight.

to be continued

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