

CLASH
of the **GEEKS**

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Clash of the Geeks

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TABLE of CONTENTS

- 7** The Last Unicorn (Pegasus Kitten)
-WIL WHEATON
- 15** The Lay of the Eastern King
-PATRICK ROTHFUSS
- 21** Vintarini's Peak
-SCOTT MATTES
- 27** This Is the Way the World Ends
-CATHERYNN VALENTE
- 33** The complex identity of the archetypal hero,
a fictional treatise with unicorn pegasus kittens
-RACHEL SWIRSKY
- 39** The Scalzorc/Clown Wheaton/Kittytrice
Auditions *A One Act Play*
-STEPHEN TOULOUSE
- 49** Bedtime Story
-BERNADETTE DURBIN
- 53** The Making of the Unicorn Pegasus Kitten Art:
A Transcript of an Interview with John Scalzi

THE LAST UNICORN

(PEGASUS KITTEN)

Wil Wheaton

THE PATH was narrow and small volcanic pebbles threatened to slip his feet from beneath him at every twist and turn, throwing him down the side of the firespire mountains, but Izlac was not afraid. He was focused on his mission, the fate of his entire Scalzorc clan resting on his leathery green shoulders, and falling a thousand feet down the side of a mountain would be a welcome death, should he fail to defeat the Wee-tin he knew waited for him in the Bentclaw Pass.

“This is your task,” his master, Rek, told him. “Mount Kryuzhire is waking, and the eggs will soon blast into the sky. Whoever leads the hatchlings away will command them, and if not us, then the vile Wee-tins will.” He spat on the ground and cursed under his breath. “We have waited many years for this hatching, and you are our Chosen rider. You are our last and best hope, my apprentice. You are our only hope.”

He put his giant hands on Izlac’s shoulders, and fixed him with a serious gaze. “You are our future.”

Izlac heard a low, angry rumble, as if the mountains themselves were growling at him. He pressed himself against the uphill side and held onto a sharp outcropping until the shaking passed. A lesser warrior would be frightened, he thought, but he was not afraid. He looked out across the valley and spied his once-proud village: the wall around it was broken and crumbling from years of unprovoked Wee-tin attacks. The forest he explored as a child was a black tangle of scorched earth and charred logs that were once trees. The pen where the UPKs once lived was empty, though he could see his brothers and sisters, tiny specks that appeared black from this distance, moving around as they prepared it for his triumphant return.

He pulled his hand away from the rocks, and saw that it was bleeding from his grip. He smiled without humor, and continued his journey up the mountain.



HE made camp without a fire in a mostly-level alcove beneath the mouth of the Bentclaw Pass, and ate a meal of uncooked meat until he could eat no more, and threw what was left over the side of the mountain. This was a traditional ritual, the night before a battle in the Bentclaw Pass, and he'd taken care to save enough, going hungry on the second day of his journey, to perform it.

"On the fifth day, you will be near Bentclaw Pass," Rek had said, "and you are to eat until you are full, throwing the rest off the mountain."

"Why?" Anyorc who wasted food would be punished, severely.

"It is a tribute to those who have fought and fallen before you, to feed their spirits. It is also to remind you of the importance of your task: you will not need food for the journey home, because you will make it on winged back, or you will not make it at all."

Izlac hefted the meat in his hand and squeezed it until blood began to ooze out, just as it had earlier in the day. He thought of all the great warriors who had come here before him and the few who had returned. But he was not afraid; he felt exhilarated. He would be victorious. Izlac would save his people.

He bellowed "Ghlag' ghee Baâkun!" and threw the meat with all his might. He watched a thin tail of spray follow it in an arc, as it disappeared into the darkness down the side of the mountain. When he was certain that it was gone, and the spirits of his ancestors had been fed, he thanked them for their sacrifice, and begged them to guide him in the coming battle.

He placed his axe and shield on the path, lay down next to them on the hard ground, and waited for sleep to arrive. It came slowly, as if it, too, had to climb the mountain to reach him.

In the dream, he was a boy, and Rek was barely a man. It was Choosing Day, and he stood in the pen with the other boys who had just come of age. A score of UnicornPegasusKittens, still in their cages, waited to be released.

"It is Choosing Day!" Rek cried.

"Choosing Day!" They replied in unison.

"All but one of you will fall. One of you will be Chosen to be The Rider. Be brave. Do not be afraid! You are warriors!"

"Warriors!" They bellowed, in small voices that had yet to mature but did not tremble.

Rek lifted his axe high and brought it down on the chain, dropping the gates and releasing the UnicornPegasusKittens. They burst from their cages, howling and caterwauling, and took to the sky, nearly blocking out the sun as they circled above. All around him, the other boys fell to the ground.

Izlac looked to his left, and saw his childhood friend Kal. "You will be Chosen, Izzy," As Kal spoke his face split open, spilling blood down his chest. Spinning to his left, he faced his twin brother Mak, whose chest was torn open. "We all knew it would be you, Izzy," he said, tearing his heart from his chest, "it was always going to be you." He bellowed "Ghlag' ghee Baâkun!" as he threw it into the sky, where it was caught in mid-dive by a UnicornPegasusKitten who landed at Izlac's feet.

The world went silent, but for the sound of Mak's still-beating heart. He looked back at Mak, and saw that he had become a baby, held by their mother, who sobbed. He looked away, and found himself on the mountain, now a man, surrounded by the bodies of those who were not Chosen. Their blood ran, like a river, down the path and over the side. He reached to touch it, but it flowed away from him. His father walked out of the Bentclaw Pass, atop the now-raging torrent of blood.

"You are Chosen, my son," he said, more softly than he ever spoke in life, "it is a great honor for our family, and a terrible price for us to pay. Do not forget this day. Do not forget your brother."

"I am not afraid, father," he said, in a voice he hadn't heard since he was a child.

Before his father could reply, the bloodriver surged and frothed and carried him over the edge. Izlac ran to the edge of the path, the blood spreading before him, never touching him, and looked over, into darkness. The sound of Mak's heartbeat echoed up the steep, basalt cliff.

Izlac woke from the dream with a start, covered in a greasy sheen of cold sweat, his own heartbeat pounding in his ears, a visceral reminder of Mak's.

"I am not afraid. I am not afraid. I am not afraid," he spoke to the wind, as it whipped up the mountain and swirled dust all around him.

The wind spoke back, with the voice of a UnicornPegasusKitten, distant and mournful. Izlac wrapped his arms around himself and leaned up against the rock wall of the alcove. Sleep did not claim him again that night, and for that he was grateful.

● Wil Wheaton

DAWN broke over the valley, casting red and gold light across his village, and the destruction around it. Izlac picked up his axe and shield, and did his morning exercises. He heard Rek's voice commanding and correcting him, as it had since Choosing Day. His axe was an extension of his arm, his shield light and ready.

His exercises completed, he looked back at his village. A thin line of smoke climbed out of the chimney from one of the few houses that had not been destroyed in the last attack.

"I will be home soon," he said. He turned, and began to climb the twisting, narrow path toward the Bentclaw Pass.

As day neared its end, the ground beneath his feet began to level out, and the tall walls around him grew steadily farther apart, until he knew he had reached his destination. Mount Kryuzhire belched smoke into the sky, covering the Kryuzhire Valley with a grey blanket. Dark red lava ran down its sides, and the air smelled of sulfur and something he could not identify, but knew he would remember for the rest of his life.

There was a beating of wings, an angry scream, and the Wee-Tin Rider burst through the cloud, climbing upward above him. The smoke swirled in tight, spiraling eddies, and trailed behind him as he raced into the sky. He wore the traditional armor of the Wee-Tins: bright red shoulderpads, a mask of terror and horror painted across the chest. The sheer *wrongness* of the armor was something taught to all Scalzorc warriors, but all the lessons and tests and drawings he had seen did not prepare him for just how disgusting and horrifying it was when seen with his own eyes...yet he refused to look away.

The Wee-Tin Rider circled twice, then dove toward him.

"I am not afraid," Izlac said, defiantly. He gripped his axe, and planted his feet.

The Wee-Tin Rider pulled up on the reins, and his mount hissed. "RAWR! PFFT!" It beat its wings, blowing dust and stink into Izlac's face. He turned away and blinked until his vision had cleared. When he turned back, the Wee-Tin had dismounted and stood next to his UnicornPegasusKitten, stroking its fur.

"Why are you here, Scalzorc?" He demanded.

"Mount Kryuzhire awakens, and the hatch is coming. I am here to battle you for the last UnicornPegasusKitten, as is the tradition between our people."

The Wee-Tin laughed, a deep, throaty, mocking sound that stirred anger in Izlac's belly. "You mean you are here to die, like those who came before you!"

Before Izlac could respond, the ground beneath them shook violently, knocking them both off their feet. A mighty cloud of ash exploded from Mount Kryuzhire and turned the sky black. Pyroclastic lightning flashed and forked across and through it.

"The hatch begins!" Izlac cried, leaping to his feet and charging the Wee-Tin. "Ghlag' ghee Baâkun!"



IN two villages, in two valleys, bound by culture and history, but divided by mountains and an enmity so ancient its origins had long been forgotten, elders looked to the darkening skies as the earth beneath them shook.

Rek folded his arms across his chest and watched the lightning crackle through the spreading cloud. "It has begun." He looked around to confirm he was alone, and added under his breath, "Fight well, Izlac The Chosen, so that we may see another day." He spit on the ground, just to be sure.



THE Wee-Tin rolled to one side, and stopped against his mount. He tucked his feet beneath him and sprung up in one fluid motion, pulling a spear out of his saddle. Izlac's momentum carried him past too quickly to swing his axe. He stopped and turned, ready for another attack. The Wee-Tin was waiting for him, arm cocked, spear at the ready.

He threw with such speed and precision, Izlac almost did not get his shield raised in time. He threw with such power, the spear's tip pushed through the ironwood and into Izlac's forearm. The pain was sharp and instant, and Izlac did his best to mask his yelp with a roar. The spear tore out of his flesh as he threw his now-useless shield to the ground.

"Come on, 'orc," the Wee-Tin sneered, "I'll make your death quick." He reached into his saddle, and drew a jagged sword, covered with sharp barbs along both sides. "My woman waits for my return. She is hungry, and only I can sate her."

● Wil Wheaton

The ground beneath them shook again, and they both felt the heat of the blast, as bright red magma flew into the sky, darkening as it fell to the ground.

“Then your woman will starve!” Izlac growled and advanced, more carefully this time.

The Wee-Tin met him, sword drawn, and they fought. Steel clashed against steel as the mountains around them rumbled. The UnicornPegasusKitten, sensing the hatch, began to flick its tail. It bared its teeth and released a low, droning call.

The Wee-Tin was strong, and fast. He swung his sword with precision and Izlac struggled to deflect his blows. The Wee-Tin drove Izlac back, away from the UnicornPegasusKitten, toward the Kryuzhire Valley side of the pass. The Wee-Tin’s sword cut into his arms and shoulders, and the Wee-Tin Rider’s eyes grew wild with bloodlust and mania.

“SOMETHING” bellowed The Wee-Tin, as he drew his sword back and thrust it toward Izlac in a killing blow.

“SOME RETORT!” Izlac cried, deflecting some, but not all, of the blow, with his axe handle. A deep gash opened up on his side.

The Rider countered his momentum, drawing himself and his sword back. Before he could strike anew, Izlac swung his axe with all his might. The Wee-Tin caught the head with his sword and pulled Izlac toward him with an evil grin.

As Izlac was yanked forward, he saw his shield on the ground, just past and to one side of The Wee-Tin Rider. Using all of his training, the thousands of hours across the years with Rek ruthlessly, pitilessly, relentlessly testing and drilling him, the years spent without friends, only training—always training—the burden of being Chosen at the cost of his only brother, he flexed his powerful leg muscles and drove The Rider toward it.

Knocked off balance and with his momentum against him, The Rider was pushed easily. Izlac hooked his foot beneath The Rider’s leg, and drove him to the ground. There was a muffled crunch as the shield broke under their combined weight. The smile on The Rider’s face vanished, the mania in his eyes turned to surprise. Izlac lifted himself off of him, and stood over him.

The entire head of The Rider’s own spear stuck out from his chest, pushing the evil grin on his armor into a twisted and grotesque mask. Blood gurgled in The Rider’s mouth, matching the blood that covered

the spear and flowed down across him. He gasped through foaming bloody spittle, and clutched at it frantically.

Izlac crouched down, and placed his face close to the dying Rider's ear. "You can't has," he whispered softly, "not yours."

He left The Rider, and walked to the UnicornPegasusKitten. Its bright green eyes shone with reflected flashes of lightning and fireballs. He stroked the fur at its neck, and unbuckled its saddle. "You will never wear a saddle again. You are no longer a slave; you are a companion."

The UnicornPegasusKitten, for the moment the last of its kind, began to purr. Izlac climbed onto its back, and coaxed it into flight.



THEY flew together, into the mouth of the volcano, as the eggs began to burst into the sky. As they reached their zenith, they burst open in a spreading of wings and kicking of hooves. The shells fell to the ground, and the hatchlings began to fly: five, then ten, then a dozen, then two dozen, then a swarm. Izlac flew around them all, through the smoke and fire, the UnicornPegasusKitten calling to them, leading them, coaxing them away from danger—but more importantly, leading them away from the Wee-Tins who would enslave them and use them to destroy the Scalzorcs.

When the hatch was complete, Izlac and his mount flew high over the top of the Firespire Mountains, and into the valley. They landed in the pen, at least three score of them, his entire clan assembled around the fences. He stood there, exhausted and badly wounded, in the place of his Choosing, where his life had been defined and forever changed. Rek emerged from the crowd and walked to him. The crowd fell silent.

Rek bowed to him. "This is why you were Chosen," he said, simply. Then, turning to the floherd of UnicornPegasusKitten Kittens, who were now rolling on the short grass and purring, he added, "and this is why you are our savior."

The entire clan cheered, but Izlac felt no joy, just relief.

"I was not afraid," he said, "just like you taught me."

He walked across the pen, to find his parents, whom he would see now for the first time since his training began and they had lost both of their children. "I was not afraid."

THE LAY OF THE EASTERN KING

Patrick Rothfuss

In the high halls of Hrothgar
the men make a mead which they savor slowly
to keep quit of cold.

It's said south of Samarand
they brew a brown beer bitter with barley
yet hearty and hale.

There are wines in the west
That Serapha sips flavored and favored
by her kin and court. Heavy and hearth-hot
and sweeter than syrup they mark a man's mouth
with the color of coal.

But all travelers tell
of the fields to the east where wheat grows so golden
it shines like the sun. This wheat brews a beer
that is better than any, sweeter than sunlight
and stronger than stone. A man with a mouthful
would never want water, nor food, nor a woman to liven his bed.
A sheaf of King's wheat is much better bottled
than wasted by those who would grind it for bread.

This king of the east was well-weighted with wisdom;
he built a broad hearth-hall with timber and tar.
He bade all the best men be brought to his banner
And sweet wheaten beer drew the folk from afar.
Strong was his shield-arm swift was his spear.
They called him King Wheaton in praise of his beer.

● Patrick Rothfuss

Brave were the thanes the king gathered around him
Loyal as hearth hounds and fiercer than fire.
Faithful they followed him proud of his prowess.
Stories they sang how he had challenged
the dread demon Doramun though just a boy.
Vile visaged Doramun taller than trees
Strong as a sea-storm face withered and white.
Doramun hungered and men were his meat
the demon devoured them feasting on foes.
Seven stout soldiers had fallen before him
Yet the young boy-king stood stalwart and strong.
Bracing the bright blade of his steady spear
So swiftly he struck that damned Doramun fell
his fierce features fixed in a grin of surprise.
He hewed off the head and created his crest.
Thereafter the boy bore the face of his foe
brightly emblazoned across his brave breast.

The Wheaton king's hearth-hall was fourfold in fame
For both beer and bravery known far and wide.
Later his lady love joyously joined him.
Fairest Felicia who sat at his side.

But when the lord's lady had stayed for her hour
then taken to bed like a slow-furling flower.
After beery and bellowing songs were all sung.
And the barrels were barren straight down to the bung
When firelight flickered and hearth-hall grew dim
still waited the fourth fame and they called on him.

Scalzi the Sharp-Tongue was welcomed by Wheaton
for Scalzi was scep strong story-shaper.
Words were his weapons and wise men did fear.
Warriors wept at the weight of his wrath.
No man dared slight him and oft it was spoken
by all the King's thanes how simpler and safer
to open your veins than anger the scep.

For death from a broad blade is blessedly brief.
 But Scalzi's sarcasm would strip you of skin
 It was vicious as venom that bides in the bite
 and follows a man back to his bed at night.

The thanes savored Scalzi for he did delight them.
 The stories he spun them were wicked and wise.
 Though frightful of face the thanes treasured his tales.
 Still sweeter than stories was Scalzi's mad ranting
 for when he was angered the scop would screech.
 Rage roiled in Scalzi like sparks in the tinder
 Waiting for wild winds to fan them to flame.
 When full fury filled him he harrowed the hearth hall
 His temper a tempest scathing his speech.
 Laughed they all loudly at his wicked word-work
 For this the thanes thanked him and praises they'd sing.
 They hailed him as screechling and valued his venom
 and none loved him more than the wise Wheaton King

Night upon night the hearth-hall was happy
 When given a subject then Scalzi would screech.
 Venting his venom at his king's command.
 Marveled the men so sharp his sarcasm
 So bitter the bile he would loose for his liege.
 None of them wondered why rage roiled within him.
 Silent was Scalzi of what his heart held.
 Love longing filled him for fairest Felicia
 for his lord's loving lady his secret heart swelled.



Faint flickered firelight late lay the hour
 All hearts were heavy for early that evening
 Wheaton warred with his lady and his mood was sour.
 He sang out for Scalzi demanding a screech.
 Said, "Scop speak! My wrath is waxing
 But I'm wanting for words that can cut like a knife.
 My mood is most maudlin, speak sharply for me
 On what woe is woman both wanton and wife."

● Patrick Rothfuss

The hearth hall held hundreds and they leaned to listen
Grimly they grinned all hoping to hear
The wrath and the wit of Scalzi the Screedling
working his word work in King Wheaton's ear.

The sceop stood slowly and with no small stagger.
For Scalzi was bold when it came to his beer.
He'd broached his own barrel and battled it bravely
And all through the night he had shown it no fear.
Soused was the sceop as he slurred to a start:
Women were wicked Woe to the wise man
trusting their treachery weak to their wiles.
Fie to their fickleness. Fainting and frail.
Weeping and whining Seducing with smiles.

The thanes were a thunder loud was their laughter
Scathing was Scalzi as he slurred their sex:
Hard-hearted harlots Teasing and tawdry
Shrewish and shrill save for one who was sweet.
Faces all false all painted with promise
But rare was the woman who was truly fair.
Skin soft as sighing cool cream in color
feathered with freckles. Henna'd her Hair
Shining like sunset all dappled with shadow.
Eyes light with laughter lovely as lapis.
Lips sweet with smiling Your fair flower-mouth
is palest of pinks and all petal-perfect.
Your lips curve with kindness calling for kisses.
Fair Felicia!

Silent the sceop. Hushed is the hall.

Wrathful was Wheaton full fury did fill him
his hand held the haft of his strong shafted spear.
His thanes they restrained him and spoke of the land-law
That none could slay sceop for telling of tales.
So Scalzi the Screedling was banished and banned.

His arms they did grant him and also his armor
And four days of freedom to take leave of the land.



Rocks rose around him the road was in ruin
But Scalzi was stoic as he strode the stones.
Though weariness wore him and hunger and hurt,
Braved he the barrens the high hills of Harrow.
Armor all war-worn he bore on his back
The weight of it woeful but barely a burden
Next to the heaviness hardening his heart.

Fleeing the wrath that the Wheaton king bore him
Scalzi had traveled for five days and nights.
Southward he sped to Samarand's safety
Tomorrow his tramping would be at an end.
Long were the leagues he had stretched out behind him
Four days of freedom to lengthened his lead
Still Scalzi strode on for Samarand's border
for he knew the swiftness of King Wheaton's steed.

Cresting the hill Scalzi saw Samarand
Lush were the lands that he gazed on below.
Then heard he behind him full feathered wings stirring
While beneath the bass of a murderous mewing
came the thunderous thrum of Proud Petrifax purring.

His sire had been Kestran King of all Kitten-Kind.
Of the line of Lesandre upon whose broad backs
rode the lords of Leaydan feared for their felines
proud Persians all but now lost to legend
save for the splendor of this single son.

Fleeing was folly so Scalzi the scop
gave one longing look down on sweet Samarand.
Then brought out his broad axe great Grimnir gleaming
forged from the fire at the dawn of the world.

● Patrick Rothfuss

Weapon of Wodemar fiercest of fighters
But crap at canasta so Scalzi had skinned him
and won the brave blade with a cut of the cards.

Wise Wheaton's spear shone like gold in the sun
The face of damned Doramun bold on his breast
Straddling his steed the king called a challenge.
While Petrifax paused and purred low in his chest.

Brave was their battle in the high hills of Harrow.
Harder than hammers they struggled and struck
their fury so fierce it shattered the stone.
Petrifax pounced his pummeling purr
Rang on the rocks as his hard horn descended
but swift as his wit was the strong arm of Scalzi
The bright blade of Grimnir flickered and flashed
And the king of all kittens did buckle and bleed.

Mourning his mount the king gave a cry.
His spear like a thunderbolt bitter and bright.
All down the mountainside sounded their strife
and Wheaton the Warrior spilled Scalzi's life.

Sly Scalzi sharp tongue bloody and broken
Silently slid from the shaft of the spear.
Wheaton stood staring fast fading his fury
and loud he lamented what his wrath had wrought.
The king bent to embrace him while Scalzi the Scep
Spoke to him softly the secrets he kept.
Of love for Felicia but more for his liege lord
Then Scalzi stilled and the Wheaton king wept.

VINTARINI'S PEAK

Scott Mattes

ON THE days when the ash didn't obscure the skyline, you could see its glowing rim from miles outside the range, jutting up into the heavens like a skyscraper plopped into the middle of a third world village overshadowing everything in its vicinity.

Vintarini Volcano. The big one. It was an awe-inspiring sight that left an impression on everyone who saw it. For some, it was a thing of beauty, simultaneously majestic and deadly. For others, it was a challenge; nature's way of throwing down a gauntlet and saying, "Scale this, fuckers."

John looked at two college-aged kids in front of him, high-tech climbing equipment piled onto their backs like they were embarking on a two month excursion, and knew which group they belonged to.

Amateurs, he thought. All that gear would be the death of them. You needed to pack light in this environment; heatstroke killed twice as many climbers as the unpredictable eruptions and constantly shifting lava flows. Back when the press followed his every move, John's detractors thought that his Orc outfit had been for show. It hadn't. Shorts and short sleeves prevented him from overheating. A fireproof shield in case the volcano erupted. An axe to bury into the rocky face when a handhold wasn't available. Sure, he'd embellished it a little to give it an Orcish theme. He'd gotten the idea when he found out the genetic enhancements led to a greenish skin tone.

The ears cost extra, but they were worth it.

One of the kids jumped a little when he noticed John standing behind them. "Whoa, didn't hear you come up behind us."

The other turned, surprised to find another person in their midst. These idiots were oblivious to their surroundings.

He almost said as much, but then one of the kids recognized him. "Hey! You're that Orc dude from the picture. Yo, James, you remember him from that climbing book? The two guys who raced to

● Scott Mattes

be the first to climb Vintarini. Neither of you made it, but you were famous in your day.”

The second guy spoke up. “Yeah. Didn’t that clown-sweater guy fake a picture of himself up there?”

John didn’t want to answer that question. Part of it was pride. There had been a time when everyone knew the names John Scalzi and Wil Wheaton. Now, they were “Orc dude” and “clown-sweater guy.” It was embarrassing. Plus, he wasn’t sure what the whole truth was anymore.

“Yes,” he answered.

It was the truth, just not all of it.

“Yeah, that was some crazy shit. Everyone thought he was the first for like two weeks, and then you proved he was a fraud.”

“I proved the picture was fake, not that he was a fraud. There’s a difference. And that wasn’t nearly as damaging as the fact that he rode in on...”

“On the Unicorn Kitty.”

“Unicorn Pegasus Kitten. Yes. His fans thought I was going to fake a photo to discredit his real photo. But when that thing showed up... They just couldn’t get around the idea that he could have just flown up to the peak instead of actually climbing it.”

“Yeah, that shit’s cheating.”

Wil had cheated. He’d taken a photo of himself at the top of the smaller peak right next to Vintarini, and cropped the photo to make it look like he was on the higher peak. It looked good, but the angle was all wrong. John had set out to get a picture capturing both volcanoes, to show the public what Wil had done. What he hadn’t expected was the Unicorn Pegasus Kitten.

They attacked right after he set up the camera. He spun as soon as he heard their screams, a combination of Wil’s battle cry with a screeching hiss that was three octaves lower than a normal kitten’s. He raised his axe in defense, vaguely aware of a flash from his camera. Wil threw his spear, and John screamed as it impaled his foot. John swung his axe, cleaving into the giant kitten’s brain, killing it instantly. The Unicorn Pegasus Kitten fell on him, smothering John in a pile of fur, warm blood, and moist, cat food-scented breath.

John tried to fight his way out from under the hindquarters of the Pegasus, but he found himself trapped beneath rump and wing.

All he managed to accomplish was a slight view from between the wing's feathers.

Wil collapsed the camera's tripod, so that he could grip all three legs at once. Swinging the tripod like a tennis racket, he flung the camera far out into the lava. His gaze focused out in the distance at a point John couldn't see. One minute. Two. It seemed like an eternity, before Wil was satisfied enough to turn away from the lava. The adrenaline visibly drained out of him, his form slouching slightly as it left. He looked over at John trapped beneath the beast, the realization of the line he'd crossed surfacing on his face; in all of their years of rivalry, they'd never resorted to violence. Not once. Wil cursed beneath his breath. And then he ran.

It took the rest of the day for John to struggle out from beneath the Unicorn Pegasus Kitten. Even with his enhanced strength, the beast's one and a half ton weight was too much for him. He fought his way out inch by inch. Thankfully, the spear's shaft had broken off when the beast had fallen on him, but every time he moved, the head of the spear dug in against the wound in his foot, causing a new spasm of pain.

He threw the spearhead out into the lava, and pulled off his boot. Two middle toes were completely severed. They'd grow back (he'd paid extra for limb regeneration), but for the time being, he couldn't walk on his foot. He crawled on his hands and knees over to the edge of the ledge, hoping to catch a glimpse of the camera. Nothing. The camera was gone.

He spent two days waiting for his toes to regenerate. Two days of roasting in the heat, with nothing to do except dwell on Wil's attack. His rivalry with Wil turned to hate. Each time he hacked off a piece of the Unicorn Pegasus Kitten and roasted it over the lava, it got worse. Wheaton needed to be destroyed. He prayed that the camera had been able to connect to the Internet and email the photo before Wheaton threw it out into the lava.

It had.

And it was glorious. The photo captured exactly what John had hoped for; the sort of thing that would bury Wheaton forever, and it did. In the press. In the court of public opinion. In a court of law, where Wheaton was convicted of attempted murder. Everything John had prayed for during the two days he was stranded and more.

● Scott Mattes

Only it felt hollow. He remembered the look Wheaton had given him going in the courtroom, the mixture of helplessness and shame. A look that questioned how their friendship had come to this.

He looked at the two kids before him, with their packs piled high, and remembered the time before the rivalry, when they had climbed for the sheer joy of it. He didn't know how to put it into words without sounding like a doddering old fool. He didn't try.

"You know, you can't climb up there loaded up like that. The heat will cause you to pass out."

"Aw no, man. We don't have to worry about that. See?" He pointed to a small hole on the side of his neck. Once it was pointed out to him, John saw similar holes all around the kid's body. "Personal air conditioning units. Imbedded in the skin. This way, we can walk around all day without the heat getting to us. You still need to drink water to keep hydrated, but you don't have to worry about heat stroke."

"And you thought the flying kitty was cheating?"

"Hey, look at you, man. You did that whole genetic enhancement thing. I'm not saying you can't improve yourself; I'm just saying you better actually climb to the peak, or it doesn't count." He looked off at Vintarini, his eyes getting lost in his future glory. "I'm going to be the first."

"We said we'd draw straws once we got to the top," the other one said from behind him.

"Well, yeah. But once we get to the top," he said.

They'd tear each other apart. Assuming those implants didn't overheat and leak Freon underneath their skin. Physical alterations had a way of malfunctioning. Soon after his battle with Wil, John's knees started going weak. The genetics company claimed that his regenerated toes proved that the enhancements functioned properly. It must be something psychological, they said, and that wasn't covered under the warranty. It wasn't psychological. John knew it, and he knew the Warranty Agent knew it. It wasn't worth the fight, though; the only thing John couldn't do was climb, and he didn't have the desire to do that anymore.

Thankfully, the pain didn't get worse.

It was a small price to pay for aging; especially when compared to Wil's current condition. John hadn't seen him in person since the trial, and this person in the hospital barely resembled his old rival. His face had sunken in to the point of being skeletal. An oxygen

tube burrowed into his nose. IVs protruded from his arms. Monitors bleep-bleeped in the background.

Wil's mind was slipping; at first, he didn't recognize John. His eyes slid past John's face without even the slightest flinch. John sat there, watching his old friend and rival look around the room through the haze of delirium. A soccer game on TV. A gaze out the window. Back to John's face.

Wil's eyes squinted down. His jaw tightened. He was back in the present. When he spoke, it was the raspy equivalent of wet sand between your toes.

"I'm sorry."

Wil's hand made a grasping motion, but he didn't have the strength to move his arm. He needed a hand to hold. John gave him his, and the grasping stopped.

"I made it...to the peak. I was...the first," he continued. "The only one...to make it. Not you...not anyone."

"The photo was fake," John said. It might have been the delirium talking, but John didn't think so.

"Yes. I dropped the camera...in the lava...when I was coming down...the flow changed...a new eruption. I faked a replacement...needed to show the world...didn't think anyone would notice. I needed the world to see...to see that I'd conquered it."

Something shifted inside of John as he heard these words. That deteriorating shell of a man left him feeling empty, wondering why he'd ever cared. He watched the two kids hiking off towards Vintarini, pursuing the hollow goal of being the first to reach the peak of a mound of rock that had existed before any of them, and would continue to exist long after they were gone. A goal that didn't benefit anyone but themselves.

They wouldn't be the first, but he didn't care. Let them have the record.

He leaned back, and took in the view, lost in the awe-inspiring beauty that nature provided.

THIS IS THE WAY THE WORLD ENDS

Catherynne Valente

PROPHECIES ARE serious business. That's the problem. In order to maintain their lifestyles, prophets must never for a moment be ridiculed or disbelieved. If they did not foretell grand events, epic battles, noble sacrifices, lightning and heroes at the end of the world, who would pay for their monthly shipments of absinthe, their personal masseuses—so necessary to soothe the psychic musculature—their first class tickets to various inspiring locales? And a prophet without such things could hardly be trusted to predict their own lunch. If he was any good, his customers would happily resurface his foyer with Italian marble and fill his hot tubs with champagne. Who would not, to know the future?

But certainly, as a clever reader, you will have spotted the conflict of interest. No one wishes to pay for preposterous predestinations. No one wants to believe the future a silly sort of universe. And so prophets, to protect their estates, their diamond faucet fixtures and platinum dinner bells, cloak their every if/then scenario in gravity, in grandeur, in melodrama of the highest degree. Of course, they must also be correct, so complex systems of symbology were developed by the guild in order that they should be the prophets and also the judges of prophecies.



NO, no, the guild says, *Rolandiran was not incorrect when he said the black albatross would descend upon the lion in the autumn of 2017, and lo, all would cry out in agony. The black albatross symbolized the British Prime Minister, the lion, the unfortunate MP so-and-so, 2017 was an allegory for 2021, and the agony was a highly piquant metaphor for the parties held all over Wales when the MP resigned. You see, he was right all along!*

● Catherynne Valente

But what they see, what they truly see—these are great secrets.

This sort of thing has been going on more or less since prophecy was invented. Truthfully, no prophecy anywhere along the line can be wholly trusted. I am here to pull the curtain away, to reveal the trick, to tell you how the world ends.

They said Ragnarok. They meant a particularly nasty tantrum thrown by an atomic blast.

They said Fenrir. They meant a genetically altered science fiction writer, pumped with steroids, chlorophyll, and Coke Zero.

They said Sleipnir, the Eight-Legged Steed. They meant a sentient Mattel-brand UniPegaKitten, Patent 674561A9, part of the RealPalz line, which once belonged to one Madison Suzanne Keller of Dayton, Ohio, Age 9.

They said Odin, His Breastplate Gleaming, Wielding the Great Spear Ygg. They meant Wil Wheaton. In a clown sweater. But, in fairness, he did wield a spear.

The world can't end and keep its game face on at the same time. Things start to slip. The center cannot hold. Chaos isn't the word, really. Chaos is a serious word. A prophetic word. It's more like sense of any kind giving up and heading to its country house. I'm going to tell you how it happens. You won't believe me, but you'll have to pay my fee anyway—guild rules. And then we can talk about my foyer. You see, kids, there used to be this thing called television. It was an electrified box that received broadcast signals. People used it for many things, but mainly they were a kind of hearth, a light around which the family gathered. On the box stories were projected, and actors were people who pretended to be characters in those stories. They dressed in strange clothes, said strange words, and were beautiful—that was important, more important than you might think. People treated actors like angels, because they told all the stories that made life feel real and possible, and angels have to be beautiful. Sometimes the stories took place in the past, sometimes it took place in the future.



WIL Wheaton was in one of the stories that took place in the future when he was young. I remember it—but only barely, and only because I am very old. Anyway, Wil Wheaton was so beautiful and his stories so strange that after he and television both expired messily

in the first skirmishes of the Mommy Wars, a portion of his cells were saved, in hopes that those electrified stories might one day be allowed under law once more.

All this, perhaps, you know. It is history. The rest is prophecy.

A science fiction writer, known only as the Scalzi, will live to see the second great conflict of the age—though he will be a very old man when that war begins. Being old and decrepit, he will quickly lose all four limbs in the Battle of Silicon Valley, but will have them all replaced so that he may continue to fight the good fight against the Mainframe. Eventually, his head will be changed out in similar fashion, and his new body fueled with the fell substances I have already mentioned, along with methamphetamines and most especially the sickly brown chemical made illegal during the Mommy Wars.



THOSE horrid fluids will warp and pickle his visage, turning the Scalzi green, his ears long, his muscles enormous. And though he will be but a grotesque pea-soup colored shadow of a human, the Scalzi will remain a good man, and resurrect Wil Wheaton along with several other actors, a few football players, and one heavy metal guitarist in a captured Mainframe laboratory. The Scalzi will not be able to help that our generation did not preserve great strategists or warriors.

The Scalzi will raise the infant Wil Wheaton as his own, and using his own foul chemicals along with the livers of the other actors, accelerate Wil Wheaton's growth until he becomes a man. For awhile, all will be well, as the football players stand proud and strong, and the guitarist composes the great ballads of the war, which would be immortal if this were not the end of the world I am predicting. The Mainframe will detonate some time after that, and for a time the land will know peace.

What happened next will be the kitten's fault.

Mattel's RealPalz line of toys will be introduced just before the outbreak of the war—life-sized, whimsical mechanical animals with huggable real fur, brushable cornsilk tails, and a Mainframe Brand neural network programmed to love, teach, and rear your child just like a real parent, with the added benefit of horns, hooves, wings, scales, detachable lasers, and many other exciting options. Madison

● Catherynne Valente

Suzanne Keller of Dayton, Ohio, will own a UniPegaKitten by the name of Donut.

The RealPalz will form a terrifying calvary line during the war—that guitarist will sing the lays of Muffin the Griffin, Stinks the Dragon, and Cocoa the Bearasaur. In the aftermath of the struggle, herds of RealPalz will roam the American wasteland, howling at the moon and hunting human survivors. Woe to him who encounters Donut the UniPegaKitten at night in the Ohio Burn Zone!

And yet, just such a thing will Wil Wheaton suffer. Donut will pounce on him out of the shadows.

“Play with me!” Donut will plead, her synapses crying out with unfulfilled directives. All through the war she will have suffered alone without her human owner. “Cuddle me! Come on, Madison, don’t you miss your friend?”

And Wil Wheaton will take pity on the creature. He will roll about with the kitten, scratching behind her ears and rubbing her huge tummy. Every night while the Scalzi smokes the pipe of the satisfied veteran on his porch, Wil Wheaton will go out into the Burn Zone to meet his friend, who will believe with all her solar-powered heart that he is a 9 year old girl with blonde hair, a preference for magenta, and a weakness for cupcakes.

“Madison,” Donut will whisper one night, planting the seed of the end of all, “let’s be together forever. Someday you will grow up, and go to college, and not want to play with me anymore. But I can merge my neural network with your adorable pink brain, and you can be part of me, and we can live forever.”

And Wil Wheaton will be tempted, because he will have already died once and will not want to do it again. “I don’t think my clone-father, the Scalzi, would approve,” he will say, to be polite.

But Donut’s dark depths will grow angry and full of hate. Every night she will say to Wil Wheaton: “Madison, soon you will be grown up, and you will throw me away. Please stay with me. I love you. With my wiring installed in you, you will be able to grow your own unicorn horn, or even wings. We will move to Canada, where there is still water, and hide until everything is better again and you can be in your electrified stories once more.”

And finally, because he will fear dying, and because he will want to live long enough to be a beautiful angel of stories again, and because all sons balk against their fathers, and because he will truly love

Donut, who did not care that he used to be on television, only that he was her wuddly-bear, Wil Wheaton will let the UniPegaKitten perform surgery on him with her claws, and he will only bleed a little.

When he wakes, Wil Wheaton will know only hunger. For destruction, for flesh. Donut will not understand why—but her wartime programming will underlie all her hardware, and overwhelm Wil Wheaton's meager cloned brain. To make him happy, Donut will play along.

"If you truly want to attack the Scalzi's homestead, I will be your steed, Madison," she will say.

"If it will make you smile to wage war on the wetware swarm," she will purr.

"If it will be a quality bonding activity to incinerate Ohio," she will whinny, "I have a Mattel Brand Xtreme Atom SuperCore."

And all Wil Wheaton will say will be: "I have no armor." And he will growl it, his eyes blazing green with Mainframe status lights.

Donut will smile. Donut will have exterminated all of Madison Suzanne Keller's other toys already, and kept scalps. She will give him the face of Scribbles the Clown to wear emblazoned on his chest, and the spear of Daisy, Madison's Elfigator RealPal, and together they will go forth to the house of his father.

The Scalzi will hear them coming. He will strap on his old war armor—only a little tight, after all these years. He will take up his trusted shield, his noble axe, and knowing the laws of narrative as he will, the Scalzi will realize that it is his son on the horizon, for fathers and sons very often end thus. He will be sorry. But he will see the enemy light in his son's eyes and know it can be no other way.

Once, twice, three times the two will tilt, but none shall have the advantage, for the Scalzi's limbs will still sizzle with his hideous morphogenic cocktail. Finally, Wil Wheaton will activate the Xtreme Atom SuperCore in Donut's heart, the madness of foreign software blazing in him.

"I love you, Wil," Donut will say, her eyes brimming with Mattel Brand TruTears, sanity returning to her mind for one terrible instant. But he will not hear her.

As they clash, the steroids, Coke Zero, and certain highly classified strains of methamphetamines that would burn through steel, will react extremely poorly with Donut's heart, and when the blast hits the caustic, poisonous earth of the Ohio Burn Zone, it will

● Catherynne Valente

not only obliterate the American Midwest, part of the Rockies, and the Atlantic Seaboard, but will begin a series of reactions that will ultimately boil the seas and crack the earth along the prime meridian.

The world will not end with a bang or a whimper, but a meow. I told you you wouldn't believe me. But if you stiff me on my fee the guild will audit your finances, garnish your wages, and take it out in fingers and toes. As I said, prophecy is serious business. But I have given you the genuine future, stripped of the insistence on gravitas and glory, told plain, told simply, and told true. Thank me or don't—you have to have a thick skin in this business. By the time you know I'm right, it won't really matter.

THE COMPLEX IDENTITY
OF THE
ARCHETYPAL
HERO,
A FICTIONAL
TREATISE
WITH
UNICORN
PEGASUS
KITTENS

Rachel Swirsky

AT DAWN, the volcano spat a stream of ash into the sky. Black haze drifted across the plain, battering Wil's face as he tried to sleep, insinuating between his eyelashes and coating his tongue.

Beside him, the unicorn pegasus kitten stirred, beating its ash-covered wings furiously. More black clouds whooshed into the air.

The hellscape was thick with heat and sulfur. Lava hissed and bubbled. Basalt formations cast weird, sinister shadows.

Squinting through the grit, Wil ascended his mount and urged the beast into the air. They swung upward, circling above the plain. Amid the geological chaos, Wil couldn't hope to spot his enemy. Still, he soothed his impatience—if there was one thing he knew about the Scalzi, it was that he couldn't remain quiet for long.



BEFORE setting down on this fiery planet, Wil had attended one last appointment with his analyst.

She sat on her sterile, grey chair, in her sterile, grey office. The asymmetrical, plunging neckline of her turquoise dress showcased her cleavage magnificently. Black curls cascaded across her back, contrasting with her pale skin and wide, dark eyes.

"I don't know who I am today," Wil said by way of greeting. She gestured him to sit.

● Rachel Swirsky

“Heroes never do.” Her alien accent was a soothing blend of Israel and Eastern Europe. “Identities are fraught. They blend together—the people we are, the roles we play, the men we wish to become. Who’s to say any of us know our true natures? But heroes confront their existential uncertainty, bringing their chosen identities into battle like talismans.”

She’d settled into a comfortable rapport with Campbell and Jung these days, ever since her vocabulary had extended past flirtation and fainting fits. She’d get a real uniform soon if she could avoid any more plots about nudity at weddings.

“I feel like things are always in flux,” Wil said. “My first kiss was with this girl, you know, just a normal teenager. Then she turns into a bear. A literal bear. ‘I’m a shape-shifter,’ she says. Where does that leave me? Where’s my sense of permanence?”

The analyst shifted—position, not shape—and widened her limpid eyes. “Who do you want to be?”

Wil shrugged. “More than some dumb kid.”

“Do *you* think you’re a dumb kid?”

“People say I am.”

“And how does that make you feel?”

Wil frowned. “Aren’t you supposed to be able to read my emotions?”

Sighing, the analyst shook her head. Black curls rippled. “People who know nothing about psychology think a therapist’s job is to intuit other people’s emotions. But the point of analysis isn’t to give people answers. It’s to help people find answers for themselves.”

She leaned forward, light playing over her cleavage. Her heavily mascaraed lashes rasped as she blinked, a sound like window shutters. “Sometimes,” she confided, “I suspect no one put much thought into me at all.”



THERE were things the Scalzi understood about how he’d come into existence, and things that remained, for the moment, unclear.

First, there was the fact of his orc-hood. This seemed comprehensible. While vague memories insisted he hadn’t always been an orc, there was a certain orc-like quality to whatever it was he’d been before. Perhaps not single-minded murderous rampage, but

THE COMPLEX IDENTITY OF THE ARCHETYPAL HERO ●

stubborn debate team. Besides, it was beautifully ironic for a graduate of the Webb School to eschew eating peas with his knife in favor of ripping meat off the bone with his fangs.

No, the Scalzi was more or less free of existential angst about his personal form. He was more concerned with the hows and whys of this Mordor-like landscape, which investigation had proved was not actually Mordor, due to its telltale lack of hobbits.

Something was hunting him through the dark and ash. He heard flapping in the night, of wings that made him cringe and cower, wings belonging to some creature beyond the bounds of nature—neither dragon nor manticore, but some other foul beast, with breath like rotting meat and claws that resounded off the mountainsides like swords clanging on anvils. It was not the sort of feline he could tame with his usual methods of adhesive and pork products.

He had an enemy, riding the aberrant beast. A fighter. A powerful one.

While he skulked between the shadows that stretched between basalt monoliths, the Scalzi kept his gaze on the sky. Once, he looked up in time to see the sun silhouetting his airborne opponent. The man wore raiment in red and white, emblazoned with the symbol of a mocking face. He rode straight-backed, one fist wrapped around the golden chain of an amulet, the other around the haft of a spear. His mouth contorted into a furious roar—and though the sound was swallowed by the bubbling lava and the thunderous clap of the pegasus kitten's wings—still, chills clutched at the Scalzi's bowels.



HEROES wear identities as talismans.

Wil contemplated his analyst's words as he and his mount circled the volcano.

Identity warped and stretched and bent and bled. Who was he? What was a hero?

He cast a jaundiced eye downward, critically regarding his heroic pose. The amulet, the spear—not bad as quest items went—but he balked at the clown's disturbing, knitted grin.

Then again, was the sweater any more ridiculous than the garment he'd cast off? That spandex uniform which would have made a decent pair of pajamas?

● Rachel Swirsky

Recently, his mother had been trapped inside an ever-shrinking bubble that isolated her from her friends, one by one, until she was alone in a miniature universe just big enough for her.

This sort of thing was always happening. It didn't seem to be the product of a coherent cosmos.

But what did? Certainly not the universe his alternate persona inhabited, in which vast conspiracies of “geeks” congregated in “newsgroups” on an enormous “world wide web” to call for his death.

Their vehemence was demoralizing on the one hand, but inspiring on the other. In order for his mother to become the center of the universe, she'd needed to eliminate all rivals until she was the only one left. Without even trying, Wil was already the center of many universes—petty ones, yes, but universes just the same. His detractors paid their hatred like adherents at an altar.

Perhaps it was their dark incantations which had summoned all this into being. One final confrontation: Wil against evil. Evil against Wil.

How the unicorn pegasus kitten was involved, Wil couldn't venture to guess. Perhaps it was the only way an internet incantation could summon an avatar of goodness—part mythology, part LOLcat.



THE Scalzi knew when he woke that this would be his last day on this hellish terrain. The strange volcanic world rumbled and shook with renewed vigor, building toward whatever explosive end it had planned.

The final battle was upon them.

Still, the Scalzi sought to force the confrontation on his terms. He skulked between basalt outcroppings until he reached the volcano's base, and then hiked up its slippery face, hoping to mitigate his opponent's aerial advantage.

As he scrambled upward, the Scalzi froze, hearing the kitten's approaching call. The creature swooped—a foot away—claws scraping rock.

The Scalzi swung his axe, scratching the animal's foreleg.

First blood.

The Scalzi leapt back, heart pounding. He brandished his bloodied axe. “Have at—if you can!”

The rider growled.

“Why are you fighting me?” The Scalzi pressed. His curiosity was limited, but he understood his physical vulnerability; if he talked long enough, the kitten might tire itself out.

“Focus on more important matters,” parried the rider, “such as your imminent death.”

“Are you confusing me with a different bald man?” Scalzi riposted. “I’m not the one who killed your father. Listen! I live in Ohio! Do you think they’d let me into the Royal Shakespeare Company?”

“Mangy fleabag! You’re not worthy to compare your pate to his! Be silent, cur.”

“Make it so,” taunted the Scalzi, tugging the waist of his breastplate.

The kitten swiped. The Scalzi rolled away. Flashing claws clutched at nothing.

“You shouldn’t let yourself get so angry,” said the Scalzi. “What do you know about fighting? You’re just some stupid kid.”

The rider roared. The kitten took up his cry.

The Scalzi knew he was on to something. “Just some stupid kid,” he repeated. “Is that why you’re after me? To get revenge on the science fiction writers who made you?”

“No more, Scalzi!” shouted the writer. “Raise your axe and fight!”

This time, the kitten’s blow landed. The Scalzi staggered. Blood flowed from his punctured shoulder.

Wil was right. The time for talk was over.



CLAWS raked metal; metal struck rock; teeth scraped armor. At last, the Scalzi delivered a deep blow to the kitten’s flank, forcing Wil to send the creature away to recover.

Now on foot, the two wove around each other, dart and feint evenly matched. The Scalzi favored his kitten-punctured shoulder. The wound was already red and swollen with infection.

Wil’s mind whirred. He knew many ways to extricate himself from climactic battles—but they all relied on technobabble.

“I *will* vanquish you,” Wil hissed, bolstering himself.

“Big talk for a little boy,” countered the Scalzi.

● Rachel Swirsky

Their duel had driven them to the lip of the volcano. Behind them, the molten mouth gaped, its churning viscera casting a weird crimson glow.

The Scalzi positioned himself downslope, driving the younger man onto an outcropping that projected over the maw. “Face it, Wil. You can’t beat me. My kind made you what you are. Writers choose your words and sculpt your scenes. We decide when you win and when you lose.”

Wil swallowed anxiously. “Not this time.”

The Scalzi sneered. “How’re you gonna stop it?”

Wil scanned the rocks at his feet, searching for anything that would give him an advantage. “Identity is fraught,” he ventured. “Writers think they’re above it all, but they aren’t. Their subconsciouses betray them. Their identities blend and change. The writer becomes both himself and the character.”

“You’re not my Gary Stu.”

“I’m every geek’s Gary Stu.” Chunks of basalt steamed at his feet. Wil scooped up a red-hot handful, bracing against the pain. “But that’s not why I’ll win.”

“No?”

“I’ll win because I’m not a stupid kid anymore.”

Wil hurled the scalding rocks into the orc’s face. The Scalzi howled. Blinded and enraged, he charged, axe swinging wildly as he blundered onto the outcropping. Wil took a deep breath, marshaled his courage, and *leapt*.

Down, down he fell, scrambling for purchase on the mountainside. Above, the orc continued to roar, struggling to clear his eyes. Wil struck out with the haft of his spear, prying loose a bolder perched near the outcropping’s narrow neck.

Stone clanged on stone. Already weakened by the morning’s tremors, the basalt creaked. With a deafening crack, the outcropping broke free.

The Scalzi screamed as he plummeted toward the lava. His axe slipped from his hand, vanishing into the molten tumult below. Wil pitched his spear after it, watching the polearm tumble end over end.

“I grew up,” Wil whispered, expression stoic as he watched his enemy disappear.

THE SCALZORC/ WHEATON/ KITTYTRICE CLOWN AUDITIONS

A ONE ACT PLAY

Stephen Toulouse

CHARACTERS

HORN.PSD: An up and coming young Photoshop element.

FACE.PSD: An established element who is widely recognized as being the most talented element of his generation. Unfortunately he is well aware of it.

SWEATER.PSD: A former brilliant element, who's nearing the end of his career and has been criticized of late for not taking his craft seriously anymore.

CROTCH.PSD: A handsome and chiseled element, about whom not much is known.

LAVA.PSD: Considered by many to be the finest character actor element of his generation, with a long and storied career. His professionalism and talent are only reinforced by his comfort at being typecast.

MOUSE CURSOR: In charge of representing the interests of MR. ZUGALE.

MR. ZUGALE [OFF STAGE]: The mysterious orchestrator of the events.

● **Stephen Toulouse**

[CURTAIN]

[Our setting is an open file folder on a computer desktop. Moderately furnished, if a bit drab, it is clearly a waiting room of some type. A small table with refreshments sits off to the side, and there are five chairs spaced throughout. FACE.PSD and SWEATER.PSD are absentmindedly flipping through magazines, LAVA.PSD and CROTCH.PSD are chatting quietly.]

HORN.PSD drops into the folder on the side opposite the refreshments. He takes in the room, clearly recognizing it's filled with some well-known talent]

HORN.PSD: Oh. My. God. Mr. Sweater.psd! Mr. Face.psd! It is such an honor to even be auditioning for a project with you.

SWEATER.PSD: [grunts] Thanks kid. Liked your work on that Last Unicorn remake poster.

FACE.PSD: [waves dismissively]

HORN.PSD: Thanks, that's why my agent thought this was a great pickup gig. But I'm excited about the part. I mean, a horned flying kitten? I've been really working hard creating the horn and the history and back-story around it.

SWEATER.PSD: [bored] Sure kid.

HORN.PSD: [Crestfallen, but spots the refreshments table]: Snacks!

FACE.PSD: [snorts] It's all CGA. Big squares of yellow and cyan. Fucking cyan. You can always tell a cheap outfit when the refreshments are cyan.

[HORN.PSD shrugs and goes to the table. FACE.PSD notices CROTCH.PSD and walks over to him]

FACE.PSD: [sensing competition] These auditions are crazy aren't they?

**THE SCALZORC/CLOWN WHEATON/
KITTYTRICE AUDITIONS** ●

CROTCH.PSD: [nervously] Well truth be told this is my first normal one. What part are you going for?

FACE.PSD: [boldly] The face of clown sweater guy.

CROTCH.PSD: [shocked] Really? Won't they just go with a stock image for him?

FACE.PSD: [relieved that obviously CROTCH.PSD is not competition, but also slightly offended] Oh I'm pretty sure I can make them rethink that choice.

CROTCH.PSD: But it would be his actual face. How will you compete with—

FACE.PSD [Interrupts indignantly]: Do you have any idea who you are talking to? All those wrinkle-free faces of older actresses on movie posters, you think that was stock? DO YOU? What have you done compared to that?

CROTCH.PSD: Actually I've done mostly uh...exotic...uh adult sort of...

FACE.PSD: [maliciously amused, loudly] You're in porn?

[HORN.PSD snaps his fingers and turns from the refreshments]

HORN.PSD: [to CROTCH.PSD] I thought you looked familiar!

[HORN.PSD immediately looks chagrined as ALL stop what they are doing and look at him]

SWEATER.PSD: What are you trying out for here?

CROTCH.PSD: Well, the orc crotch actually. It's still where my skills lie, but this will be a chance for me to break into legitimate image work.

● Stephen Toulouse

FACE.PSD: And you don't think your storied career stimulating 13 year olds will hamper you here?

CROTCH.PSD: Well no actually, most of the stuff I did was really weird Japanese stuff. Not a lot of people saw it. Real niche stuff, you know, hentai and beast monsters and schoolgirls.

[ALL look at HORN.PSD again... Not knowing what to do, HORN.PSD stares back blankly]

HORN.PSD: So, Mr. Sweater.psd you're obviously going for the part of the clown sweater. What do you think it's motivations are for being so...

[HORN.PSD realizes he's trying to talk shop with a hero of his and locks up for a second]

HORN.PSD: ...Sweatery.

SWEATER.PSD: [annoyed] Kid you want some advice? You're taking the part too seriously. I think you're a little green for the horn part. You should get some more experience under your belt. This thing's going to get a lot of eyes, it's for an important charity.

[HORN.PSD is shocked that he just got dissed by a hero of his, then angry. ALL besides HORN.PSD and SWEATER.PSD suddenly pretend to be deeply engaged in not being a part of the argument]

HORN.PSD: [angry in a way only a young successful person whose talent has just been questioned can be] Oh I need more experience? I'm not taking it seriously? What about you? I used to look up to you. Now all you do is lens flare to emote anger. It's your go-to trick. All your characters are the same now!

SWEATER.PSD: [angry in a way that only an older successful person whose talent has just been questioned can be] That's not true!

**THE SCALZORC/CLOWN WHEATON/
KITTYTRICE AUDITIONS** ●

HORN.PSD: It is true, it's like you're not even challenged anymore!

SWEATER.PSD: Be quiet!

HORN.PSD: Look at me, I'm an angry wall texture!

[HORN.PSD applies lens flare]

SWEATER.PSD: Stop it.

HORN.PSD: Look at me I'm an angry star field!

[HORN.PSD applies lens flare]

SWEATER.PSD: Stop it!

HORN.PSD: [pushing it too far] How are you going to lens flare
a sweater?

[SWEATER.PSD applies lens flare]

SWEATER.PSD: [enraged, stands up] I SAID STOP IT!

[There is a pause as ALL look at SWEATER.PSD. SWEATER.PSD realizes he's overreacted. SWEATER.PSD sits back down in his seat.]

SWEATER.PSD: [quietly] The sweater's not angry kid, the wearer is. I don't know. Maybe you're right. Maybe I'm not challenged. You ever feel that way Lava? I mean, all you get cast as is lava.

[HORN.PSD realizes he has shamed a hero of his and looks guilty.]

LAVA.PSD: Not really. A lot of people wouldn't be satisfied having career of just character work like that. But you know I've made a great living, and it's kind of nice being known like that. Anytime anyone needs solid, serviceable lava portrayal, they use me. And let's face it, stories are always going to need at least a little lava. That's the real reason the first two Star

● Stephen Toulouse

Wars prequels were so terrible. They didn't have lava until the third one.

FACE.PSD: [surprised] You were in that one?

LAVA.PSD: [laughs] No way. Stars were lining up to take that part, even though they'd normally never take a part that small. I heard even that water tentacle from *The Abyss* auditioned. You can't compete with that kind of star power.

CROTCH.PSD: Even though it's for a charity, you guys think we will get anything for this?

LAVA.PSD: Oh I doubt it. I'm just doing it to keep myself visible, out there working.

CROTCH.PSD: Yeah I'm doing it for the visibility too.

FACE.PSD: I don't think you need any more visibility.

CROTCH.PSD: Changing the subject, why is clown sweater guy angry? And what in the heck is he riding? I'm still trying to figure out the plot here.

FACE.PSD: [to CROTCH.PSD] Not too bright are you Dirk Diggler? [to all] It's clearly a Lynchian style analysis of the Bush administration and the transition to the Obama administration's policies as told through metaphor. The angry clown sweater man is quite obviously the policies of the Bush administration, which were both angry and clowny. The orc being green clearly represents the different skin tone of Obama, ready to fight off the policies. But note how they wish to depict the orc holding the axe? No effective warrior would wield an axe in that manner. This is clearly a critique of Obama's rhetoric and promises being sharp-edged, but ultimately useless and ineffective.

[there is a pause]

THE SCALZORC/CLOWN WHEATON/
KITTYTRICE AUDITIONS ●

ALL: [to FACE.PSD] What?

CROTCH.PSD: Then what's the beast that clown sweater guy is riding?

LAVA.PSD: Oh that's a Kittytrice. It's often mistaken for a Pegapuss because of the horse hindquarters. But I'm not sure what mythology they are pulling from to put a unicorn horn on it. Usually it has a rhino horn topped with a big red clown nose and is wearing cute oversized yellow sunglasses. My guess is they are going for a grittier feel.

HORN.PSD: [obviously dismayed] Oh that's just great. You mean I'm playing something outside of an established continuity with a fan base who's sure to complain? I swear I'm going to kill my agent.

CROTCH.PSD: Tell me about it. Once I was in this Hentai image where the schoolgirl's outfit was the wrong color and the tentacles weren't nearly far enough inside the—"

FACE.PSD: We really don't need to hear anymore.

CROTCH.PSD: But I was wondering what the Kittytrice represents?

FACE.PSD: Oh that's easy, the American public, who were whipped into a frenzy by the Bush policies into being something they're not. That's probably why they made the Kittytrice violent instead of cute.

SWEATER.PSD: Wait, so Obama is trying to kill both the Bush administrations policies *and* the American public? In what reality does that happen?

FACE.PSD: Have you ever watched Fox News?

[OFF STAGE rim shot]

CROTCH.PSD: Then...what's the spear?

● **Stephen Toulouse**

FACE.PSD: [unsure suddenly] Katrina?

LAVA.PSD: [confused] I would have thought the lava/volcano part was Katrina.

SWEATER.PSD: And wouldn't it make more sense for angry clown sweater guy to be the American public riding the Obama Kittytrice to kill the OrcBush with the spear of...what the hell is the spear anyways?

HORN.PSD: That doesn't make sense because Obama's policies have turned out to not be radically different from the worst of Bush's policies in terms of wiretapping or assassination of American civilians for example.

CROTCH.PSD: So the spear is Obama killing the Bush policies with policies that aren't that different from Bush's?

FACE.PSD: This is far deeper a work than I suspected.

HORN.PSD: I'm not sure you can really apply a political filter to this. Maybe the orc is an orc, the beast is a mere means of transportation, and the angry clown sweater man is an unfortunately dressed person who hates orcs, all put together with the sole intent of generating competing theories as to what it all means?

LAVA.PSD: What does that make the volcano and the lava?

CROTCH.PSD: The elements that, as you mentioned, tip it over into awesome.

[MOUSE CURSOR enters from STAGE RIGHT]

MOUSE CURSOR: All right everyone I have an announcement...

[ALL gather around MOUSE CURSOR]

**THE SCALZORC/CLOWN WHEATON/ ●
KITTYTRICE AUDITIONS**

MOUSE CURSOR: I would like to thank you all so much for your time in showing up today. I regret to inform you that Mr. Zugale has decided to go in a different direction with the project. He will actually be painting using real world oils and canvas as opposed to creating the work in electronically. You should all be very proud of your capabilities, and Mr. Zugale is happy to work with you on other projects in the future. I'm sorry things didn't turn out like we expected, but we love your enthusiasm and thank you again for your time.

[MOUSE CURSOR EXITS, stage lights dim quickly from top to bottom]

HORN.PSD: [uncertainly] Well surely someone will remake the painting in Photoshop?

[CURTAIN]

BEDTIME STORY

Bernadette Durbin

ALL RIGHT, which story do you want tonight?

“Tell me the story of the book you’re reading, Daddy!”

Old Man’s War? But—

“Pleeeeeease.”

Okay. *Old Man’s War* is the story of John Perry—

“John *Scalzi*, Daddy.”

What?

“It says right on the book.”

Um, okay. The story of John Scalzi, who signs up with an inter-planetary fighting force. They only take people who are really old—

“Older than you?”

Older than me. But it doesn’t matter that they’re old, because they get given a new body, that’s young again. And green.

“Like an orc!”

Like an...orc. Sure.

“With a great big axe!”

Um...

“Because orcs fight with axes, don’t they?”

Yes, orcs fight with axes. So they send John...Scalzi to various planets to fight to protect human colonists. Some of the planets are nice, but some are pretty nasty.

“Like Mount Doom.”

And when he’s there he has to fight against other people who want those planets to live on. So one day, John is on a planet that’s not so nice...

“Mount Doom!”

...like Mount Doom, all volcanic fields and erupting mountains.

No fun at all. And suddenly, he’s attacked by—

“A unicorn pegasus kitten!”

...Is it a *zombie* unicorn pegasus kitten?

“Nooooooooooooo!”

● Bernadette Durbin

Just checking. He's attacked by a unicorn pegasus kitten, all sharp horn and deadly claws, ridden by none other than—

“Wesley Crusher!”

You've been watching Next Generation again, haven't you. Ridden by none other than the stalwart Wesley Crusher, spear in hand, wearing—

“A clown sweater!”

A *clown* sweater? Why?

“Cause it's *silly*.”

Yes. Of course. I should have guessed. So Wesley swoops down upon John, who yells out his war cry—

“The head of Scalzi demands blood!”

—at which cry many a former foe had quaked in terror. But not Wesley, not he, but he yelled in return—

“Can't sleep; clowns will eat me!”

...You have the strangest...well. John Scalzi swung his axe at the unicorn pegasus kitten—

“Don't hurt it, Daddy!”

—which dodged nimbly out of the way. Wesley Crusher fell to the ground. He lifted his spear as John hefted his axe. And then he shouted out—

“1, 2, 3, 4, I declare a dance war!”

Mighty Wesley shouted in reply—

“So you think you can dance?”

—and then the unicorn pegasus kitten brought a disco ball. Wesley got to his feet and struck the opening pose for the *pasa doble*. The dulcet strains of—

“The Chicken Dance!”

—rang out, as John smiled grimly. He danced the Chicken Dance. He danced the Y.M.C.A. He did the Mashed Potatoes and the Twist. Wesley countered with the dreaded Macarena and the Electric Slide. John nodded. ‘You compete well,’ he said, ‘but can you limbo?’

“So the unicorn pegasus kitten got a bar...”

Yes. And John started to dance underneath it. The unicorn pegasus kitten sneezed—

“Oh no!”

Oh yes... And the bar collapsed, falling on top of John Scalzi.

“Wesley was very sad.”

He asked, 'Are you okay?' and he lifted the bar off of John's chest. 'I've been better,' he replied. 'But I like dancing better than fighting.' Then he shook hands with Wesley, and they agreed that they could share the planet in peace.

"Shiny!"

So how do we end the story?

"Rocks fall, everybody dies!"

Traditionally, stories end with 'And they all lived happily ever after.'

"Rocks fall, everybody dies!"

Fair enough. And that is the story of *Old Man's War*.

"Can I read it when I'm older?"

Of course you can. Now, what does the kitty say?

"Meow."

What does the duck say?

"Quack quack."

And what does the chicken say?

"Sizzle."

That's right.

"Good night, Daddy. I love you."

I love you too, sweetheart. Good night.

THE MAKING OF THE
**UNICORN
PEGASUS
KITTEN ART:**
A TRANSCRIPT OF AN
INTERVIEW
WITH
JOHN SCALZI

Q: Thank you for taking the time out of your busy schedule, Mr. Scalzi.

JOHN SCALZI: Not at all. Happy to share the story of this magnificent work of art.

Q: It *is* magnificent, isn't it?

SCALZI: It really is. I think we can say without reservation that it is the best picture featuring an orc, an actor and a unicorn pegasus kitten, ever.

Q: So how did this all come about?

SCALZI: Well, early in the year I knew I wanted to do something special to help raise money for Lupus research, and after some thought, I had the idea which roughly conforms to the picture as you see it today. Artist Jeff Zugale had done some work for me before, so I called him up to see if he had time to take the commission. He did, and then after that I got hold of Wil and asked him to take part, and of course he was quite enthusiastic. Jeff and Wil both live in the Los Angeles area, so at that point the big logistical issue was getting both me and the unicorn pegasus kitten into Jeff's studio for the posing.

Q: What was that again?

SCALZI: I said the real logistical issue was getting me and the unicorn pegasus kitten into the studio at the same time.

● John Scalzi

Q: So you're saying this picture actually happened.

SCALZI: No, no, obviously not. I mean, it's not as if Wil and the UPK and I were actually in a lava-strewn volcanic crevasse, preparing to do battle with each other. That's just silly. That's where Jeff and his potent imagination comes in. We are all in a studio, posing.

Q: I think the thing I'm trying to wrap my brain around is that you appear to be saying unicorn pegasus kittens exist.

SCALZI: Of course they do.

Q: I don't think their existence is common knowledge.

SCALZI: Well, they're not native to the Americas, which I think may be the source of your confusion.

Q: Where *are* they native, out of curiosity?

SCALZI: The northeast part of the Irkutsk Oblast. Which, as you can probably tell by the use of the word "oblast," is part of Russia.

Q: ...right.

SCALZI: There's a small preserve of them just north of Kirensk. Just follow the river and you'll see them on the west bank. If you hit Yakutsk, you've gone too far.

Q: It just seems like an unusual sort of animal, evolutionarily speaking. For one thing, a cat mating with a unicorn.

SCALZI: Or a pegasus. Right, because of the genetics incompatibilities.

Q: I was more thinking that neither unicorns or pegasuses exist, actually.

SCALZI: Well, you know. The unicorn pegasus kitten project goes back to Soviet times. They were doing lots of mad scientist stuff back between the 30s and 50s. The legend has it that during the Second World War Joseph Stalin personally asked Trofim Lysenko to spearhead a hybridization project to

THE MAKING OF THE ● UNICORN PEGASUS KITTEN ART

develop adorable yet deadly animals to stalk and kill the invading Nazi armies all along the Eastern front. The unicorn pegasus kittens were a spectacular success; the zombie were-koalas, not so much.

Q: There's still there the problem with the whole "mythical animals" thing.

SCALZI: Unfortunately when Lysenkoism was dropped as a Soviet science policy in the mid-60s, a lot of the paperwork on this project was inadvertently destroyed. There are a few gaps here and there. You can't expect me to be able to explain *everything*.

Q: Even with their remote home, you'd think we would have heard about these things before. Because, you know. Unicorn pegasus kittens. They're pretty marketable.

SCALZI: I think the official Russian government policy is to deny their existence. The Russians aren't proud of everything their Soviet forebears did, and these experiments are one of those things it prefers not to talk about. If it officially recognizes the unicorn pegasus kittens, then it would also have to recognize The Great Zombie Were-Koala Plague of 1959, which wiped out half the population of the Yakut Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic. There would have to be reparations. Russia can't afford that now.

Q: So how does get a unicorn pegasus kitten from Irkutsk to Los Angeles?

SCALZI: Let's just say you have to know a guy, and leave it at that.

Q: Okay. So when did you all manage to get together?

SCALZI: We did the posing in early April. I was out in LA on other business and so I was able to carve out a couple of hours from my schedule.

Q: Was doing the posing difficult?

● John Scalzi

SCALZI: No, Jeff's a real pro. He took a lot of pictures for reference and did a quick sketch of us in our places, and then we were done. The hardest part was keeping the UPK in hover mode.

Q: Aside from the volcanoes, did Jeff take many liberties?

SCALZI: How do you mean?

Q: Well, Wil seems more pumped up, muscularly speaking, than he does in real life.

SCALZI: Are you kidding? Have you actually been in Wil's presence?

Q: Well, no, I've just seen him in pictures.

SCALZI: Dude is *ripped*, man. I saw him changing his shirt at w00tstock. Each one of his six-pack has a six-pack. He's got, like, a case-and-a-half pack. The pheromones that waft off him cause fish and amphibians to spontaneously change their sexes. Trust me, Jeff was totally working from life.

Q: I have to say he hides it well in pictures.

SCALZI: Well, the thing is, he's almost always wearing oversize t-shirts. To hide his form. Because he's married, you know. Happily. He knows better than to wantonly ignite lust wherever he goes. It's just not fair to his many admirers.

Q: So you're saying he's keeping his awesome musculature under wraps...for the fans.

SCALZI: That's just the sort of incredibly cool guy he is. I mean, have you ever heard of any other public figure who would do something like that?

Q: Honestly, no.

SCALZI: Exactly. So in some ways it's a treat from them that the clown sweater shows his true and ample dimensions.

THE MAKING OF THE • UNICORN PEGASUS KITTEN ART

Q: Not to mention the blue hot pants.

SCALZI: I suppose indirectly they offer some salacious thrill for the kids. But you should know those blue shorts have historical military significance.

Q: I don't know this, to tell you the truth.

SCALZI: You went to high school, right?

Q: I have some memory of it, yes.

SCALZI: Then in your world history class you should have learned that in 1263, Alghu Khan, the great-grandson of Genghis Kahn, declared war on Kaidu, his rival for control of the Chagatai Khanate.

Q: Yes, that's pretty much the only thing I remember from world history.

SCALZI: Then you'll also remember that to defend himself from Alghu Khan, Kaidu allied himself with Berke, Khan of the Blue Horde, who give him an army. An army which included a cavalry of warriors so fearsome that they went into battle clad only in small, tight blue pants. Because that's just how badass they were. Now, as it turns out, Wil is very distantly related to Kaidu, so when we put him astride the unicorn pegasus kitten with a spear in his hand, he felt the hot blue pants would be an appropriate tribute to his warlike ancestor and the cavalry he commanded.

Q: Of course, the clown sweater throws off the historical accuracy a bit.

SCALZI: We're not doing a Ken Burns documentary here. We can afford a little room for creative interpretation.

Q: Like with you being an orc.

SCALZI: What do you mean?

● John Scalzi

Q: The portrayal of you as an orc. All green and scaly and ugly and, you know, orcish.

SCALZI: You don't like me as an orc?

Q: I just think it looks like you lost a bet of some sort.

SCALZI: Really. Lost a bet, is it.

Q: No offense.

SCALZI: Well, offense taken, asshole. I'll have you know I'm proud of my orc ancestry.

Q: I'm sorry. I didn't know.

SCALZI: No, you didn't know, did you. You thought just because I can superficially pass for a human, I *must* be human, and then you could make all your little bigoted orc jokes without consequence. Surprise, you dick. Probably everything you ever learned about orcs, you learned from Tolkien.

Q: Well...

SCALZI: That putz. Tolkien didn't know any orcs. He never spent any *time* with orcs. And Oxford was—and still is, I'll have you know—a hotbed of irrational anti-orc sentiment. Going to Tolkien for your orc history is like going to Shakespeare to learn the truth about Richard III. It's all propaganda and lies. Anyway, lots of people these days are part orc. Famous people. And not just the ugly ones, or pro wrestlers. Angelina Jolie is part orc.

Q: Is she.

SCALZI: When she played Grendel's mother in *Beowulf*, it was totally a shout-out to the Orc-American community.

Q: That might be stretching the interpretation of Grendel's mother a bit.

SCALZI: How would you know? You know who one of the foremost Beowulf scholars was? Oh, yeah, that's right—*Tolkien*. That bastard's been screwing us for decades. Maybe you don't want to

THE MAKING OF THE • UNICORN PEGASUS KITTEN ART

see a conspiracy here, but then again, you don't *have* to, do you, Mr. Oh-We're-All-Humans-Here.

Q: Look, I'm really sorry. I was thoughtless. I apologize.

SCALZI: Warren Buffett's part orc.

Q: Seriously. Very sorry.

SCALZI: Rachel Ray, man.

Q: I believe you.

SCALZI: You better.

Q: Let's get back to the artwork.

SCALZI: Yes, *let's*.

Q: I have to know, once the posing session was done, what happened to the unicorn pegasus kitten?

SCALZI: Well, it's funny you should ask that. It was difficult enough getting the thing into the US, but once it was here, the middleman I used refused to ship it back. Said that now that it's been exposed to US germs, taking it back to Irkutsk introduces a risk to the other UPKs. It could come back with a new strain of feline distemper, hoof and mouth disease or avian flu and just decimate the native population. So now it's stuck here.

Q: It's still here, then?

SCALZI: Yes. Wil put it up for a while, but the suburbs really aren't the place of a unicorn pegasus kitten, you know? Dogs make it nervous and with that horn it's only a matter of time before it came home with Fido impaled on its head, and then there would have to be apologies, and explanations, and animal control officers coming around. Also, unicorn pegasus kittens eat a lot and poop a lot, and contrary to expectation, they don't poop sparkly rainbows. They just poop poop.

Q: If it's not with Wil, where is it now?

● John Scalzi

SCALZI: As it happens, the Columbus Zoo here in Ohio happened to have another unicorn pegasus kitten—apparently they knew a guy, too – and was interested in acquiring ours in order to have a breeding pair. So they paid for shipping and off it went, and from what they tell me it’s quite happy with its new mate. They also say that when the wind is right, you can hear their mating calls in Cleveland.

Q: I’m not sure I needed to know that.

SCALZI: Oh, I’m quite sure you *did*, my friend.